




Speech By
Tony Perrett

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Record of Proceedings, 14 February 2024

TRANSPORT AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Report, Motion to Take Note

 **Mr PERRETT** (Gympie—LNP) (2.21 pm): I rise to speak on the report *Inquiry into the Peninsula Developmental Road (Laura to Weipa) Project*. The PDR is a vital route through more than 500 kilometres of Cape York, which is 7.3 per cent of Queensland's total land mass. It passes through Laura and Coen and local roads linking to communities such as Weipa, Cooktown and Bamaga. The road is historically in poor condition with only a quarter sealed prior to 2014-15. It floods and is then cut for up to four months during each wet season. The committee investigated a range of financial, social, timeliness project management criteria regarding the upgrade of the road including its economic and environmental impact on the Cape York communities. This region has unique and specific challenges.

As the report notes, road improvements have generated increased tourist and visitors to Cape York. Michael Rowland, Chair of Weipa Town Authority, said that each year roughly 40,000 tourists and up to 60,000 travel across the PDR. While this is expected to grow and have a positive impact on local economies, the committee heard that it also creates challenges for local authorities for enhanced local amenities. An influx of tourists and movements across the cape also increases threats from biosecurity risks. Unfortunately, the government's dealings with the region seem to be made in isolation from other departments. Linda Cardew, the former chief executive officer of the Cook Shire Council, told the committee—

We would like to take a whole-of-government approach ... which we have tried to initiate at various times. The perception ... is that each government department is ... undertaking its work within its terms of reference but in a very narrow silo.

At the same time this report was tabled last February, the department of agriculture said it was reviewing the Cape York Biosecurity Centre at Coen. While the transport department was projecting increases in people and traffic movements, DAF either did not know, care or ignored the projections. The Coen facility was one of the first northern physical barriers to biosecurity threats. In 2018 the minister announced increased operating hours there and then five years later, last June, he closed it. Yet since 2018 exotic emergency animal disease threats have increased, not decreased. It does not make sense. The threat from biosecurity risks, including to the cattle industry, is increased especially when the PDR upgrade is expected to deliver growth in traffic and tourist numbers. Local growers and graziers said that the Coen facility should have been opened for 24 hours, not shut.

Local traditional owners also want to benefit from increased agricultural opportunities. The Acting Chief Executive Officer of the Cape York Land Council, Terry Piper, told the committee—

I do see the PDR as quite a game changer on the cape ... There are tourism and agriculture opportunities that would not have been there otherwise.

We do hope that some of this brings a bit of a boost to cattle on the cape in some areas. Traditional owners have grown up in the cattle industry. It is in their blood and they want to see improvements in that ... This road will then improve that. It will provide opportunities for export out of Weipa and various things that would not otherwise have been available.

The Coen facility was very successful in stopping the spread of diseases as well as increasing biosecurity awareness amongst travellers. An editorial in the *Cape York Weekly* stated—

... it provided both a physical reminder about biosecurity and provided a bottleneck to monitor traffic in the case of an outbreak.

There were frequent reports of northbound visitors stopping for biosecurity information from a DAF officer and of surrendering produce to the biosecurity bins on their return journey. A retired biosecurity officer told the newspaper—

... a lot of tourists ... pick up driftwood from a beach and ... don't realise what kind of biosecurity problems that can cause if they take it home. That driftwood comes from Indonesia and PNG.

AgForce CEO Michael Guerin said the consequences of the closure of the Coen facility could be catastrophic and makes no sense. He said—

It is simply madness to close the facility ... Without a solid movement control checkpoint on Cape York, an emergency animal disease outbreak on one of the Torres Strait Islands could have a catastrophic impact on red meat exports ... the country has lost the ability to prevent a pest or disease from spreading.

While the PDR upgrade is welcome news for communities in the cape, the agriculture minister's record of crossing his fingers and paying lip-service to biosecurity risks makes us vulnerable.