



Speech By
Hon. Jeff Seeney

MEMBER FOR CALLIDE

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FORESTRY AND ANOTHER ACT AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. JW SEENEY (Callide—LNP) (Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, Infrastructure and Planning) (5.24 pm): I rise to make a short contribution to the Forestry and Another Act Amendment Bill 2014 and to foreshadow two amendments that I have circulated and that I plan to move at the appropriate time during the consideration of this bill. I will confine my comments to those two amendments and the reason why they have been presented to the parliament in the manner that they have.

There has been an issue for quite a long time in a number of regions across Queensland in relation to the ability to access timber that has been damaged by natural disasters or other such events. I know that my parliamentary colleague, the member for Hinchinbrook and Minister for Natural Resources and Mines, has had a longstanding view about that. He has expressed the frustration felt by many members in the communities across North Queensland on a number of occasions in this House, as North Queensland has been regularly subject to those sorts of natural disasters. I know that both he and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry will make a contribution to this debate to deal with the detail of that.

I wish to inform the House, as I have informed the opposition spokesman, about the reason why this particular amendment has been brought to the House this afternoon. It arises from a situation on Cape York that involves an Indigenous corporation, a group of Indigenous people. I say at the outset that our government has been particularly keen to develop job opportunities on Cape York. Economic development opportunities and the job opportunities that they provide are very scarce indeed on Cape York, so every job is very precious.

The Aboriginal corporation in particular that has initiated this amendment today is the Cape York timber hardwood mill at Cooktown. It has been funded in partnership between the Queensland government and the Commonwealth government in the Cape York Partnership and some venture capital. They have been able to establish a sawmill with a considerable grant of money from both the state government and the federal government, and the mill has been commissioned following its acquisition in April this year. The business is 100 per cent Indigenous owned, and 75 per cent of the employees are Indigenous. It has the potential to create between eight and 10 jobs. The submission that was made to me in regard to this particular mill is that, in the short term at least, it is not expected to make a huge profit but it is expected to be able to provide the job opportunities for those eight to 10 people and invaluable training.

In order for the mill to succeed, it obviously needs access to timber, and there is a considerable amount of fallen timber that was damaged by Cyclone Ita earlier this year. The Aboriginal corporation involved in establishing this sawmill in Cape York has come up against the same frustrating difficulties that have afflicted people in North Queensland, in the electorate of Hinchinbrook, in the electorate of Burdekin and indeed in my own electorate. They have come up against these same frustrating difficulties in getting access to timber that has already been damaged by a natural disaster and that in time will rot or burn and be lost and wasted.

It behoves us as a government to move quickly to address that situation not just because providing those eight to 10 jobs for the Indigenous people on Cape York fits with what we are trying to do in the Department of State Development, Infrastructure and Planning in developing job opportunities in a place where job opportunities are very limited, but because it is common sense to do so. There were a number of occasions under the former government when these types of situations were not able to be resolved and extensive amounts of timber were wasted.

The amendments that I will move in the parliament later today will provide the minister with an opportunity to grant an exemption to the act to allow the minister to make a decision with regard to these sorts of situations. I do not suggest—and I certainly have not suggested to the minister—that this exemption should be used in a broadscale fashion or a long-term fashion. I think the exemption that we are seeking to put in place today allows the minister to move quickly in particular situations where it is difficult to go through the proper processes for a sale contract. For larger areas or a longer term timber supply, it is right and proper that we go through the processes for sale contracts to be established.

To enable the minister to move quickly to address some of the nonsensical situations that we have seen develop in the past, we believe that there should be a provision in the act for the minister to grant an exemption to the provisions of the act so that common sense can prevail and this timber that is damaged by natural disasters or other particular situations can be used. It is particularly pertinent because of the situation that has developed in Cape York. The amendments that I will propose will allow that situation to be addressed very quickly.

In the longer term, I think the provision needs to remain in the act so that we can solve the broader problem. I would be recommending to the minister that regulations be developed that build a framework around the sorts of situations where exemptions may be granted so that we never again see the sorts of situations develop where large volumes of a valuable natural resource are not able to be accessed by people who have an ability to make a valuable use of it and are, therefore, wasted needlessly.

I know the member for Hinchinbrook will talk about those particular issues in North Queensland. Even in the area where I live a lot of people have been frustrated by the fact that they have not been able to access this sort of timber from state forests. Some years ago I dealt with a local woodworking group which, after a particularly bad storm, wanted to go and salvage a very small amount of timber from a local state forest. The bureaucracy and process that was involved was—

Mr Stevens interjected.

Mr SEENEY: They are now involved in a men's shed, although they were not at that stage. They were not able to access what was a very small amount of timber. The process involved made it impossible and that timber subsequently burnt and was wasted.

In anticipation of their support, I thank the opposition; I have spoken to the opposition spokesperson. It is a sensible solution, we believe, to a longstanding issue. It will provide an opportunity for the minister to develop a longer term solution to something that I think everybody wants to see fixed.