

MEDIA RELEASE

4 June, 2009

BLIGH GOVERNMENT LEGISLATES TO HEAL GREAT BARRIER REEF

Strict controls on fertilisers and pesticides and close monitoring of large and high-risk farms in north Queensland will help heal the Great Barrier Reef, Climate Change and Sustainability Minister Kate Jones said today.

Ms Jones, introducing the Great Barrier Reef Protection Bill 2009 to State Parliament, said the legislation would reduce the levels of farm chemicals and sediment harming the Reef.

“The Bill will help detox the Great Barrier Reef and give it a fighting chance,” Ms Jones said.

“The Great Barrier Reef is Australia’s most treasured possession and is worth nearly \$6 billion to our economy, supporting about 63,000 jobs.

“But its health has been deteriorating from a number of factors, including damaging run-off from sugar cane fields and beef cattle farms in Reef catchments.

“We must do all we can to ensure this natural wonder of the world survives long after us and that means minimising man-made harm. This Bill is good for the Reef and it makes good business sense for farmers.

“While many farmers are doing the right thing and have minimised their impact, we must go further than the voluntary approach to get the results we need faster.

“Our Reef is too precious so we have no option but to act now and act decisively.

“The Bligh Government told Queenslanders last election that we would regulate to reduce the amount of fertiliser and pesticides entering the Reef by 50 per cent in four years.

“The Bill makes good on that commitment. It’s backed by strong scientific evidence and it gives the Reef every chance of recovering from the damage inflicted by over-fertilising, toxic pesticides and soil run-off.”

Under the new legislation and regulation to take effect from 1 January, 2010:

- Sugar cane farmers and graziers in Mackay-Whitsunday, the Burdekin Dry Tropics and the Far North’s Wet Tropics must apply no more than the optimum amount of fertiliser to their soil and must keep annual records on soil testing results and their use of chemicals and fertilisers;
- These farmers must follow a range of new controls and restrictions for the pesticides Atrazine, Diuron, Ametryn, Hexazinone or Tebuthiuron, such as banning their use along drainage lines, certification and training before use, and secure storage; and

- Farms considered high risk to the Reef will be required to keep tailored Environmental Risk Management Plans showing how they are improving their practices to achieve a standard compatible with good Reef health. The plans will include the size of their land, which and how much pesticides and fertilisers used, soil testing undertaken on the land, and stocking rates.

Ms Jones said the methodology for calculating optimum amounts of fertiliser in different soils would be developed using the best scientific evidence and with industry input.

“Scientists estimate that at least 32,000 tonnes of fertiliser, worth around \$32 million, is lost in Reef catchments every year due to over-fertilisation,” she said.

“Using the right amount represents big savings for farmers. Precision fertiliser equipment can save at least \$3000 a year in reduced fertiliser costs and help reduce farmers’ risks.

“The restricted chemicals were those most commonly found in the Reef’s waters and traced back to sugar cane fields and grazing areas in close proximity to the Reef.

“Strong scientific evidence shows the presence of pesticides in the Reef, detected at harmful concentrations up to 60 kilometres offshore during the wet season.”

Ms Jones said early estimates indicated around a quarter of the 4,500 farmers in the affected regions would be required to maintain an Environmental Risk Management Plan.

“Plans will be required for sugarcane properties of more than 70 hectares in the Wet Tropics and cattle grazing properties of more than 2,000 hectares in the Burdekin Dry Tropics – that’s about 1,000 farmers in total,” she said.

“In addition, other pollution ‘hot spots’ may also be identified based on any available and compelling evidence and those farmers too will be required to keep Plans.”

Ms Jones said she did not expect the new regime to greatly impact on farmers already doing the right thing.

“Many farmers already keep similar management plans under other laws and agreements, apply the right amount of fertiliser and are responsible in how they use their pesticides – the cost and administrative burden on these farmers will be minimal,” she said.

“For farmers who are using excessive amounts of fertiliser and pesticides, meeting the new requirements will be challenging but I’m instructing that a comprehensive program be in place to support landholders with all the tools, assistance and advice necessary for a smooth transition.

“I stress though that every new measure has been designed to entrench best practice so that all affected farmers are doing the right thing by their land, the Reef and all the industries that rely on its good health such as fishing and tourism.

“Best practice will not only benefit the Reef but, ultimately, the farmers as they should witness increased productivity and efficiency on their land.”

“We’ll be working with farmer organisations such as Canegrowers and AgForce to ensure the new requirements are introduced gradually over time to allow farmers time to adjust.

Ms Jones said the State Government had committed \$50 million to implement the new legislation, involving compliance officers and resources to inspect and help improve farming practices.

She said the new laws would build on the 10-year Queensland-Commonwealth Reef Water Quality Protection Plan and the \$200 million Commonwealth Reef Rescue Plan.

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