

Reef regulation the wrong approach

By Stephen Ryan, General Manager ACFA

The Queensland Government has released new legislation aimed at improving the water quality entering the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) lagoon. This will have serious consequences for farmers and graziers.

Ironically, this release has occurred just two weeks after Professor Peter Ridd (James Cook University, Townsville) stated at the recent Australian Cane Farmers Association (ACFA) Conference in Mackay that the reef is in excellent shape and is the most pristine ecosystem in Australia. ACFA has never supported a legislative approach and will closely monitor this legislation, its implementation and effect.

The Bligh Government told Queenslanders during the last election that it would regulate to reduce the amount of fertiliser and pesticides entering the Reef by 50 per cent in four years. This is a target most people believe cannot be met. Under the new legislation and regulation to take effect from January 1, 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.

Climate Change and Sustainability Minister Kate 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. The ACFA will work with the Minister to develop the best possible



According to Professor Ridd, inshore corals are well adapted to high sediment loads.

outcome for farmers. Of importance will be how the legislation relates to the Commonwealth – State Reef Plan, a program underway since 2003, and the 2008 Commonwealth Reef Rescue Program.

These targets outlined are unrealistic and will not be achieved; however, farmers will be striving to improve environmental outcomes in conjunction with improved farm viability.

How threatened is the reef?

Professor Peter Ridd from James Cook University in Townsville spoke at the recent Australian Cane Farmers Association (ACFA) Conference in Mackay. He believes that the reef is in excellent shape and is the most pristine ecosystem in Australia.

There has been a lot of hype in all facets of the media surrounding the state of the GBR. The science that should be the basis of environmental policy has in many cases taken a backseat to emotive arguments, self interest and a downright lack of factual reporting.

Saving the GBR is a great vote winner for governments, a great way for environmental groups to raise funds and great for researchers whose livelihoods depend on government and other funding. Professor Ridd commented that if farming activity is having any effect at all, which is as yet un-

decided, it would only be a minor effect on some of the reef hugging the coast which makes up one per cent of the GBR.

The remaining 99 per cent of the reef is not being affected by farming activity. The reef is actually expanding. Coral reefs have been around for over 200 million years. The small coastal section of the reef has evolved in high sediment loads and is a vastly different eco system to the other 99 per cent in the clear blue water we see in the tourism ads.

Impossible to measure

Professor Ridd maintained it is impossible to measure any affect on 99 per cent of the GBR from mainland activity. He believes a lot of money is being spent on trying to find problems with the reef but this is proving to be difficult to do.

Sugar cane farming has co-existed for 150 years with the reef and there is no better agricultural crop to be adjacent to the reef. ACFA is willing to work with all parties to improve the environment and I trust the Queensland Government legislation will not cause further decline in a great Queensland agricultural industry, especially when the evidence behind the legislative intent is not at all convincing.

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