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# Growers scapegoated by proposed Reef regs

**By Kevin Borg, Chairman, CANEGROWERS Mackay**

Growers in Mackay district have for decades farmed trash blanketed cane which is highly effective in preventing the movement of sediment from farms into creeks. The incorporation of inputs such as fertiliser and agricultural chemicals deep in the soil where the plant can use them has improved out of sight as growers have experimented and developed the machinery needed to carry out these processes so that these valuable inputs are not lost to the environment.

However, the current Bill before the Parliament (the Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019) seeks to increase the regulatory regime. Most disturbingly, the Government is seeking to be able to obtain records of advice, products and services supplied to growers by their agronomists, extension officers and even chemical and fertiliser resellers, ignoring privacy laws or the commercial-in-confidence information routinely withheld by other businesses.

I am always perturbed when I read that this State Government has ‘consulted’ with groups. What we usually find is that people have been “spoken at” and what they’ve had to say in response has been ignored. This is particularly the case where the goal is to implement the greens’ agenda in South East Queensland at the expense of the agricultural sector.

These ‘consultations’ take place in Brisbane, not on the farms where the impact and cost (to the farmer, to agronomic businesses and to the taxpayer) of more bureaucratic farm data collection and auditing must be dealt with. Our region has certainly not seen the Minister come out to the farms to discuss with growers first-hand how the proposed new regulations are going to work in improving water quality.

Cane growers already take our responsibilities towards Reef water quality seriously and are well down the road of an industry-developed and independently assessed best management practices program – Smartcane BMP.

I ask Minister Leanne Enoch why the State Government ceased to fund the very successful Cane Changer pilot, when it has had very good results in the Wet Tropics, and saw the uptake of Smartcane BMP by growers accelerate significantly. Cane farmers are making real progress, with 70 per cent of the industry now involved, and the figure is climbing. But what recognition do we get of how well we are going? Clearly, this is not a convenient message for a Government trying to fingerpoint, scapegoat and alienate one sector of the community to retain the support of another.

The cane farming families of this region are proud and protective of the Reef on their back door. Yet they feel they are in a no-win situation with a government that abuses their trust and turns society against them.

We are all able to live, work and grow our region together, when we collaborate, rather than using selective misinformation to tear one group down to support the political aspirations of another.

It is now more obvious than ever that this debate is not about the protection of the Great Barrier Reef but about what will get the most votes in the city.