

By Chairman, Kevin Borg

Scientist vindicated for stance against poor Reef research

A Federal Court decision handed down last week determined that a marine scientist, Professor Peter Ridd, had been unlawfully dismissed by James Cook University (JCU) in north Queensland for speaking out against his colleagues. It comes at an interesting time in the debate about how to sustain the health of the Great Barrier Reef.

The court case decision vindicated Prof. Ridd's right to criticise some of his colleagues' research about the effect of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef and his public lack of trust in the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS).

Prof. Ridd complained that there wasn't enough checking, testing and replicating of the science so that it was difficult to know what was right and wrong, raising doubt about the robustness of the science.

The decision seems to open the way for other scientists to speak out without ramifications if they are uncomfortable with the standard of some of the Great Barrier Reef science in the areas of water quality and the health of the Great Barrier Reef, in the name of academic freedom. Thanks to an ironclad academic enterprise agreement, Prof. Ridd's comments were deemed allowable by the court even though the criticism was decidedly unpopular with the university and appeared to go against its code of conduct.

The decision follows parliamentary committee hearings in Reef catchments along the Queensland coast where the success or otherwise of further environmental regulation on agriculture as is proposed by the Queensland Government was hotly debated.

Key arguments put forward by farmers pointed out the impracticality of the draft legislation to implement on farm, the amount of progress that has already been made but ignored by the government, the ridiculously high punitive measures for lack of compliance (stronger than mining regulations), and the lack of effective monitoring or scientific evidence to prove that the regulations would work.

However, unlike Prof. Ridd, who says he stands by his comments and will seek reinstatement in his job, it seems unlikely that farmers who stood up to speak out against the Queensland Government's draft legislation will be vindicated in their actions through any recognition of their opposition or changes to the law.

We welcomed the public hearings in regional Queensland as an opportunity to air our frustration that the positive progress we are making is not being recognised. It is

expected that the parliamentary committee will announce its findings on 26 April and the draft legislation may be on the table for the parliamentary sittings in May.

Despite all the work already done by the sugar industry in achieving Best Management Practice through our voluntary Smartcane BMP program, which is now being recognised by major customers overseas for its robustness, the Queensland Government is unlikely to back down from its adversarial position towards agriculture. This is despite the fact that positive collaboration incentivising incremental change is the better way to go in improving farm productivity, innovation and efficiency and, hopefully, at the same time the health of the Great Barrier Reef.