

THE HON PETER GARRETT AM MP

MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

Speech to Reef Summit

Parliament House, Brisbane

Friday 24 October 2008

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

Premier Bligh, Minister McNamara, invited guests, it is a pleasure to be here today. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

Today we have a unique and timely opportunity to get it right for one of Australia's most important natural environments – the Great Barrier Reef – a place of beauty, productivity and awe.

Today's Reef Summit is a one-off chance to bring everyone together – representatives of the Australian and Queensland Governments, industry bodies, conservation groups, natural resource managers, scientists and researchers – with a common objective – to address the pressure on the Great Barrier Reef from declining water quality.

It is only through working together that we can hope to achieve a real improvement in the health of the Reef.

Today I would like to take stock of our efforts to reduce the pressures on the Reef.

Firstly, I want to recognise the attendance today of those involved in agricultural industries in the Reef catchment – the peak representatives for the graziers, canegrowers, cotton growers, horticulturalists, grain growers, the fertiliser industry and dairy farmers, who together provide the significant economic and social underpinning of regional Queensland, who produce essential commodities to the value of around \$4.5 billion each year and whose cooperation and involvement is crucial if we are to achieve our objectives.

I speak for the Australian Government in acknowledging your leadership here today.

Agricultural industries must continue to take a lead role in driving the uptake of sustainable land management practices. And Governments – federal and state – must support industry in this task.

I also want to acknowledge the others here today who play an active role in improving the Great Barrier Reef:

- Our partners in managing indigenous land and sea country;
- Local government, with its important role in urban areas;
- The research community who help us to work more effectively;

- The conservation movement whose interest in the Reef is long-standing;
- The tourism and fishing industries – both guardians and beneficiaries of a healthy Reef;
- And of course the Natural Resource Management groups who are now central players in this important work.

Ladies and gentlemen, the issue of declining water quality in the Reef lagoon is serious. If we are to halt and reverse this decline we must act in a united way today. Failure is not an option.

The future of a globally recognised environmental jewel is at stake. When it was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981, the Great Barrier Reef was internationally recognised as an example of 'superlative natural phenomena'.

The Reef is the world's most extensive coral reef system and contains critically important habitats for the conservation of biological diversity.

It is not only an environmental icon. We know the Reef is economically important, too.

As a source of employment for around 54,000 people, and contributing more than \$5 billion dollars to the Australian economy each year through tourism, fishing, and recreation-related industries, it is a critical driver of regional economic activity.

The original Reef Plan was agreed between the former State and Australian Governments back in 2003. Now – at the halfway point of this 10-year commitment – it is time to take stock of our progress.

It is clear that whilst there have been some achievements, we must do a great deal more.

We have seen the development of Water Quality Improvement Plans. A marine monitoring program is in place. And there are numerous examples of industry leading the way. Improved farm management practices are being driven by industry through measures such as the SmartCane System, Grazing Land Management and the horticulture Farm Management System.

We've already seen widespread uptake of practices such as green cane trash blanketing, and decreases in fertiliser, herbicides and pesticide use. For instance, almost all cane farmers in the Mackay-Whitsunday region are now green cane trash blanketing.

But the scientific evidence confirms what we expected and what the community is understanding – that we have not done enough.

Excessive nutrients, pesticides and sediments from run-off from land-based activities are still degrading inshore reefs and other important marine environments, and making the entire system more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The Australian Government is committed to meeting its responsibilities through Reef Rescue. We have a comprehensive \$200 million, five-year plan to tackle the impacts of declining water quality and ultimately improve the Reef's capacity to deal with climate change.

Under Reef Rescue, we will:

- provide grants to accelerate and expand efforts to improve agricultural land management practices;
- build upon partnerships with land managers to assist them to make changes;
- invest in research and development to improve our understanding of the link between land management practices and their environmental impacts, and to trial new technologies and practices;
- provide funding towards a water quality monitoring and reporting program; and
- foster partnerships between Traditional Owners and reef managers and develop Traditional Use of Marine Resource Agreements.

The Australian Government has set ambitious, but achievable targets to be delivered through this investment.

We have committed to reducing the discharge of dissolved nutrients and chemicals from agricultural lands to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon by 25 per cent.

Over this same five-year period we will reduce the discharge of sediment and particulate nutrients from agricultural lands to the Great Barrier Reef lagoon by 10 per cent.

These targets are transparent and hold the Government accountable for real results.

In updating the Reef Plan, we need to go beyond these already ambitious targets and unite our efforts and investment to ensure that we all actually deliver a healthy and resilient Reef.

Effective actions must be identified through a refreshed Reef Plan and they should focus on achieving meaningful and substantial results. We are literally custodians of the Reef for future generations. Our actions must complement each other so that together we can address the critical water quality issue.

As with Reef Rescue, the Reef Plan must hold each of us accountable for delivering the actions we are individually and collectively responsible for.

Each of the new actions we add should have realistic and measurable targets, just as the Federal Government has done with the Reef Rescue actions funded for 2008-09. These new actions must be properly funded, and they must be developed in partnership.

Governments are looking to industry to take the lead in driving widespread uptake in sustainable land management practices.

We need to accelerate and expand these efforts and it is the role of governments to support you – by providing incentives, helping to build capacity, through extension, and awareness-raising.

The Australian Government will work in partnership with industry, land managers, natural resource managers, researchers, Indigenous communities, non-government organisations and the Queensland Government and others to ensure this support is effectively delivered.

The Australian Government has also set a long term goal for the Great Barrier Reef – that in 20 years, the impact of threats to the Reef from sediments and nutrients will be reversed, and water quality and aquatic health will improve.

Furthermore, management arrangements will be established in Reef catchments to prevent further deterioration, especially given the Reef’s vulnerability to climate change.

I am proud to have jointly announced with my Ministerial colleague Tony Burke this week a \$23 million package of measures to target hotspots that pose a significant and immediate threat to water quality on the Great Barrier Reef.

These measures are the first instalment of the Australian Government’s Reef Rescue package.

Five regional organisations will receive up to \$7 million each to work with industry organisations, land managers and landholders towards land management changes for the benefit of the Reef.

The Fitzroy Basin Association, Burnett Mary Regional Group, Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM, Reef Catchments (Mackay/Whitsunday) and Terrain (Wet Tropics) NRM – will all share in this funding package.

I encourage representatives of these organisations to work in close cooperation with farmers in the sugar, horticulture, grazing, cropping and dairy industries to achieve our objectives.

We also announced this week a grant of \$1 million to a partnership of primary production industry organisations – Growcom, Canegrowers, AgForce, Cotton Australia, the Queensland Dairy Organisation and the Queensland Farmers Federation – to work with the Regional Groups Collective to raise awareness of the need for land management changes.

I have been very encouraged by the enthusiastic response from land managers and land holders to these Reef Rescue announcements.

I hope that the Australian Government can assist you in improving the management of your land to protect the Reef.

Ladies and gentlemen, I must emphasise that to succeed we must work together.

The Great Barrier Reef deserves no less.

Thank you

[ENDS]