Queensland’s cane growers have reacted with anger and frustration at government plans to ramp up the state’s already stringent reef laws, saying the proposed new regulatory regime is heavy-handed and risks criminalising farmers. If approved, the laws could see agronomists, industry extension officers, sugar mills and fertiliser resellers forced to hand over sensitive data about the day-to-day operations and business decisions of cane farmers in a Big Brother-style system that threatens to stymie industry development.

**KICK IN THE GUTS**

The Environmental Protection (Great Barrier Reef Protection Measures) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2019, which was introduced to State Parliament on 27 February, has drawn the ire of Queensland’s peak agricultural bodies, with CANEGROWERS warning the new laws may damage the future growth of the $2.5 billion sugar industry while doing little to further protect the reef.

The government’s decision to push ahead with the proposed new laws is a kick in the guts to growers, many of whom have spent thousands of dollars improving on-farm practices and updating their farming systems to ensure the best possible environmental outcomes, CANEGROWERS Chairman Paul Schembri said.

It also comes as a bitter blow to primary producers across northern Queensland who are still counting the cost of recent natural disasters.

"Just as growers are picking themselves up from a summer of natural disasters, the Queensland Government is putting a further regulatory cloud over our businesses," Mr Schembri said.

**FARM DATA**

Agronomists, extension officers and even chemical and fertiliser resellers will be required to keep and produce on request records of advice, products, and services supplied to growers.

**FURTHER REGULATION**

The Bill provides for future regulations that will enable the collection of additional farm data for various reasons, including to assist in determining where over application of fertiliser, and therefore high rates of nutrient run-off, may be occurring.

**LAND USE**

Under the Bill, growers will be required to obtain an environmental authority licence to grow cane on their own land, if that land has not been in cane production for three of the previous 10 years (including one of the previous five years). Where a licence is required growers will need to show they can manage water quality risks through farm design and practice standards.

**EXPANSION SOUTH**

Should the government’s proposed law changes be approved by parliament, growers in Queensland’s southern growing regions of Bundaberg, Isis and Maryborough, who are already struggling with drought and soaring electricity prices, will face reef regulations for the first time.
“With international companies now looking at sugarcane as a valuable feedstock for a new generation of bioplastics, biochemicals and biofuels, we won’t be able to grow to meet new opportunities.”

“We absolutely take our responsibilities towards reef water quality seriously.

“Thats why we’ve voluntarily gone down the road of an industry-developed and independently assessed best management practices program – Smartcane BMP.

“Under this, growers have shown initiative and commitment, improving their productivity while addressing issues of fertiliser and sediment runoff.

“The program has recorded real and positive momentum with participation going from zero to 70% of the state’s sugarcane area within five years.

“What we should be seeing is the removal of regulations those areas where growers have proven the highest commitment and results towards Reef water quality.

“CANEGROWERS has invited the Premier to visit a cane farm to give growers the opportunity to explain exactly what impact these laws will have but to date she hasn’t taken up our offer,” he said.

In the most sensitive area for Reef water quality, the Wet Tropics region, participation in Smartcane BMP involvement is strongest with over a third of the area now independently accredited as operating at or above industry best practice.

Across the state, 90% of growers engaged with Smartcane BMP are now applying fertilisers underground to prevent any washing away, 80% of the cane is cut green with a mulch/trash blanket left on the paddock and 80% of growers use fallow rotations to protect and nourish their soil between cane crops.

“Huge changes have been made and the sugarcane growers of Queensland should be congratulated for their effort and commitment,” Mr Schembri said.

“But instead, with the introduction of this bill to the Queensland Parliament, the Labor Party is telling growers that no matter what you do, how much you spend or change the way you run your farm, we will shift the goal posts on you again and again.”

BIG BROTHE

One of the most worrying aspects of the Bill is the power it gives government officials to demand information from any advisor or company working with cane farmers.

“Not only will this bill increase the red tape burden on individual farm businesses reporting to government but it is ringing alarm bells right through the sugarcane industry’s supply chain,” Mr Schembri said.

“The Queensland Government’s own drafting document says the bill should give it the power to require data from fertiliser sellers, agronomists, wholesalers, sugar mills and industry extension officers.

“Nothing will be safe from the cold hand of the bureaucratic Big Brother!”

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The bill could also prevent growers from making the best possible use of the land they own and farm. “If you haven’t cropped an area of your farm for some time and you want to put cane in, the State Government wants to make you go through the same sort of environmental impact statement that a mining company does,” Mr Schembri explained.

“This amounts to the Labor Party telling us we can’t expand our industry onto land our growers already own and manage without government approval. “With international companies now looking at sugarcane as a valuable feedstock for a new generation of bioplastics, biochemicals and biofuels, we won’t be able to grow to meet new opportunities.

“This would be very short-sighted, throwing a roadblock in front of our industry and potential bio-futures investment in Queensland.”

SOUTHERN DISTRICTS FACE REGS

If passed by parliament, the new laws would see reef regulations extended into Queensland’s southern cane-growing districts of Bundaberg, Isis and Maryborough for the first time.

It’s a development that CANEGROWERS Isis Chairman Mark Mammino worries could spell the end of cane growing in the region.

"The feedback I’m getting from growers is that they’ll probably exit sugarcane and look at moving to a crop that is less impacted by reef regulations," Mr Mammino said.

"The pressure on growers in the Isis region is already very high. We’ve been hit badly by the drought and the high electricity prices are making irrigation more and more difficult. There’s also pressure from alternative crops like macadamias and avocados.

"If these laws go through as they are, it’s going to be the end for many cane growers in this region.”

Despite not falling under the current suite of reef regulations, Mr Mammino said there had been an impressive uptake of Smartcane BMP in recent years, with over 75% of the district’s cane land benchmarked in the program and

"What we need is lower electricity prices and more water, not unnecessary regulations that are only going to hurt growers that are already struggling."
"My fear is, if these new regulations go ahead it’s going to have the opposite effect to what the government and the industry actually wants. It may turn growers away from Smartcane BMP if they feel they’re being forced into it with a gun to their head."

almost 20% independently accredited as operating at or above industry standard.

“We’ve been very proactive promoting BMP and a lot of growers have gotten on board with it, but despite that it’s looks like we’re going to be penalised anyway,” Mr Mammino said.

“Really, there’s no justification for imposing reef regulation in the area. Not only are we not near the reef, but we spend more years in drought than we do with wet weather, so there’s no run-off to impact the water quality anyway.

“What we need is lower electricity prices and more water, not unnecessary regulations that are only going to hurt growers that are already struggling.”

GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO LISTEN

As Chairman of the CANEGROWERS Environment and Sustainability Committee, Innisfail cane farmer Joe Marano understands better than most the negotiations between industry and government that go on behind the scenes of major environmental policy decisions.

However, Mr Marano is frustrated with the State Government’s approach to consultation around the proposed new reef regulations, saying government representatives have not listened in industry concerns.

“I just wish the government would come and speak to us, not just the cane industry, but all the ag industries, and actually listen to what we have to say and take it on board, rather than just paying lip service to our concerns and going ahead with what they had planned anyway,” Mr Marano said.

“Look, the government has given the industry a lot of money over the years to develop the Smartcane BMP program, I acknowledge that, and if we’re honest we haven’t hit the targets, but as an industry we’re moving in the right direction.

“My fear is, if these new regulations go ahead it’s going to have the opposite effect to what the government and the industry actually wants. It may turn growers away from Smartcane BMP if they feel they’re being forced into it with a gun to their head.

“We have had so many meetings with government, but the conversation is all one-way. They need to get off their backsides and get out to industry and ask what will work and what won’t.

“It needs to be done properly, because if it’s only being done to appease the green vote with one eye on the next election then it’s not going to work and it’s going to drive people away from the industry.”

Any regulations that force growers to reduce nitrogen inputs unnecessarily will not only hurt farm incomes, it will have a flow on effect that will impact the whole industry as well as the communities it operates in, Mr Marano said.

“We’ve seen production in some mill areas reduce over the last few years. Is this sustainable? The industry is not just cane farmers, it’s millers and harvesters, and they are governed by tonnes also.

“Is this reduction in tonnes down to less fertiliser being applied? If it is, it’s going to impact everyone, from the mills right down to the resellers, small businesses and families.”

SMARTCANE BMP EXEMPTION

There is some good news in the legislation briefing paper for growers already accredited in Smartcane BMP.

"Agricultural producers accredited under a recognised BMP or like program will be deemed as meeting the regulated minimum practice standards," the paper states.

“This recognition rewards those producers who are already meeting or exceeding minimum practice standards for reducing risks to water quality through industry BMP programs.”

For growers in Queensland’s southern districts, where regulations will be phased in over a three year period, this means they’ll have time to go through the BMP accreditation process and avoid a visit from the government’s farm police.