

HANSARD – 10 August 2006

Mr MARTIN FERGUSON (Batman) (11.55 am)—I rise today in support of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Legislation Amendment (Export Control and Quarantine) Bill 2006 and, in doing so, I endorse the remarks of the members for Capricornia and New England.

We all appreciate this is an important bill, but it also goes to a wide-ranging debate—which was the case with the previous speakers.

The intent of the bill is to ensure that our trading partners can continue to have complete confidence in the safety of our food exports.

That is exceptionally important today in terms of our difficulties on the trade front.

Offences under the Export Control Act currently only apply to those actually exporting proscribed goods or in possession of proscribed goods intended for export.

This bill appropriately creates new offences for people in control of the preparation of food products for export.

Importantly, offences will apply if those goods fail to meet legislative requirements, especially in relation to food safety.

The bill clarifies the Commonwealth's authority to regulate the sourcing of fish intended for export.

In that context, I remind the House that this bill is not only important nationally; it is exceptionally important to regional economies around Australia.

That authority is therefore necessary to ensure ongoing access for exported fisheries products to overseas markets and to protect consumers by ensuring that fish, including shellfish, are harvested from areas that do not contain pathogenic organisms, biotoxins or chemical contaminants at levels that may represent a threat to consumer health.

I am pleased to see that the Commonwealth is finally taking a lead with respect to protecting the sustainability and reputation of Australian fisheries in the international market.

Obviously the opposition also believes we have to be more rigorous with respect to illegal fishing in Australia's coastal waters, but that is another debate for another day.

I also raise in the context of this bill a broader debate going to the forest industry.

This debate is also about seeking forest industry sustainability in the same way we seek sustainability of the fishing industry.

I would like to see the Commonwealth, in the context of what it intends to do by way of this bill, start exercising more authority with respect to protecting the sustainability and reputation of Australian forest industries as well.

This is also important in terms of our exports and potentially important in terms of import replacement in the foreseeable future.

I contend that no other industry is under as much pressure from our trading partners as the forest industry at the moment.

I use this opportunity to remind the government of its responsibilities.

Australia has 164 million hectares of native forests, four per cent of the world's forests and 1.7 million hectares of plantations.

About 10 per cent of our native forests are managed for wood production, with less than one per cent being harvested in any one year.

That small proportion of forests harvested annually is regenerated so that a perpetual supply of native hardwood and softwood is maintained in this country.

I know the Australian fishing industry is continuing to make the adjustments necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of its resources, as the forestry industry has done for many years.

I therefore go to Australia's rigorous forestry standards.

AFS has global mutual recognition under the Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, the largest international sustainability recognition framework for forestry in the world.

But unfortunately the environmental movement, as the member for New England and the member for Lyons are aware, is at this point running an aggressive and duplicitous campaign around the globe to undermine the status of that standard and the sustainability of the Australian industry.

At the same time as the environmentalists are decrying and seeking to discredit Australia's forest industry, they are running a campaign about illegal logging, interestingly, in Third World countries—a problem I argue they are directly fuelling because of their failure to back responsible forest industries in places like Australia.

Make no mistake: these are not environmental campaigns.

They are political and they are commercial, and they are starting to hurt Australia economically.

Increasingly, environmental non-government organisations around the world, with the complicity of some governments, are embedding themselves in policy and regulatory frameworks in which they have commercial interests, and they do so with no mandate from the people and with no accountability.

The forest industry, I argue, represents a classic example.

I will also use this debate to remind the fishing industry of similar pressures starting to emerge in our domestic and international fishing industry.

Instead of endorsing the AFS, developed in accordance with the usual rigorous standards and processes used in Australia and New Zealand to govern all kinds of industries and products, green groups have been lobbying to discredit the standard internationally and to hurt Australia commercially, which goes to the issue of making sure that we have in place appropriate export controls to guarantee the future of Australia.

Instead they favour accreditation under the Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC, an organisation, interestingly, created by the WWF, with the clear intention of sidelining elected governments when it comes to forest policy.

Behind its foray into the forest certification process, the WWF has a history of establishing buyer groups that effectively boycott timber products that are not FSC certified.

Consequently, producers and suppliers are pressured to obtain FSC certification to maintain their businesses and their market access.

The FSC's business interests are effectively protected by the environmental NGOs, who have mounted a concerted attack over recent years on other certification schemes.

The AFS is just one of these schemes.

It is instructive therefore to take a look at the membership and governance of the FSC, if there is any doubt about this.

In Australia there are just 10 members, including five environmental NGOs—Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society, Friends of Gippsland Bush, the Western Australian Forest Alliance and WWF Australia.

The executive director of the FSC hails from the WWF, and the members of the board are a very interesting group from Greenpeace, a cardboard manufacturer from Columbia, two members described as individuals from Bolivia and Argentina, and the list goes on.

While there is some industry representation, it is severely limited.

Multilateral organisations and governments are, interestingly, excluded, despite the fact that governments are major funding donors.

Further, it is my view that the FSC certification does not provide the guarantee of sustainable forestry that is claimed.

Fortunately, both suppliers and consumers seem to be recognising this, with over 190 million hectares of certified forests now falling under the program for the endorsement of forest certification, which encompasses the Australian forestry standard.

By comparison, with less than 80 million hectares of certified forests, the FSC is clearly not the global standard.

Over 40 per cent of the total area of forests certified by the FSC is certified without any approved standards and over 80 per cent of the countries with FSC certification do not have approved FSC standards.

Despite the fact that 550,000 hectares of plantations in Australia are FSC certified, as of June this year there was no Australian FSC standard against which to certify.

In 2003 Tim Cadman, the then FSC representative in Australia, issued a time line for 2005 for finalising national management standards so in 2006 interim certification could give way to accredited national standards.

Those accredited national standards are nowhere to be seen.

FSC certifications are often carried out against the requirements of a FSC draft standard or against a set of requirements developed by FSC certifiers themselves in preparation for their audit.

They are not practices acceptable in any sector with international audit and certification rules.

It is my contention that the vast majority of FSC national standards and forest certifications would simply not withstand scrutiny by an international accreditation forum or the International Organisation for Standardisation, which is recognised by the United Nations.

The body which recognises FSC principles, the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance, has seven full members, none of whom are national or international standard bodies but two of whom are the Rainforest Alliance and the FSC itself.

I also note that the Marine Stewardship Council is a third member, whose practices and affiliations are not unlike those of the FSC, which is very much related to the current debate.

When I attended a Seafood Industry Council function in this place last night, I noted that an Australian fishery had become the first in the world to be certified by the MSC.

I hope that the seafood industry is aware of the secondary boycott practices of organisations like the FSC and those behind the MSC.

In addition, I sincerely hope that it does not suffer the fate of the Australian forest industry and the special impact that has had on regional communities, which very much depend on the forest industry for their economic sustainability.

I also hope that the Australian government is closely monitoring artificial trade barriers in both the fishing and the forest industries of Australia.

We, and especially Labor in government, took too many tough decisions not only to open up Australia to the impact of globalisation but also to seek to develop a freer trade world than to have it now undermined by an artificial set of trade barriers developed by some non-government organisations.

Interestingly, therefore, I refer to the fact that the Australian Forestry Standard—we should be conscious of this because it is about rigorous assessment—is proceeding through the very rigorous processes of Standards Australia and the PEFC towards full recognition.

However rocky the road may be towards consensus, the organisation's members are to be congratulated for their perseverance against the odds.

Equally, I would welcome the Australian FSC standard, were the FSC prepared to meet the same rigors of Standards Australia, the ISO and the IAF.

I make it clear that I will not support it while it makes its own standards, accredits its own people as certifiers and switches hats to environmental NGO mode when it needs to protect its business from competition.

The FSC logo can be used for woodchip and fibre products when only 17.5 per cent of the total wood fibre or 30 per cent of virgin wood fibre is FSC certified; it does not matter where the rest of the timber comes from.

The FSC mixed label can be used on any wood product, even if only 10 per cent of the total material is FSC certified.

Compare these low percentage requirements with the PEFC logo, which can be used on a product only if at least 70 per cent of the wood content is PEFC certified.

If the FSC's objective were truly to promote responsible management of the world's forests, I believe that the organisation would be engaged more seriously with the forestry industry in Australia in trying to resolve some of the concerns I have highlighted today in order to protect our reputation and its reputation.

The Australian government's priorities should be to ensure that Australia's forest industries and, indeed, its fishing industries are managed sustainably, both today and into the future, for future generations and that they have fair market access for their products, both in Australia and overseas.

I would also like to see the Australian government doing more to pursue with our trading partners the very serious question of secondary boycotts and to draw to their attention the need for rigorous international standards to apply to labelling and product certification.

The fact is that Australia is one of the few countries in the Asia-Pacific region with the land availability and capability to expand sustainable forestry through further plantation development over the coming decades.

Because we are living in a historic era of global economic expansion, particularly on our doorstep in the Asia-Pacific region with China and India, demand for forest products, like other resources, is skyrocketing; therefore, the sustainable expansion of the Australian forest industry is very important to meet global demand and to contribute to our own economic prosperity.

Most estimates are that already a third to a half of the world's forests have been burnt or chopped down.

That makes it more critical than ever for the world's remaining forests to be managed sustainably for conservation, the world's future forest product needs and the enormous environmental services they perform in maintaining global biodiversity and providing carbon sinks to manage climate change.

I therefore note that recently the Indonesian forestry minister was quoted as saying that the level of forest destruction in Indonesia has reached serious levels.

There are claims that illegal logging in Indonesia destroys about three million hectares of forests every year.

That is about three times Australia's legitimate forest harvest each year.

It is not just squatters but legitimate forestry companies that are contributing to illegal logging, deforestation and poor forestry practices in Indonesia.

Unfortunately, Indonesia is just the tip of the iceberg, including in our own backyard.

The Solomons, Papua New Guinea, Costa Rica, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala and a host of other developing countries feel under pressure to cut down their forests for timber or to make way for coffee plantations because this has been their only option to release their people from poverty and deliver a sense of economic future.

It is estimated that almost 10 per cent of timber and wood products imported to Australia are of suspicious origin.

That figure would be much higher for many of our trading partners.

The trade in illegal and unsustainable timber distorts trade, suppresses prices and causes major irreversible damage to the environment, especially in less developed countries.

Dubious importing practices are already contributing to job losses in Australia, where local producers are arguably being unfairly undercut—for example, in Tasmania.

I believe we cannot continue to ignore this problem.

Our own environmental and economic future is in jeopardy if we do not accept measures to control importation of illegal and unsustainable timber products and if we fail to set an example in world's best forestry practices with our trading partners.

I raise these issues because I think this is a debate that we have to become more rigorous about as a nation both domestically and internationally.

If there are resources or industry or environmental policy issues to be addressed in our country, the place to address them in is our houses of parliament or through due process of our governments and institutions, including Standards Australia.

The conservation movement is a legitimate stakeholder in the development of forestry policy and the implementation of forest management.

But let us have an honest debate.

They have always been welcome in Australia around the negotiating table, but I think it is time they declared their hand, just as the rest of us have to.

Are they representing environmental NGOs or are they representing their business interests like the FSC? It is an interesting question.

I say they cannot have it both ways.

At the end of the day, like everyone else we expect them to abide by the decisions of elected governments and particularly to adhere to negotiated outcomes.

The Australian Labor Party knows full well that the key to a better Australia is jobs and economic prosperity for all.

Australia's forest and fishing industries are part of achieving that.

They are also importantly central to sustained economic prosperity in regional Australia.

I say in conclusion, in supporting this bill and the government's intent, that there is a lot of work still to be done in other areas encompassed by this bill.

This government therefore needs to do more—a lot more—to provide fair access to export markets for those industries that are seeking to be covered by this bill.

I have sought today to raise for further discussion and policy consideration an area of major weakness—the potential future sustainability of the timber products industry in Australia.

I commend the bill to the House and ask the minister to take on board today the very serious issues that I have raised.