



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

COMMITTEES

Standing Committee on the Environment

Report

SPEECH

Monday, 23 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 23 February 2015
Page 812
Questioner
Speaker Hawke, Alex, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr HAWKE (Mitchell) (10:07): On behalf of the Standing Committee on the Environment, I present the committee's report, incorporating a dissenting report, entitled *Streamlining environmental legislation: inquiry into streamlining environmental regulation, 'green tape' and one stop shops*, together with the minutes of the proceedings.

In carrying out this inquiry into streamlining environmental regulation, 'green tape' and one-stop shops, the committee has been keen to identify efficiencies in Australia's environmental assessment and approval framework. Importantly, it has undertaken to do so without any reduction in appropriate protections for Australia's unique and invaluable environment.

The committee adopted this inquiry in February last year and spent several months gathering evidence. The inquiry received 83 submissions, 13 supplementary submissions and 29 exhibits. The committee held six public hearings, both here in Canberra and also in Sydney and Melbourne. We heard from industry representatives, community groups, government departments, environmental practitioners and advocates, legal experts and interested members of the public. We are grateful to all those witnesses for taking the time to send us written submissions or to meet with us and express their views at public hearings.

The inherent value of preserving our environment is something we can all agree on, and that is on top of the economic and social benefits that our environment brings. However, throughout this inquiry, the committee was presented with numerous examples of environmental regulation that is duplicative, ineffective, confusing, impractical, contradictory or otherwise inefficient. We saw that some environmental laws were creating delays and significant compliance costs for business without actually delivering any environmental benefit at all. I would recommend to members examining some of that evidence the specific examples where business was unable to have any environmental benefit despite great cost or regulatory burden.

For example, according to the Department of the Environment's annual report, in the last financial year alone, 304 separate actions were referred to the Commonwealth for assessment and approval under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999. The majority of these referrals involved activities such as commercial and residential development, mining and exploration, natural resource management, and transport—activities vital to the strength and the resilience of our economy. Significantly, the vast majority of the activities referred to the Commonwealth would have already been assessed by the relevant state or territory's authorities, who also have responsibility for assessing and mitigating the environmental impact of developments—highlighting the duplication in this sense that existed in the past in Australia.

Through the inquiry, I was therefore pleased to hear about the government's one-stop-shops initiative—and the progress that is being made by the government in the one-stop shops—which is seeking to reduce the duplication of these processes by accrediting relevant state and territory processes. This will ensure that the Commonwealth's environmental obligations are fulfilled without requiring industry and community groups to jump through the same set of hoops twice, reducing cost and burden on industry and society. I am pleased with the progress that has been made to date, and I look forward to the government finalising bilateral agreements with states and territories in due course.

Following on from evidence from stakeholders, the committee identified opportunities to enhance the one-stop-shop system and has made two recommendations for bilateral agreements with states and territories going forward to enhance those arrangements. Those recommendations relate to statutory time frames and risk based terms of reference for environmental impact statements, a common theme of proponents being risk based assessments.

The inquiry also received a great deal of evidence about environmental regulation beyond just the EPBC Act and the one-stop-shop proposal. The evidence related to energy efficiency and renewable energy programs, areas for

harmonising legislation between jurisdictions, and the Department of the Environment's communication with regulated communities.

The committee examined some of the energy related programs and regulations, including the Energy Efficiency Opportunities Act, the National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Scheme, the renewable energy target, and the Commercial Building Disclosure Program under the Building Energy Efficiency Disclosure Act. I am pleased to note that some of these programs have either been discontinued or were in the process of being reviewed during the committee's inquiring and reporting process. Where matters remain outstanding, the committee has made recommendations for change and looks forward to receiving the government's response.

Some of the other areas in which this report has offered very practical, sensible recommendations for change include a national approach to the listing of endangered and threatened species, and better sharing of environmental data between jurisdictions, including environmental data gathered by project proponents in the course of preparing environmental impact statements.

This has been a timely inquiry. Following on from the Productivity Commission's work in 2013 on major project approvals processes, and in the context of the government's effort to reduce the regulatory burden on business and the community, I am confident that the committee's findings and recommendations can help pave the way for further reforms. The recommendations made by the committee are practical and will help reduce duplication and make for more efficient administration of environmental regulations.

Australia's precious environment must be protected. But where regulations are inefficient, unnecessary, and produce no environmental benefit, they must be reconsidered.

Once again, I thank organisations and individuals. I thank the committee secretariat, including Peggy Danaee. I thank the member for Makin, the deputy chair, and I thank all my colleagues on the committee for their contributions to the inquiry and the report in general.