



The Hon. David Littleproud MP
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T R A N S C R I P T

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Minister Littleproud iv ABC Country Hour Queensland

TOM MAJOR: But first this afternoon, and a new tranche of funding for the fight against some of Australia's worst biosecurity threats in recent years has been announced in Townsville this morning. \$378,000 from the Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia will be spent in collaboration with the Australian Prawn Farmers Association to identify some of the most common biosecurity risks to the prawn industry, which is a real growth sector for Northern Australia. Now, researchers from James Cook University will seek to develop tests to identify when common viruses are present in commercial and wild-caught prawn populations. Agriculture Minister David Littleproud was at James Cook University this morning for the announcement. I spoke to him a short time ago about the funds and the ongoing ag visa negotiations.

[Excerpt]

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah, this is world-leading research done at a regional university right near our prawn farmers, so that they are more likely to adopt it. And that's what we're trying to do with our innovation and research program with agriculture now, is to try and get it into universities, regional universities that will create regional jobs, but also help the industry. And this is about really getting a genetic program that allow prawn farmers to breed the signs of genetics they're looking for that'll be more resistant to these viruses and pathogens. So it'll increase the productivity, the profitability, and the resilience of the prawn industry by effectively breeding a better strain of prawn that will be more resistant in the future. And when we see the demand for prawns, we're expecting to increase by over 400 per cent by 2030. This will be an important tool for our prawn farmers to be able to deliver the best prawns in the world from here in Australia.

TOM MAJOR: Minister, I understand that white spot disease won't be included in this particular research project, but in February, you did mention that an independent advisory group was going to review your departments' work on the import risk analysis for raw prawns after the devastation of that white spot disease in prawn farms around the Logan and Brisbane river systems. Where is that review at?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: It's been completed, and in fact, is we've handed it back to the industry as well. We'll obviously be consulting further with them. But effectively, it says that the controls and protocols in which the Department of Agriculture's biosecurity arm has put in place around the importation of prawns is more than satisfactory. The international panel said that they're doing exactly what they should, in fact, some more. But I still want to have further consultation with the prawn industry around that, because obviously they have some concerns and I still want to get that comfort as well. But, from the international panel, an independent international panel, they're saying that the Department of Agriculture's protocols are sound and are doing the job.

TOM MAJOR: Does that mean hands are somewhat tied under world trading sort of rules, or do you accept that Australians would really want more from their biosecurity measures, given that infection in those particular wild populations, which has caused some serious devastation to the industry?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah, I am tied by WTO. You can't have your cake and eat it too. You got to understand that if we want to export, we want to trade with the world, we've also got to have and provide market access to those countries in which we trade with. And to think that we can just close up our borders and not trade, simply doesn't add up. The simple math is this: we're a nation of 26 million people. We produce enough food for 80 million people. So we have to engage with the World Trade, with the world. So that means we have to live by the rules of the WTO. And the only reason that we can stop any importation is on scientific grounds, and that's really what we expect from those we trade with and what we have to do in return. And unfortunately, that doesn't always sit well emotionally with some of our industries, but the practical and pragmatic reality is that we have to live by those rules if we want to live and benefit from them. And that's why I went to the further step of getting international independent assessment of this, of what the department is doing.

TOM MAJOR: Are enough imported raw prawns being tested by security authorities?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well that's what the independent panel has said, that it has; that they are doing what they should be, in fact, more. And obviously we'll continue to review that. And the numbers actually say that they've done the right thing in that we've been- haven't had any further major incursions because we've been able to detect, and if we have, we've acted swiftly. But I'm also understanding that we have to continue to be agile with this. And if circumstances change, I'll be expecting the department to move quickly and to adjust any of the protocols they put in place immediately, not to wake, but to actually do that as an immediate action if we have any further incursions.

TOM MAJOR: I'm speaking with the Federal Agriculture Minister, David Littleproud. And Minister, let's talk about the ag visa now. Have the regulations around the conditions for employers and labour hire to bring as the ASEAN workers in been finalised? There's been a lot of, I guess, concern from the farm sector about exactly what these regulations will look like, and whether they will, in fact, mirror those that are enforced on those using Pacific Islander labourers.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: They have come into effect. They came into effect last Thursday. It was given Royal Assent by the Governor-General. These now go to our ability to have further bilaterals with- we've started with around four countries, and we're very close to getting some acceptance from them. And I've got to understand what we can provide, and we've got the visa up and going. These countries are their own sovereign governments. They've got accept the visas and the conditions, and what we're looking at is effectively that the visa would go for around three years, and they're allowed in on an unskilled basis to come in much like the Pacific and seasonal schemes where they work up for nine months and go home for three. Do that over a three-year period. But there is a skilled and semi-skilled element that we've actually consulted with industry, where they can stay for the full 12 months, because you don't want to lose that out of your business. And then after that, to get the pathway to permanent residency, you'd have to commit a further period in agriculture in regional Australia to get the pathway to permanent residency, because we believe if you here for five plus years, you'll have roots laid down in regional communities. Your kids will be at school. You'll be part of the community. You won't want to go to a capital city. So we're thinking that that'll be the way. The only challenge we're going to have with that part does require legislation. And unfortunately, Senator Hanson and One Nation hasn't committed to supporting this, despite being offered briefs to be able to

say this is the biggest structural adjustment in agricultural workforce in our nation's history, moving away from transient population to put in a population that wants to live in Australia, that grows regional Australia, and builds agriculture.

TOM MAJOR: Any chance that they'll be affirmed by Christmas?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: We're hoping. They're very well advanced. The reality is that we started those bilaterals effectively as soon as we were able to announce the ag visa. And obviously, we have to work respectfully with those countries and appreciating and respecting their sovereignty. But they are countries that we already have arrangements with, and so we're trying to build off that as quickly as we can.

TOM MAJOR: The state Minister for Agricultural industry development and Fisheries, Mark Furner, he's hit out at you, saying that there hasn't been enough help from the Federal Government when it comes to supporting the importation of temporary workers for agriculture. What's your response to the criticisms that have been made about the Federal Government's lack of ability to assist the state government in that?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: This is another program. The scale of the problem hasn't changed. Mark Furner has been asleep at the wheel. The reality is we've had 25,000 men and women sitting on the tarmac in 10 Pacific Nations, ready to come in, but Queensland Government hasn't allowed them to come in. The ag visa is just another program that adds the opportunity for farmers to look, whether to the Pacific or into these Southeast Asian countries, to bring workers in, whether they be skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled. So it's another program. He's done nothing for 12 months, and today they announced a quarantine facility. And so for all the yelling and screaming that this is quarantining Canberra's fault. We're now getting the truth, and the Australian public getting educated, that health orders are what determine whether people can come into this country or not.

TOM MAJOR: What's the latest on the Pinkenba facility that has been developed by the Federal and State Government? Will it be able to host and quarantine some of these workers?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, that's, again, comes to the health orders, the Chief Health Officers and the Premiers. They're the ones that help the leaders on this. We're getting a real education federation. Everyone points to big bad Canberra, but in fact, it's the states that have the power on that. But I suspect, what I believe is what will happen, is I think that, Wellcamp will probably come online. International airlines are already saying: they're not interested to Toowoomba, they'll fly to Brisbane. Pinkenba will probably be, for my understanding, last brief I had, will be some six months after Wellcamp. But internationally to determine where they want to land. And the public statements for them is that they still want to land in Brisbane, because they've got to put things back on the plane to go back to where they came from.

TOM MAJOR: David Littleproud, Federal Agriculture Minister, thanks for your time on The Country Hour.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Thanks for having me.

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