

Ms LAWLER (Environment and Natural Resources): Madam Speaker, I thank each of my colleagues, the Leader of the Opposition, members of the opposition and Independent members for speaking to this bill today.

The purpose of this bill is to amend the *Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority Act*, which as you know, is the establishing act for the objectives and operation of the Northern Territory Environmental Protection Authority, or the NTEPA.

The purpose of this bill is to improve the governance of the Northern Territory EPA, provide greater flexibility in its membership and give it the new responsibility of assurance monitor, which gives it the power to undertake systemic reviews of environmental management matters.

The bill also supports the implementation of this government's robust, open and transparent regulatory system. Regulatory processes are improved by allowing for additional members to be appointed to the NTEPA and introducing changes that will allow ministers to seek the authority's advice on a range of specific proposals and plans targeting improved environmental management and protection.

I introduced this bill into the Legislative Assembly on 23 August 2018. The Assembly subsequently referred the bill to the Social Policy Scrutiny Committee for inquiry. The report of the Social Policy Scrutiny Committee was tabled in parliament on 23 October 2018.

At this time, I take the opportunity to acknowledge those members of our community who took the time to prepare submissions to the committee on the bill. Eleven organisations and individuals took the time to comment on this bill, reflecting that Territorians are interested in the measures being implemented to protect the environment. I am sure the members of the committee are grateful for the interest shown in this bill. While some matters raised in the submissions were outside the scope of this bill, I am confident that they will be considered as part of the broader environmental regulatory reform program currently being undertaken by my Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The committee's report recommended the bill be passed subject to an amendment to require me, as the accountable minister, to table the NTEPA's completed statement of intent in the Legislative Assembly within six sittings days of its receipt. As I outlined to the Assembly in August this year, one of the amendments contained in this bill is the introduction of a requirement for the NTEPA to develop a statement of intent. The purpose of the statement is to enable the authority to demonstrate how it will work within the framework of overarching government policies and direction and to provide the public and interested stakeholders a window into the authority's proposed activities for an upcoming period of time.

The Leader of the Opposition was talking about that two-year time frame. That time frame is important, because there are sometimes those new or emerging issues. One that comes to mind is the issue of PFAS across the Territory, but in particular in Katherine. There is that flexibility of that two-year time frame. The Member for Daly was also talking about the role of the minister. The only role of the minister is to ensure that a statement of intent complies with the objectives of the EPA. It is a governance measure that was adapted from a similar process undertaken by the Tasmanian EPA, which is strongly supported by industry and the public in that state.

The NTEPA will be required to report against the statement in their annual report, providing a means of public accountability for the statement. While the measure is intended to provide greater transparency to government and the community about the activities of the NTEPA, the scrutiny committee report noted that there was no requirement for the completed statement to be tabled in this Assembly. This is inconsistent with other governance and transparency measures in the act, which also require that I table a document prepared by the authority within six sitting days of receiving the documents.

As we move to consider this bill in detail, I point out that the Assembly amendment being tabled today will address this inconsistency and improve the operation of the act, as recommended in Recommendation 2 of the scrutiny committee's report. It is important that the Assembly remembers that the Northern Territory Environment Protection Authority Act is establishing legislation. It establishes the NTEPA as an independent authority. It sets the objectives of the authority and provides for matters like the appointment and termination of members. The authority gets most of its powers from what is known as enabling legislation such as the Environmental Assessment Act and the Waste Management and Pollution Control Act. As such, the matters that it addresses and the extent of these current amendments—including the Assembly amendments being tabled today—is quite restrictive.

These amendments are, however, an important component of the environmental regulatory reform program being progressed by my department and support the recently-released draft consultation Environment Protection Bill that focuses on a proposed new environmental impact assessment system for the Territory.

These amendments are also important for the implementation of recommendations from the hydraulic fracturing inquiry because they provide for additional members to be appointed and allow for a minister to receive advice from the NTEPA on a range of specific proposals and plans, including environmental management plans under the Petroleum Environmental Regulations.

The Leader of the Opposition asked about the qualifications of the members. I assure him that the purpose of those additional members is to value-add to the NTEPA in accordance with governance advice. Their qualifications will be looked at carefully.

DRAFT