

Pauline Hanson stymies inquiry into Angus Taylor's intervention on endangered grasslands

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Pauline Hanson has saved Energy Minister Angus Taylor from an inquiry into his intervention over endangered grasslands, with a Labor motion defeated 33-32 in the Senate.

Earlier Taylor defended his intervention in a statement to the House of Representatives, insisting he had obtained a meeting with officials on the grasslands in response to representations from local farmers, and there was no canvassing of the compliance issues that were on foot relating to land in which he had an interest.

The opposition continued to pursue Taylor in question time, but it was already clear it would not have the numbers in the Senate for the inquiry. Hanson said One Nation, which has two votes, would not back a “witch hunt”. Labor’s motion had the support of the Greens, Centre Alliance and Jacqui Lambie. The other crossbencher, Cory Bernardi, voted with the government.

In 2017 Taylor sought a briefing on the revised listing of the endangered natural temperate grassland. The environment minister at the time was Josh Frydenberg who was not, however, at the meeting that occurred in response to Taylor’s representation.

At the time there was an investigation into the clearing of a section of the grassland on the property of the company Jam Land Pty Ltd, of which Taylor’s brother Richard is a director. Angus Taylor has an interest in Jam Land through his family company.

Taylor told parliament that when he took up the matter there “had been strong antagonism expressed by the farming community about federal and state native vegetation regulation.”

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In late 2016 and early 2017 he had spoken with farmers in his Hume electorate and nearby about their worries with the listing of the grassland.

“On 21 February 2017, I spoke with a farmer near Yass who expressed strong and detailed concerns about the revised listing, pointing out that it had occurred despite the concerns of the National Farmers’ Federation and NSW Farmers, and with little consultation with farmers themselves,” he said.

“All of these farmers were completely disconnected from our family farming operations.”

Taylor said the revised listing of the grassland - which is in both the Hume and Eden-Monaro electorates - “would ultimately halt pasture improvement and efficient weed control across the Southern Tablelands and Monaro” and “has the potential to do untold damage to agricultural productivity throughout the region”.

“I sought a briefing on the revised listing from the then minister’s office, which I made clear was not to include any discussion of compliance matters.”

Taylor said FOI documents already released showed that an official had written that the meeting was “to answer questions on the technical aspects of the listing outcome”, and would “stay out of completely” any compliance action underway.

This was how the meeting had gone, Taylor said. “At no time during this meeting, was any compliance matter, or any personal interest of mine, discussed. At that meeting we discussed precisely what the department had said we would discuss.”

The opposition pressed Taylor to produce any correspondence from complaining farmers. Nothing was forthcoming.

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Labor's Senate leader Penny Wong accused Taylor of using his ministerial position to "shore his investments up".

She told the Senate: "Mr Morrison says Mr Taylor has one KPI, to be the minister for lower prices. But he is the minister to increase the value of his own investments.

"Angus Taylor failed to declare a direct financial interest in a company [in the declaration of interests register]. But worse, he then used his position, as a minister, to defend that company's interests after it was accused of breaking the law."

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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