

THE AUSTRALIAN

Labor vows to override states on landclearing

By **EAN HIGGINS**, REPORTER

3:29PM MAY 8, 2019 •  150 COMMENTS

Labor has vowed it will “not hesitate” to override state laws to stop from farmers clearing land, a stance the Coalition said would “take away a farmer’s right to make a living.”

Agriculture and Water Resources Minister David Littleproud today clashed with Labor agriculture spokesman Joel Fitzgibbon over land management, milk price regulation, and the Murray-Darling Basin Plan.

Both told journalists at a National Press Club debate in Canberra they wanted to introduce an “agricultural visa” for foreign workers, but neither was capable of articulating what such a visa would look like.

Water policy and climate change have marked some of the fiercest divisions in the election campaign, and today Mr Littleproud and Mr Fitzgibbon slugged it out over how much federal regulation was required in agriculture.

Labor has announced a national vegetation management policy it says is designed, similar to that of the Queensland Labor government, to police and in some cases restrict farmers from clearing land.

Mr Fitzgibbon told the Press Club “we are hoping to put 10 years of carbon wars behind us” and introduce farmers to the option of entering the carbon market to earn revenue.

“This is the best defence to drought,” Mr Fitzgibbon said.

In states with tough anti-land clearing laws such as Queensland, Mr Fitzgibbon said, “nothing changes” with the proposed new national legislation.

But “we won’t hesitate to use the power ... if conservative governments are doing the wrong thing” and “rolling back” vegetation protection, he said.

Mr Littleproud retorted that Labor was “locking up” the potential of agriculture, and described the policy as “populist” and made “on the run.”

“You are going to get in place a system that will take away a farmer’s right to make a living,” he said.

The pair also put forward sharply different approaches on milk prices.

Mr Fitzgibbon promised that if elected, a Labor government would introduce a mandatory code of conduct in the industry and “the focus is the minimum farm gate milk price.”

Such a system would provide security for dairy farmers and maintain investment and activity in the industry.

“I am not asking the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to tell us why it can’t be done,” Mr Fitzgibbon said.

“We need structural intervention from the government”.

Mr Littleproud said he was proud of having brought the supermarkets to heel on paying farmers a decent price for milk, but said “I am not going to promise them a falsehood.”

“A floor price is a falsehood.”

On water policy in the Murray-Darling Basin, Mr Fitzgibbon stuck to Labor’s policy announced this week of starting a new round of buy backs of water licences from farmers to reduce that available for irrigation, in favour of environmental flows.

He said there had been “non-compliance, possibly corruption” in the taking of water for farming, along with massive fish kills.

“It’s all about getting water back into the system, there is no other solution,” Mr Fitzgibbon said.

But Mr Littleproud said buy backs of water were a crude approach and “destroy communities”, compared to the government’s preference for getting more environmental water flowing through improved water use efficiency.

“They just want to use a blunt instrument because it works for voters in Adelaide,” Mr Littleproud said.

Asked about whether they would introduce an “agricultural visa” to deal with labour shortages in agriculture, Mr Fitzgibbon and Mr Littleproud both said they were committed in principle to such a visa, but could not provide detail.

“We don’t have a fixed policy position,” Mr Fitzgibbon said.

Mr Littleproud said he supported the concept, and insisted Scott Morrison was now “on the journey” to make it happen.

But he said:

“You just don’t rush into it, and have unintended consequences.”

More stories on this topic

- [Magazine ‘first’ for agriculture](#)
- [Resilient Elders defies the dry](#)
- [Murray Cod hooks Blumenthal](#)

Topics

[Agriculture](#) / [Federal Election 2019](#)