



Support for wheat bill divides coalition

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Liberal senators will push for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to have a strong role in monitoring third-party access to port terminals when wheat exports are deregulated from July.

But while the Liberals have come out in support of Labor's proposed deregulation, Nationals senators, including coalition agriculture spokesman Nigel Scullion, have condemned it as disastrous for growers.

The split – evident yesterday in a report by the Senate's Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Committee – means Labor's plans to accredit multiple exporters will eventually pass parliament, although not without embarrassing divisions for the coalition.

Liberal senators sided with Labor in suggesting amendments to the draft wheat export marketing bill, and went a step further by insisting that the ACCC regime outlined in the bill should also apply to receivable silos in rural towns.

Bulk grain handling companies – GrainCorp, CBH and ABB Grain – had objected to provisions in the draft bill requiring them to reach an undertaking with the ACCC in relation to rival traders' access to their ports.

They warned this was too heavy-handed and might deter investment in infrastructure and prevent them applying for accreditation as wheat exporters.

Instead, they wanted the issues of third-party access to ports and receival sites governed by a voluntary code of conduct, overseen by the agriculture minister.

There was sympathy for their position among Labor senators, who suggested an acceptable compromise could be for a mandatory code of conduct, registered with the ACCC, to apply to ports and silos.

But Liberal senators wrote: "We consider that these issues must be dealt with by access undertakings through the ACCC under the

powers provided for in Part 3A of the Trade Practices Act."

"The success or otherwise of the legislation will largely pivot upon the access provisions," wrote Liberal senators Bill Heffernan, Julian McGauran, Judith Adams, Mary Jo Fisher and Mathias Cormann.

They also made a case for further deregulation than proposed by Labor to exempt growers who export their own bulk wheat from the need to apply for accreditation.

Labor wants the bill passed through parliament by the end of June so the new system can be in place for the next harvest.

But Nationals senators called for the bill to be withdrawn, saying it was a "travesty" that neither the Rudd nor Howard governments had accepted growers wanted to retain the single desk for wheat exports.

Agriculture Minister Tony Burke was not available for comment.

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