



PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr SA Bennett MP—Chair
Mr NJ Dalton MP
Mr RI Katter MP
Mr GR Kelly MP
Mr JR Martin MP
Mr TJ Smith MP

Staff present:

Dr A Ward—Committee Secretary
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PUBLIC HEARING—OVERSIGHT OF THE FOOD FARMERS' COMMISSION

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

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Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2025

The committee met at 9.29 am.

CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. Good morning. I declare open this public briefing as part of the committee's oversight of the Food Farmers' Commission. My name is Steve Bennett, member for Burnett and chair of the committee. With me today is James Martin, Deputy Chair and member for Stretton; Nigel Dalton, member for Mackay; Robbie Katter, member for Traeger; Glen Kelly, member for Mirani; and Tom Smith, member for Bundaberg.

This briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation. I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading this committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the briefing at the discretion of the committee. I remind committee members that the officers are here to provide factual or technical information. Any questions seeking opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left to be debated on the floor of the House.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present—welcome, media—and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may appear on the parliament's website or on its social media pages. I remind everyone to turn their phones to the appropriate settings.

BURKE, Mr Charles, Queensland Food Farmers' Commissioner (interim), Queensland Food Farmers' Commission

CHAIR: I invite you to brief the committee, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Mr Burke: Thank you. Good morning, Chair, Deputy Chair and members of the committee. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide an update on my progress as the Food Farmers' Commissioner. Since stepping in to the role, my focus has been on delivering practical, measurable outcomes that directly support Queensland's food producers. The farming sector is under significant pressure and my role exists to ensure that growers have a voice, that systemic challenges are addressed and that meaningful reform is pursued, simply not just discussed.

At the outset, I developed a structured four-element plan that would ensure the best possible process to perform the role successfully. This included: meeting extensively with growers and producers across horticultural regions to seek input and begin to develop key and consistent themes and issues; exploring the existence or creation of a platform to capture farmers' issues and concerns—this platform must be underpinned by confidentiality to ensure the anonymity of individuals providing that information; liaising with the ACCC to establish areas of commonality and establish a cooperative relationship to share information, where possible, and to seek remedy, where applicable; and establishing a respectful and workable relationship with supermarkets and other stakeholders, such as wholesale markets, to begin conversations and commitments for potential systemic change and rectification of poor behaviour.

Since commencing in the role, I have travelled broadly across Queensland visiting major horticultural regions, including the Lockyer Valley, Bundaberg, Bowen, Far North Queensland, the Fassifern Valley, the Scenic Rim and the Granite Belt. At each region, I have met with a broad cross-section of industry representatives through individual discussions, shed meetings, packing shed visits and coordinated social events, all designed to ensure that those on the front line of food production are directly informing the work of my office. This engagement with growers and industry bodies will continue to be a priority and an ongoing process.

The feedback has been clear and consistent across all the commodities and all the regions, and I would like to briefly outline a number of those key themes. Firstly, unfair supermarket and retailer practices have included an imbalance of power in negotiations with retailers, non-binding supply forecasts and pricing manipulation, a lack of transparency in supplier agreements and supermarkets failing to account for rising production costs with realistic pricing.

Another key theme is compliance and regulatory burdens. This includes: multiple overlapping quality assurance schemes and excessive compliance costs; an increasing number of quality assurance regimes which duplicate existing compliance requirements but provide little additional value; audit fees and increasing time and cost of auditing; pedantic and hypercritical corrective action reports; and regulatory complexity placing significant strain on farm businesses, particularly small- and mid-sized operations. Another area of concern is the supply chain and market access barriers with limited domestic competition, barriers to export—the list goes on in that category. Next is workforce constraints and payroll tax pressures, which includes the rising cost of labour and its requirement regardless of product pricing, labour availability, shifting employment regulations, the rising cost of compliance, and the burden of payroll tax and the fact that it is not linked to profitability.

Actions taken to date: my office has been working proactively to address these concerns through several key initiatives, and I would just like to mention a few of those areas now. The development of an anonymous farmer portal: a secure reporting mechanism has been developed—and I am pleased to say that the portal should be live by Friday on our website, which went live yesterday—to allow growers to raise issues without fear of commercial retaliation. This initiative is a direct response to industry feedback and will play a key role in identifying systemic issues whilst maintaining strict anonymity.

We have had engagement with retailers and regulators. Direct discussions with supermarket executives have taken place on a number of occasions and more are scheduled regularly to negotiate greater transparency and accountability in retailer practices. The information and data that will be collected via this anonymous portal will be critical to underpinning these negotiations. Additionally, I have been liaising with the ACCC to identify other areas of common interest and explore enhancements to the grocery code of conduct and assess potential changes to the horticulture code to better support growers. These discussions with the ACCC also include possible remedies through the Trade Practices Act under, for example, collective bargaining.

We are developing a case study and we are engaging with an industry body to support the continuation of a grower market reporting tool that enhances price transparency. The tool aggregates anonymised pricing data, providing growers with regional sale price insights to improve market awareness and negotiation power.

Next steps: my focus remains on securing positive outcomes for growers. My key priorities over the coming months include: refining and improving the anonymous reporting portal, ensuring that growers can safely raise concerns without repercussions and utilising this data to generate case studies and dashboard reporting to highlight areas of systemic poor behaviour; monitoring portal input and identifying emerging issues and using real-time farmer feedback to drive targeted responses; reviewing and refining quality assurance and compliance requirements; working with industry towards a more streamlined but industry-led system; supporting the case study that I briefly mentioned and exploring scalability and portability, ensuring that effective price transparency models can be expanded across the industry; strengthening discussions with retailers, highlighting poor behaviour and advocating for fairer practices to improve supplier relationships and greater contract or supplier agreement transparency; and furthering discussions with the ACCC in exploring options for stronger competition policies, collective bargaining enhancements as well as regulatory and various code improvements. I will also continue to provide advice and recommendations to the minister, based on evidence gathered via all the ongoing processes.

In conclusion, since taking on this role, my focus has been on listening, understanding and acting. The concerns of Queensland's fresh food growers are clear, and my commitment is to ensure their concerns and issues are heard at all levels of government, industry and the wholesale and retail sectors. This focus also extends to developing and delivering practical and workable solutions and to pursuing them with a dogged commitment. Progress has been made but there is still work to do. My office will continue to consult widely, refine our approach based on industry feedback and push for meaningful changes that strengthen the long-term sustainability of our food production sector in Queensland. Once again, Chair, I appreciate the opportunity to provide this update and welcome questions from the committee.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Burke.

Mr SMITH: Mr Burke, it is wonderful to hear about the work that you have been doing in your short time in the role. I might just get a couple of quick particulars on the record. Could we get the web address for the website?

Mr Burke: I hope I quote it right with all the dots in the right place. It is www.offcq.qld.gov.au. Just for the committee's reference, that went live yesterday. Hopefully the secure portal that I spoke about will be added into that by the end of this week so that, if we direct a grower to the website, they

will be able to access the portal. We just had to essentially finalise a couple of the confidentiality statements and the legal disclaimer, which I think we will rectify today. It will be live by the end of the week.

Mr SMITH: Excellent. Thank you so much. Is there a phone number or email that we can also get on record for our farmers?

Mr Burke: Everything is on the website. I have declared my mobile phone number on the website.

Mr SMITH: Brave man!

Mr Burke: Half of Queensland has my mobile phone number from previous roles anyway, so it does not matter if the other half has it now either. I have openly said that I want to speak to people, so my direct email address and my phone number are available on the website.

Mr SMITH: Thank you. Mr Burke, you mentioned the anonymous farmer portal and how important that is. Could you reflect on your previous experience in the industry and now your experience in this role and how important it is for farmers to have that confidence of anonymity, given the pressures that they are experiencing? What are some of the tactics and the pressures that have been used against farmers in Queensland by larger retailers in the past?

Mr Burke: To answer the first part, trust is vital. Without that, I will not be able to achieve anything, and that is one of the reasons I have travelled around the state extensively making a commitment to growers to understand what the issues are. I simply cannot go and effect an outcome if all I can say to a retailer is, 'A farmer told me once that this was happening.' I need to be able to get information.

It is born out of the fact that retailers consistently, in the industry term, put farmers 'on holiday' if farmers dare speak out about some of the practices that have been happening. Those practices are across a broad range, including whether there has been a failure to reach a satisfactory negotiated agreement on price or quantities or whether there are questions about specifications for a dispute or for produce being rejected. There is a whole list of reasons farmers will not speak out. Historically, when farmers have been put 'on holiday', supermarkets will not take their produce for weeks or months. I have had a producer tell me that their last supply agreement for a vegetable was over 12 months ago. It was a niche vegetable and they spoke out about some of the practices and they have not had a call for 12 months. It is a real issue.

I have had discussions with the supermarkets. They deny it, obviously, at a certain level but then there is a disconnect between the higher levels in supermarkets and the category managers and the people who are actually effecting the negotiations. Some of the issues are in that gap and in the failure of that communication piece to get through.

The trust element is vital and I have work to do. Now that the website is up and the portal is a couple of minutes away, the next bit is to get out and raise awareness. I will also say this: part of me also knows that that website will be keenly watched by other participants in the supply chain. I am hoping that the supermarkets, that already have taken the bait somewhat because they are very interested in what we are doing here out of morbid curiosity, I would suggest, will be watching that website and seeing how things unfold. That is a good thing as well.

Mr DALTON: Mr Burke, I congratulate you on listening and all the work you have done so far. It is very encouraging to see that you are supporting the growers in our community, wherever it is in Queensland. My first question is a very simple one: how will you advertise that portal? Secondly, do you think the supermarkets will be able to change their processes as a result of the evidence you will get through that portal?

Mr Burke: In relation to the first part of the question, once the portal is live with the website, I intend to use every channel I possibly can to raise awareness. I will be using internal government communications, and I have a really good relationship with all of the grower industry groups which are offering me slots in their newsletters, in the *QCL*, to write articles. I am hoping that any media here today might be so kind as to draw people's attention to the website. The more people who are aware of it, the better.

As I said, one of the key bits in this is having the supermarkets know that it exists and that it is a coordinated effort to gather information. The ACCC has done it. If you looked through the ACCC report, you would see that all of the things that we are finding are exactly what the ACCC found. They are a different entity because they have statutory powers which I do not. What I have is the ability to be independent and expose this information to the supermarkets, and I think people will probably trust me as readily as the ACCC because I am independent and I am known in Queensland.

Can you remind me about the second part of your question?

Mr DALTON: With the evidence you gather from that portal, how confident are you that the supermarkets may change their behaviour?

Mr Burke: I have outlined to the supermarkets what I am doing and what I intend to do. Already they are asking me for examples of poor behaviour. I am not prepared to give them one-off information because a large grower said to me that what they will try to do is fix the individual and not the problem. I am not giving them any individual problems. I have told them that I will come to them with aggregated data that will prove systemic problems. They have given me a commitment that they will work with me. I might be naive but I have to give them that opportunity. I do not have any powers to compel people to come to the table; I have just got to use a little bit of old-fashioned negotiation and evidence and hopefully they will support their claims.

Mr KATTER: Commissioner, all of that sounds pretty good. I am highly conscious of the fact that you are up against some big players who play a pretty tight game in those areas and are pretty seasoned. My question is fairly simple. You were explaining some of the areas you are attacking. A lot of farmers will say, 'Mate, I just give to the agent and he reports back to me and says whatever.' Some of that was picked up in some of your introductory remarks.

I know they used to talk about a delivery docket: 'We just want a delivery docket for what went down there and the price it got,' but they just get a phone call from the agent when they are up at Tully, Kingaroy or somewhere and they are at the behest and mercy of the agent and everyone between them and the consumer at the supermarket. My next-door neighbour said, 'I'm no farmer and never have been but I don't know why you do it. You're just at the mercy of everyone.' Is there a simple mechanism that is being presented at this early stage where they are saying what they want?

Mr Burke: I can only cover so much in a five-minute opening statement because there is a lot more to this than just the supermarkets. There are a lot of elements that are at play and the supermarkets are utilising their position which the market offers. Part of it is the wholesale markets as well. The horticulture code was originally implemented to address all of that and it has not properly addressed that. The reporting mechanisms that come back via the wholesale markets, agents or merchants still have a lot to be improved.

I quote on a regular basis my understanding of the cattle industry. For example, if you send a truckload of cattle to the market and there are 20 steers on the truck and they are sold at 20 individual lots, you will get a report from the market and each one of those will be itemised about what that beast made. If you send 20 pallets of mangoes to the market, you will get an aggregated price for the lot with very limited supplier feedback and without any ability to be able to see how they were marketed.

I have heard stories where a fellow paid additional costs on a Friday to ship his produce to Brisbane. He paid extra for cold storage because he did not want this product sold at the end of the week; he wanted it there on the spot to be sold on the Monday. At 5 am on Monday he got a sales docket saying that the market was depressed and that is all they could get for his particular fruit. He knows full well that they took delivery of that produce on the Thursday, sold it for whatever they could get and pocketed the storage costs. It is not just about supermarkets.

The horticulture code is due for review towards the end of next year I think. I have said to the ACCC that if you are creating a mandatory grocery code then the horticulture code should be reviewed quicker and fall into line with that. It is very much an issue, and the markets certainly need some improvement in that reporting and feedback information.

Mr G KELLY: Mr Burke, it is a pleasure to meet you. I really respect the answers you are giving here. As a farmer myself, I understand the issues we have as a producer. As a beef cattle producer, we can think we are on a winning roll for three, four or five weeks of the year and then overnight we can lose 60 cents, 70 cents or 80 cents a kilo on our beef. It is basically the same when it comes to bananas or mangoes too. Overnight it can crash. It is like we have at the moment up in the north where bananas are going to go through the roof because our crops have been wiped out because of the floods. This is something as a Central Queensland farmer that I hear about a lot.

Concerns have been raised about the time it takes the big supermarkets to agree to prices with producers. This was raised in an inquiry held in the previous Queensland parliament and in the Australian Senate inquiry into supermarkets. This was seen by producers as the supermarkets trying to force a lower price for the producers due to the fear of not selling their produce before it spoils. Do you know what the average contract length negotiation was prior to this information of the commissioner last year compared to what it is now? Do you know what it was particularly for Coles and Woolworths? These big boys like bossing us little fellows around, but without the little fellows the big boys do not always have their gracious way. As I see it, in our electorate wet weather can control and drought can control and they still rely on us little fellows to get them through most of the time. What are your thoughts on that moving forward in your position?

Mr Burke: Again, it gets back to systemic issues. This is not something that we are going to be able to fix overnight. This is about systemic change. I use the example of the Slip, Slop, Slap campaign. It started many years ago and it changed the way people thought about how they managed themselves out in the sun. That was a long campaign and people still talk about it. I liken this to that sort of thing. We have to start that process, have the conversations and develop better price transparency so that consumers know that a fair and reasonable price is being paid to farmers.

I have examples and I have photos on my phone taken from a producer who had been growing a particular vegetable line for years. He did not have a direct supply agreement but was supplying direct to an aggregator or a merchant. That is a tier 2 supplier to one of the supermarkets, so they aggregate smaller producers into major lots and then they supply to a supermarket. There is tier 1 and tier 2. Tier 1 is direct, so farmer A supplies with a direct agreement to Woolworths. Tier 2 supplies through an aggregator.

This fellow supplied a large retailer year in, year out. He rang his merchant, agent, aggregator, whatever you want to them, and said, 'I've got this produce ready to box, ready to go.' They said, 'Don't bother. They're only making \$2 a box in the market.' It cost the producer \$2.50 for a cardboard box to ship the produce so the guy decided, 'Fair enough.' He is a realist and he understands that when there is an oversupply the price is going to be depressed. He fed this particular vegetable to his cattle and then slashed the rest of the crop.

Three days later he was in that particular retail outlet in his home town and there was a sign where that product should normally be: 'Due to climatic conditions in the growing regions of this particular product, we are unable to supply this at the moment. We are working closely with our supplier.' I can quote it word for word. That sort of thing is going on. People, consumers, would not take too kindly to that if they knew the full story.

We have to start. The website is a first start—building the layers of understanding, building a better price transparency model. People talk to me about limiting margins of supermarkets. I do not think we want to go down that path because if there is a shortage of bananas the last thing we want to do is limit those people's ability to take advantage of that market shortfall. That is market forces.

What we need is a better price transparency model so that, if the zucchinis are cheap and plentiful, why is the supermarket not stocking them? People would like to know that. At the moment, capsicums in the supermarkets are at \$10 a kilo. They are selling at farm gate for \$2 a kilo. I think supermarkets are not good at clearing gluts or clearing oversupply. If there is a big supply of capsicums, they should be sold at \$4 a kilo and have that move through, but it suits the supermarkets to have a continuous supply and they regulate the supply and the price.

Part of your question asked about time of negotiation. The answer to that is how long is a piece of string. It goes as long as it needs for them to get a good outcome. We need to start moving away from that. I do not know whether you saw it, but in the publicly available court proceedings, the counsel assisting the ACCC asked one of the supermarkets about their non-binding forecasts. They are the sorts of things that are difficult for suppliers to work with. They are told they would be expected to supply 100 pallets but there is never any talk about price. When they get to that point where they have those 100 pallets ready, then the price negotiations start but everybody else in that supply chain has also been asked for 100 pallets and all of a sudden there are too many pallets and that allows the negotiations for the prices to come down. Whether it is deliberate, there are two sides to the story. The supermarkets will say it is not, but we need to make sure that if it is not then let us fix it. That is what I am trying to call out with them in a measured way and provide evidence that this is happening. It creates food security issues long term in my view.

Mr MARTIN: Commissioner, you mentioned that you met with supermarkets. Could you expand on your meetings with Coles and Woolies? In particular, were they adversarial or cooperative? Have they been helpful with providing you with information that you have requested? Did you meet with senior management or did they send in their lawyers? I think this committee would have a strong expectation that those supermarkets would be treating your position with the respect that it deserves, so I was wondering if you could expand on that.

Mr Burke: I am very fortunate in that, throughout my career, I have worked across different jurisdictions, in Queensland and federally, and I still have some very strong contacts at a federal level. After my appointment, on day 1 I contacted them and asked them to put me in the loop with the right people at Coles and Woolworths. I have met with people who are direct reports to CEOs. I do not see the point, at this point, in meeting with the CEOs because they will only rely on the information that they have from their direct reports. I have been meeting with very senior people—national product managers and national fresh food managers. I have met with them at a very senior level. I have a bit of an advantage in that I had some entrees into that.

The meetings thus far have been respectful and professional. They have given me commitments that they would like to work with me. Those meetings are ongoing. I am hopeful that if I can start to present them with information that I can stand behind and substantiate—as I said before, I may be naive and they may be just telling me whatever they think I want to hear, but I have to take them at face value to begin with—and then give them the opportunity to try to rectify it. I have ongoing regular scheduled meetings with them. As I said earlier, they are asking me what information I want to share with them. I am not prepared to do it just yet because the only card I have up my sleeve is to keep a little bit of my powder dry for the time being—until I get a consistent weight of information to go to them and say, 'This is not just farmer A's issue; farmer A, B, C, D and 20 of them have said the same thing about a particular category manager. What are you going to do about it?'

Mr MARTIN: As a follow-up, looking across the range of food farming, you were talking about category managers. In the meetings that you have had so far, is there a particular type of farming that is more impacted than others?

Mr Burke: Not really. It seems to be more a commodity and more a product line issue. I would not say it was regional. There is a little bit of regionality to it. It seems to be that a lot of this issue stems from the gap between senior management and a company ethos or direction down to people at a level where part of their salary is pegged to their financial performance within the entity. It is in their interests to get the best possible outcome financially, because it helps their bottom line. What gets rewarded gets done. Part of the grocery code talks about a lot more supervision and control of that. That would be a good outcome. Again, the strength of the code will be its enforceability.

Mr MARTIN: You mentioned there is a little bit of regionality. What region is that?

Mr Burke: Again, you might get a bit of a snippet in one region, in two others you will not and then you might get the same snippet in another region. It might be a category. It might be a particular vegetable line. It might be zucchinis, it might be carrots, it might be leafy greens. You might hear the same story, not so much in Far North Queensland but in the Bowen-Gumlu area or across in the Fassifern Valley. It is generally along commodity lines rather than regions because a lot of these category managers are national.

CHAIR: Commissioner, considering the recent floods up north, have there been any reports about transport price gouging? I understand it is an input cost that markets would dictate. Has anything already come through to you about transport price gouging on growers?

Mr Burke: The Minister for Primary Industries asked me to investigate this last week so I got onto it as quickly as I could. In the scheme of things, the transport companies that had to do the detour route through Charters Towers were applying an additional fee onto the freight lines that were going that way. It equated to about \$35 per pallet. I do not think that it is unfair and unreasonable for them to provide that because it was an additional 420-kilometre round trip.

I think that the original question that was asked of me by the minister was there had been a call for freight subsidies or freight rebates. I do not know that that call was as strong as maybe the call was for getting the Bruce Highway fixed initially and then that additional freight cost would come off. It was a bit academic in the first instance because that route was open for a while and then, after a few days, it closed because of additional flooding so it became impassable. Some of the transport companies I spoke to said they would not use it anyway because it was not really fit for purpose for large combinations.

My response to that is I am driven by the fact that we need to operate in a market where that extra \$35 a pallet equates to about three or four cents per kilo additional to the transport. I said that I want to live in a world where the market dictates that the supplier can actually demand that extra three or four cents per kilo to cover that additional transport cost. That is what has become my driver.

Mr SMITH: Mr Burke, you spoke earlier about how you are getting out there and talking to people throughout the industry. Have you yet had an opportunity to engage with some of the unions along the supply chain, such as the Transport Workers' Union, the United Workers Union, the AWU and so forth? We have seen that they, too, have their spats with Coles and Woolies. Are you seeking to engage them along the journey as well?

Mr Burke: I must say I did not anticipate that question because I unashamedly have declared that I am the Food Farmers' Commissioner and I am really trying to effect change for food producers. I acknowledge that along the supply chain there are issues and some of those issues equate back to increased costs for farmers. Up until now I have not engaged with them because I have been very involved in dealing with farmers, the supermarkets, the ACCC et cetera. I guess it is probably something that I need to put on the plan to do.

Mr DALTON: In Mackay we have a couple of very successful farmers' markets. Not much growing goes on in my constituency but obviously it does around the area. Do you have any comment about those farmers' markets and how useful they are for the supplier? Have you seen good examples of them and maybe some not so good examples on your travels?

Mr Burke: I have not really delved into the markets themselves. There are producers who use them as a bit of a sideline, more so than their mainstream. I think they have their place. I think they have proven that. Customers or consumers like them. I think that is something that needs to certainly be encouraged, but most of the producers do not rely on them primarily for a large percentage of their business.

Something I will make a comment about is that my office has been engaged with the department. There was a discussion about creating an additional or some sort of electronic platform to market produce. Being involved in the livestock industry, for many years we have had a system called AuctionPlus, which is a computer generated sales opportunity. I have worked with the department to scope a concept for developing that for horticulture. It would allow a farmer to register their produce and it could be sold online. It could be either from the retailers, processors, restaurants or mum-and-dad consumers. I have worked with the department on scoping that up to a point where we probably should consider having some resources go to the development of that.

I do not believe long term that is a role for government but, from a state point of view, I think it would be great if the state instigated some sort of discussion about an additional—and it would be additional to; it is not a disruptor—enabler for farmers to have an option or another way to market their produce and particularly to regionalise things because people are conscious about food miles. I hear the story all the time: people in Bowen put their produce on a truck, it goes to a DC in Melbourne and then, three or four days later, that box ends up back in their supermarket in Bowen. If you want to go down the pathway of climate change and food miles, that is not a good outcome. We need to make sure that we try to give every opportunity to food producers to regionalise their product. This would be a way to do that long term.

Mr DALTON: You must keep us updated on that one.

Mr KATTER: That is a fascinating concept to bring up. If you talk to Followmont, they are at capacity.

Mr Burke: Scotts went broke. That is one big supply chain service provider out of the market.

Mr KATTER: I do not want to get into too much of a policy discussion with you, but years ago we lobbied for a fair milk mark label to try to allow a consumer to opt in. It was sort of targeting that transparency and trying to achieve it from the other end through a labelling system. Are there any other ideas like that floating around that would provide a reward or incentive for operators or middlemen who wanted to increase transparency?

Mr Burke: That is something that might flow out from this. We have been speaking to some people who are really keen to develop price transparency models that give consumers access to it. People could sign up to it and, as you say, it could have a reward system in it and people could be more aware of those pricing elements.

Mr KATTER: I know there is a line, say, in the airline industry, which I think was the smartest thing to target and where all the pushback comes from. If some transparency resides with an independent party in government—not to the public—at least there is a watchdog. That seems to me a pretty reasonable proposition. Obviously, they do not want to get too transparent if the competition can see it, but if that resides with the government then surely that should be something we can aim for.

Mr Burke: Absolutely. However, I still think that long term industry needs to take some control of these sorts of things as well. Probably it is the government's role to kickstart it and point industry towards it. I think a little bit of what has happened, particularly with quality assurance programs, is that industry have not been as involved as they possibly could or should have been. Now they have multiple QA systems, which are spiralling out of control and the cost of compliance is unbelievable.

Mr KATTER: Good point.

Mr Burke: This is eating the elephant one bite at a time. I have focused very much on horticulture but I am engaging with dairy farmers as well and seeking their input. It is not all about horticulture. I am going out to the Scenic Rim tomorrow where I will be at different dairies all day.

Mr KATTER: I want to make a point and it is possibly a question. We have always been very concerned about the small private enterprise diminishing in just about every facet of every industry. The compliance seems—not necessarily to work in the favour of, but it is usually the guillotine on the

smaller guys. We are talking holistically about climate change, trucking, transport and so on. Glen brought up the point before about the little fellows who kick in at times. They are part of the ecosystem that you need, but they are disappearing from everywhere. We need to keep that in mind. There might be some inadvertent benefits from some of our efforts in this space.

Mr Burke: That is what I am hoping because at every point in this supply chain, when it comes to suppliers there is a lot of good small operators producing really good produce.

Mr KATTER: Yes, that is very true.

Mr Burke: We need to make sure that they are not swept under the rug in this process. I am not focused on just the big ones. Some of the initiatives that we are talking about are right across the board so that if people are up for it then they can prosper.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Burke, for coming along. It is great to see you continuing in the agriculture sector. Yours has been a long and distinguished career. It is good to see you back.

Mr Burke: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that.

CHAIR: That concludes this briefing. Thank you to everyone who participated today. Thank you to the parliamentary Hansard reporters, broadcast staff and committee secretariat. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. With that, I declare this public hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 10.14 am.