



PRIMARY INDUSTRIES AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present:

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

Staff present:

Ms K Guthrie—Committee Secretary
Mr R Pelenyi—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO ANNUAL REPORTS 2024-2025

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday, 10 December 2025

Brisbane

WEDNESDAY, 10 DECEMBER 2025

The committee met at 9.30 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open the public briefing for the committee's inquiry into annual reports 2024-25. My name is Steve Bennett. I am the member for Burnett and chair of the committee. With me today are James Martin, the member for Stretton and deputy chair; Nigel Dalton, the member for Mackay; Glen Kelly, the member for Mirani; and Tom Smith, the member for Bundaberg.

The briefing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to its 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, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the 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 officers are here to provide factual and technical information. Any questions seeking opinion about policy should be directed to the minister or left for debate on the floor of the House.

These proceedings are being recorded and broadcast live on the parliament's website. Media may be present 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 also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. I remind everyone to turn their phones off or to silent mode.

Today we will be talking to representatives of the Department of Primary Industries, the department of natural resources and mines and QRIDA as well as the Food Farmers' Commissioner. Please remember to push the microphone on when you start speaking and off when you have finished.

BOLTON, Mr Graeme, Director-General, Department of Primary Industries

CLARK, Ms Justine, Deputy Director-General, Corporate, Department of Primary Industries

CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make an opening statement, Mr Bolton.

Mr Bolton: Good morning. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to brief you on our annual report. I am joined today by Justine Clark, the Deputy Director-General, Corporate, within the Department of Primary Industries. I will give a very short opening address and then welcome questions from the committee.

The Department of Primary Industries—DPI—is committed to ensuring Queensland's primary industries thrive and remain sustainable. Growth and innovation are driven through collaboration across industry, research, investment and regional communities, with a clear focus on profitability, productivity and resilience to challenges. Guided by the Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon. Tony Perrett, DPI is strengthening biosecurity, driving research and innovation and supporting the sector to adapt and thrive. These are central to achieving the ambitious goal to grow primary industry production to \$30 billion by 2030.

Key to this goal is the release of Primary Industries Prosper 2050, a transformative 25-year blueprint co-developed with industry to guide the sector's future. As the first whole-of-sector plan in more than a decade, Prosper 2050 provides a clear framework for growth, innovation and resilience, supported by regional action plans, to ensure Queensland primary industries are profitable, productive and sustainable for future generations. As a subset of Prosper 2050, the Queensland Future Timber Plan 2050 outlines the 25-year strategy to expand and transform the forestry and timber industry, ensuring innovation and productivity while supporting the delivery of one million new homes by 2044.

Queensland's primary industries demonstrated their strength and adaptability in 2024-25, achieving a gross value of \$26.8 billion and record exports of \$15.6 billion, primarily driven by beef. These results highlight the sector's ability to leverage favourable conditions and the targeted support provided by DPI.

Innovation remains central to DPI's efforts, with expanded research facilities and the integration of ag tech solutions driving advancements. Biosecurity continues to be a priority, with strategic investments, new leadership roles and proactive responses safeguarding Queensland's agriculture industries and environment. DPI also plays a critical role in disaster recovery. This year was no exception, with three major flooding events to hit Queensland in three consecutive months. DPI successfully negotiated changes to funding arrangements to allow more Queensland farmers to access support for a broader range of activities, secured unprecedented funding to rebuild destroyed exclusion fencing and worked tirelessly to ensure fodder support was in place and being delivered as floodwaters receded in Western Queensland.

DPI has delivered significant enhancements to existing programs as well. These include the National Fire Ant Eradication Program and the Shark Control Management Plan, highlighting Queensland's leadership in protecting natural assets and advancing innovative solutions. DPI is driving efforts to secure a sustainable and prosperous sector for generations to come. Looking ahead, DPI will continue to work with industry and government to grow markets, accelerate innovation, meet workforce needs and optimise infrastructure. By working with industry in the spirit of co-design, co-investment and co-delivery, DPI is ensuring Queensland's primary industries remain a global leader in the supply of sustainable and high-value food, fibre and foliage that meets not only consumer but also market demands. I welcome questions from the committee.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about fisheries. We are aware of concerns particularly from recreational fishers about where they fit within Fisheries. In the report, it states—

A Fisheries Queensland stakeholder satisfaction survey was not undertaken in 2024-25.

Can you let the committee know why the survey was not undertaken and if it will be undertaken in the future? Also, how are we going to measure the views of recreational fishers alongside commercial fishers?

Mr Bolton: Could I ask for a reference to the annual report?

Mr MARTIN: Page 13.

Mr Bolton: Thank you. The question was about the survey not being undertaken in 2024-25 or 2023-24?

Mr MARTIN: In 2024-25, unless I have that wrong.

Mr Bolton: I might have to take that question on notice, if I can. I do not know the answer readily.

Mr MARTIN: That is fine.

Mr G KELLY: In the last couple of weeks there has been a lot of anxiety amongst the farmers up in my country about the federal EPBC provisions. It is making us pretty nervous, as a matter of fact. As a farmer, for one, I feel as though today's federal government does not realise how important us farmers are to—

Mr SMITH: A point of order, Chair: is there a question, please?

CHAIR: Member, please ask your question now.

Mr G KELLY: The recent changes to the federal EPBC provisions will now place restrictions on farmers clearing regrowth. Has the department had a look at how this is going to impact our farmers and whether it will make it harder to reach the government's goal to increase primary industry production to \$30 billion by 2030?

Mr Bolton: We have been watching the proceedings of the Commonwealth very closely, particularly the amendments that happened in the last week of sitting. A lot of those amendments were progressed without consultation with stakeholders. We have been engaging with the Commonwealth department of the environment to understand what those amendments actually mean, and we are currently working through those. It is quite a large amendment package. It is something that we are watching very closely in terms of potential impacts not only to graziers and agricultural producers but also to the timber industry, particularly any changes that were made through those amendments considered in the last week of parliament. Once we have finished our full analysis of what those impacts are, we will be in a position to brief the minister.

I know the minister has raised his concerns with the Commonwealth minister as well. We will continue to work with the Australian government to understand and communicate very clearly the impacts to our primary industry producers and how we can better manage that. We will then follow up with communication directly to our primary industries sector so they understand what the impacts are, how we can work with them and how we can work with the Commonwealth.

Mr SMITH: You mentioned the timber plan in your opening address. A large part of the timber plan notes that the current government has a plan to deliver one million homes by 2044, including 53,000 social homes. Has the government indicated to the department how many of those homes will be made from timber?

Mr Bolton: The government has not indicated that to us in terms of specific targets, but what we do know is that our softwood plantations, which are currently operated by HQPlantations, are a key component of the trusses and other foundation materials that go into the construction of a home. We are a net importer of timber at this point in time and we need to grow our timber plantation, which is clearly articulated through the timber plan. That is part of our commitment to support the achievement of the target by 2044.

Mr DALTON: Director-General, page 2 states—

A robust biosecurity system is critical to safeguarding Queensland's agricultural industries ...

I totally agree with that. Can you advise the committee on how the department is helping primary industry producers to respond to emerging biosecurity threats?

Mr Bolton: Yes, biosecurity is absolutely critical in terms of safeguarding not only our current industries but also potential new market opportunities. Never before has biosecurity been such a challenge for us, with increasing numbers of threats each year. We work very closely with our stakeholders and communities around building an efficient, future focused biosecurity system. In particular, the Queensland Biosecurity Strategy 2024-2029 reflects a shared responsibility for managing biosecurity.

To help achieve that, we are currently implementing the government's election commitment of employing 100 frontline biosecurity officers across the state, and I can give the committee a quick update on that. To date, 27 new employees have commenced across the state. They are all frontline officers embedded within the region. The advertising has closed for a further 13 roles and they are going through the interview process. We expect those to be appointed sometime early in the new year. We currently have one role being advertised, so we are well on track to implement the government's election commitment. In order to do that, we have been working very closely with our regional communities through the Regional Organisation of Councils to understand what their priorities are within those regions and ensure the biosecurity officers who are established in those regions are responding to that particular priority and are fit for purpose.

Mr SMITH: In the minister's message in the Queensland Future Timber Plan, it states—

The Queensland Future Timber Plan 2050 is a long-term, forward-looking strategy to safeguard the future of the forestry and timber industry, and help to meet the demand for enough timber, produced in a sustainable way, to build one million homes by 2044.

How much timber will need to be harvested by 2044 to ensure the delivery of one million timber homes?

Mr Bolton: The member may be aware that homes are constructed from a range of materials. A lot are constructed from timber frames and trusses. A lot are also constructed from other materials such as aluminium. The exact modelling about how much timber will be required for one million homes will vary depending on consumer choice and how they want to construct their home. What we know is that we need about 1,000 new hectares of plantation over the next 20 years, and that is articulated within the Queensland Future Timber Plan.

Mr SMITH: Is that 1,000 per year?

Mr Bolton: Yes, we need 1,000 hectares per year to meet that future demand to 2044.

Mr SMITH: Is that plantation hardwood or softwood?

Mr Bolton: Softwood.

Mr SMITH: The plan says 25,000.

Mr Bolton: Sorry, 25,000. Thank you.

Mr SMITH: So we are not sure how much timber will need to be produced to create one million homes?

Mr Bolton: Based on the modelling we have done, we believe we need 25,000 hectares over the next 25 years to achieve that target.

Mr SMITH: Thank you.

CHAIR: Mr Bolton, those of us in the regions and down here in the south-east corner are interested in the containment and eradication of red imported fire ants. We do not want them to come our way, but I guess no-one does. On page 30 of the annual report you talk about the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce, which is tasked with the significant reduction of these fire ant densities. Can you explain how the FAST aerial suppression activities are being delivered?

Mr Bolton: The Red Imported Fire Ant Eradication Program is divided into two components. The actual eradication program is a horseshoe shape which circumvents or surrounds South-East Queensland, and the intent is that we do the eradication activities in that band and slowly step it in as we progress with the eradication. That is called the eradication zone. Inside of that is called the suppression zone. The eradication zone is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and all of the other states and agencies. The Commonwealth puts up 50 per cent and the Queensland government puts up 13 per cent and the rest is jointly funded by the other states and territories. The suppression zone internally is wholly supported by the Queensland government, so the funding for that is met by the Queensland government and is supported by local government.

CHAIR: Can you give us a progress update and how much country is being treated at the moment?

Mr Bolton: The suppression zone was also mentioned in a Senate inquiry that was undertaken in 2023 and the report handed down last year in 2024. One of the recommendations spoke about an increase of funding within the suppression zone to aid the overall eradication program. Earlier this year the Queensland government basically made a contribution on 24 March 2025 announcing an additional \$24 million in 2025-26 for the aerial treatment of land within the suppression zone. This aerial treatment is absolutely critical in treating large-scale areas that are within that suppression zone. Previously we were not able to support that because it was all on the ground—terrestrial based—and without the additional funding we would not have been able to do that. The additional \$24 million investment will see a total of 106,000 hectares treated twice before 30 June 2026.

In terms of where we are at at the moment, approximately 38,000 hectares has been treated as of 30 November 2025. In addition to that, the Fire Ant Suppression Taskforce has also provided approximately 64,000 residents with free fire ant treatment kits, which enable them to self-treat their own properties, and we have supported large landholders with approximately 24,000 kilograms, or 24 tonnes, of free fire ant product for them to treat their own properties as well in a larger scale.

Mr MARTIN: I have a follow-up question about the 25,000 hectares. Has the department looked at locations for that? Is that new land? Has it been identified? What progress has been made towards securing that 25,000 hectares?

Mr Bolton: As you would be aware, the plan has just been released. We are certainly doing that investigation as we talk at the moment. We are working very closely with industry as well, so HQPlantations in particular as the softwood plantation owner and operator. We are looking at a range of factors about where this land might be, including the future growth of South-East Queensland. We know that the current pine plantation is under pressure from expanding urban growth within South-East Queensland, so we are starting to look strategically at where that might be located, in particular at the western edges of South-East Queensland and then up into the Wide Bay-Burnett region as well. In terms of identifying large lands, we are looking at government owned land and other options for the expansion of the plantation.

Mr MARTIN: So when will Queenslanders know or when will the committee know where this is going to be? I imagine dealing with that means there will have to be consultation with communities about this. When can we expect to know where these 25,000 hectares will be?

Mr Bolton: A key premise of Prosper 2050 is around co-design, co-investment and co-delivery with industry. This is not about government doing all of the heavy lifting. We are working very closely with HQPlantations and other potential private entities that might want to establish their own private plantations. Some of that will be commercial decisions based on private property. Other areas might be land that the government acquires. We have not made any decisions around that. There has been no decision about that. Others could be on land that is currently owned by other government entities like water entities and those sorts of things, so we are exploring all of those options to look at what makes best economic sense but also provides that future security.

Mr MARTIN: So still very early stages?

Mr Bolton: Very early stages given that the timber plan has just been released this year.

Mr GKELLY: Graeme, page 9 of the annual report states that Queensland has more biosecurity incident responses than any other state. Could you please provide more detail of the number of responses and the types of issues that Biosecurity responded to?

Mr Bolton: As I mentioned before, biosecurity is a major issue for us and a major priority. Queensland's primary producers achieved a gross value of production of about \$26.79 billion in 2024-25—as I just said, it is a record export—and biosecurity is critical to protecting that. In 2024-25 DPI responded to 604 new biosecurity incidents. Of these, 159 were notifiable animal diseases, including 15 listed under the Emergency Animal Disease Response Agreement; 75 were notifiable plant pests or diseases, including 18 incidents underneath the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed; and 370 were notifiable on the basis of plants and animals, including five incidents under the National Environmental Biosecurity Response Agreement. Some of these included the Varroa destructor mite, Japanese encephalitis virus and Asian green mussel. We also lead, as I mentioned before, multiple national responses to exotic pests and diseases, and that includes five nationally cost-shared programs being the Torres Strait exotic fruit fly, the national tropical weeds, the national red witchweed, the National Fire Ant Eradication Program and the National Electric Ant Eradication Program.

Mr SMITH: Mr Bolton, so we need to set up a thousand hectares a year for the next 25 years to hit the goal of 25,000 hectares. You have just mentioned other private plantations, so the department is considering allowing plantations to be owned on state forest land by companies other than HQPlantations?

Mr Bolton: I would like to clarify for the member's benefit that that is not what I said. What I said is that we are looking at options where new plantations might be established. Some of those might be on state owned land; some of those might be on privately owned land, but those decisions have not been made yet. We are currently undertaking a strategic assessment of where that land might be.

Mr SMITH: Did you say other private companies, though—other than HQPlantations?

Mr Bolton: We are working with the industry, and that includes HQPlantations, which currently owns the current softwood plantations, but we are open to working with anyone.

Mr SMITH: Okay, so there could be other organisations that undertake plantations, other than HQPlantations, in Queensland?

Mr Bolton: We do not have any restrictions on any other company coming into Queensland and establishing a softwood plantation.

CHAIR: Most of the forestries are private now, as I understand it anyway.

Mr Bolton: That is correct.

Mr DALTON: Graeme, this one is particularly exciting when you see exports going out from Mackay harbour. Trade is critically important to helping the Crisafulli government achieve its \$30 billion in agriculture output by 2030. I notice in the section on the operating environment for primary industries that trade is a key component to the success of food and fibre products. Are you able to provide updates on the key industries which will contribute to the strong domestic and international demand for our products?

Mr Bolton: As I mentioned in my opening address, the 2024-25 year has seen a significant growth in our primary industry production at \$26.79 billion, which is an 18.3 per cent increase from 2023-24. The key contributors to this were beef, and that is worth \$7.88 billion, which has been driven by strong export demand and higher slaughter rates, particularly with regard to the high levels of uncertainty with the global trade and free trade arrangements; sugar, \$1.57 billion, with an additional \$900 million from value-added processing; grains, worth \$1.73 billion, led by sorghum and wheat; oilseeds and pulses, worth \$1.02 billion, led by chickpeas; horticulture, valued at \$4.76 billion, including fruits, vegetables, nuts and bananas; and fisheries and forestry, valued at \$764 million. In terms of the commodities that experienced the largest GVP growth, beef was at 29.9 per cent, chickpeas at 241.3 per cent and wheat at 83.1 per cent. With regard to exports, there was a 17 per cent increase for 2023-24 and the key areas of increase were beef, which is valued at \$8.4 billion; raw cotton, valued at \$1.6 billion; grains, oilseeds and pulses, valued at \$2.7 billion; and horticulture, valued at \$503 million.

Mr DALTON: So we are doing pretty well, aren't we?

Mr Bolton: We are doing very well.

Mr SMITH: Mr Bolton, so we have a 25-year timber plan to achieve the goal of one million homes in less than 20 years and a need to expand by 25,000 hectares of plantations for trees that will not be ready until 30 years time. What funding has the department put towards the 2050 timber plan and the 25,000 hectares?

Mr Bolton: This year's budget has already been handed down. If you are talking about future decisions, that is a policy decision that might be best referred to the Minister for Primary Industries.

CHAIR: I have a question about modern tools and availability to help primary producers increase their productivity. Page 9 of the annual report under 'Innovation and technology' says—

Agricultural technology can improve efficiency, profitability, and sustainability across the agribusiness value chains.

Can you let us know how the department is supporting farmers to adopt these innovative agricultural practices and the use of technology to increase productivity and mitigate input price pressures, please?

Mr Bolton: A key component of Primary Industries Prosper 2050 is the opportunity for accelerated innovation, readiness and adoption of ag tech, and it is going to be a key component of achieving \$30 billion by 2030. The *Accelerating precision agriculture to decision agriculture: enabling digital agriculture in Australia* report estimated that the full adoption of ag tech by the agriculture industry could generate up to a 25 per cent increase in the gross value of production of the sector, with even larger gains within grain cropping which could be as high as a 51 per cent increase and in horticulture with a 40 per cent increase.

In terms of what we are doing to support this, we heavily invest within our Emerald and Gatton research facilities, which have been designed and operated as centres of excellence to connect new technologies, data sciences and foundational research together with industry. These facilities focus on demonstrating the use and benefits of ag tech, data science and other innovative technology. We de-risk investment decisions for farmers and we support farmer innovation. We help to bridge the gap between new technology and the current traditional research and we provide a test bed for new ag tech developers to test and trial their technologies in a real-world situation and we support the creation of regional jobs.

Following the successful Gatton AgTech Showcase in 2024, DPI hosted the second showcase on 15 and 16 October 2025. The showcase included 19 live field demonstrations, 43 general exhibitors, 24 protected cropping displays and three partner booths which enabled attendees to see technologies in action, discuss emerging ag tech innovations and engage directly with experts. Over these two days we saw more than 1,400 participants walk through the doors, and that included 384 growers, 185 tertiary and secondary school students and a range of exhibitors showcasing innovations across automation, sensors, crop management and other emerging technologies.

Mr SMITH: Mr Bolton, have any timber peak bodies expressed concern or frustration at the release of the 2050 timber plan and have you had to meet with them?

Mr Bolton: Can you just repeat the question? I missed the front end of that question.

Mr SMITH: That is okay. Have any timber peak bodies expressed concern or frustration to the department and yourself about the Queensland timber plan?

Mr Bolton: I meet regularly with Mick Stephens, who is the CEO of Timber Queensland. I also met with their board probably about two or three weeks ago. They expressed a very strong desire to get on with the implementation of the timber plan. We are working with them on a joint approach to how we collectively co-designed and are now co-implementing the timber plan, so we are working very closely with Timber Queensland.

Mr SMITH: Did they express a happiness at the timber plan?

Mr Bolton: There is a range of conversations that we have. As far as I am aware, they are very happy with the timber plan itself. There is an expression to get on and deliver it, and we are working with them to achieve that.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your participation here this morning.

Mr Bolton: I can provide an answer to a question on notice now, if it pleases the chair.

CHAIR: Please do.

Mr Bolton: The customer satisfaction survey for fisheries was postponed for two years. That was to enable a review of the effectiveness particularly post the reforms that were led by the previous government and then understanding where the seafood and aquaculture industry is going underneath Prosper 2050. Once we have that landed, we will be looking to design a new survey.

Mr MARTIN: When will that be?

Mr Bolton: We are in the process of working with industry to co-design the seafood and fishing action plan. It will be post that.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your participation this morning.

CASE, Mr Stephen, Executive Director and Chief Finance Officer, Finance, Business and Corporate Partnership, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

FRAINE, Mr Graham, Director-General, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

GRABSKI, Mr Andrew, Deputy Director-General, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

KALSI, Mr Gobes, Executive Director, Reform Strategy and Delivery Lead, Reform Strategy and Delivery Office, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

KIDD, Mr Jason, Deputy Director-General, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

ROSANOWSKI, Ms Amy, Deputy Director-General, Lands, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

VENABLES, Ms Celia, Deputy Director-General, Business and Corporate Partnership, Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development

CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development. Director-General, I invite you to brief the committee after which committee members will have some questions for you. Please remember to push the microphone on to speak and turn it off when you finish.

Mr Fraine: I thank the committee for having us here this morning to brief you both on our annual report and on what has been a busy year of delivery for our department. You might recall that when we briefed you in February we talked about how this department has been tasked with not only building a legacy of economic and social development across our resources, our lands and our manufacturing sector but also having a commitment to rural and regional development in this state. Our focus in 2025 has been on two key elements associated with that. One is: what really is the sum of the parts of this department and how do we leverage each of those individual elements to provide that economic and social development opportunity that I spoke about?

That I think is expressed well in our strategic plan—I have copies to table if the committee so desires—which is really focused around providing that overarching narrative of what we do as an agency. I will give one simple example of that. You would be familiar with the saying ‘pit to port’—digging the resource up and getting it out of a port. We now talk around ‘pit to processing to product to port’ and how we use that to basically look at a broader supply chain for our resources sector. It looks at processing opportunities in country; it looks at how we can value-add in a manufacturing sense; and it looks at how we ultimately produce those benefits for all parts of Queensland. That has been the first focus point. The second has really been on delivery of a number of areas.

In the resources sector, a good focus for the agency this year has been on facilitating projects and working through expediting resourcing leases and mining leases. For example, between November last year and mid-November this year our minister has granted 41 new production permits—this includes 22 mining leases and 19 petroleum leases—and 69 renewals of production permits. In addition to this, under delegation the department has made 1,200 decisions to grant or renew other resourcing authority types. These include authorities to prospect, exploration permits for coal and minerals, and mining claims. Since January, of course, we have also worked with the federal government and Glencore with regard to looking at opportunity for the future of the north-west of this state, centred around Mount Isa. I am certainly happy to address some of that today. In the gas space, we have also looked at how we can release new tenements and bring improvements and efficiencies to the process for the release of tenements for the gas sector.

In lands, we were tasked just 12 months ago with the delivery of an election commitment of \$117.84 million for the natural resources program—a program that at this point the minister has announced \$43 million worth of projects for. We have worked collaboratively with the sector and the Brisbane

NRM groups. I want to acknowledge their work through this in something that would normally have taken twice as long. There is more to do in the lands space. The committee may be interested to know—and one of the things I learned coming into this portfolio—is that as an agency we have oversight in some way of about 60 per cent of land in this state. If you add what we do in the valuation services space, we touch on 100 per cent of land in this state.

Manufacturing and regional and rural development has had a big year with the release of the manufacturing strategy, which will support significant growth opportunities in advanced manufacturing, particularly in areas like aerospace, defence, medical technologies and renewables. Our commitment to being a catalyst for strong regions is really being driven through both the work we do as an agency but more broadly through the regional leadership network system that we have set up which has done a range of key projects on the ground in the regions. For instance, it has solved water issues for the Rockhampton Ring Road project and released water in a fundamentally different way to allow water to be used for that project without the agriculture sector having to give up water leases. Those sorts of practical things are fundamentally what we are all about in this agency.

Our focus for the year ahead will be on continuing delivery and on building the legacy that I spoke about at the beginning. Either I or my leadership team are happy to take questions for the period of the briefing.

CHAIR: Thank you. You are very generous with your leadership team!

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about special employment contracts. Ian Davies was employed under a special contract of 25 days for \$187,000 for strategic analysis.

Mr Fraine: Yes.

Mr MARTIN: Can he now demonstrate value for money to Queenslanders for this? What exactly did he do strategy-wise and what exactly did he do that our hardworking public servants could not do?

Mr Fraine: As we discussed during the estimates period, Mr Davies has a long track record in the resources sector in this state and certainly in our department negotiating the work that was happening with Glencore and the work that we were looking to do in Mount Isa more broadly. We utilised Mr Davies to do a range of things. That involved the identification of key risks and issues relevant to the north-west region. It allowed us to tap his expertise and analysis of key factors, key risks, key strengths, the key stakeholders and the resources sector in the north-west area. He worked on the identification and analysis of related opportunities to support local communities in the north-west and also worked in engagement with key stakeholders including Glencore.

Mr MARTIN: Was he suggested to the department by the minister?

Mr Fraine: In discussions about how we proceeded at that point in getting expertise and involvement from external parties who know the resources sector in that space, there were certainly discussions with our minister's office around that.

Mr DALTON: While critical minerals zones are located inland from Mackay, what planning is underway to recognise Mackay's supply chain role given the mining sector, port access and manufacturing capabilities?

Mr Fraine: I might kick off with a couple of starting points and maybe throw to a couple of my colleagues. You raise a very good point of what I mentioned earlier around looking to move away from simply pit to port. Mackay's area is a key example of that. It has a very strong METS sector. Any member who has not been to the Paget estate will see some incredible manufacturing done there—not only in the METS space but certainly well in the METS space. Of course Mackay, as part of a range of key areas there, also has a key link to the resources sector more broadly in terms of mines themselves. We are looking, through things such as the Resources Centre of Excellence and the work they are doing around their expansion and the flexi hub they are doing there, to really try and bring together those different components of the resources supply chain. For us, somewhere like Mackay is a really good case in point of how we can try and bring that full supply chain together in the one area.

Mr Grabski: Certainly, the RCOE in Mackay is core to our future. RCOE will definitely be part of what we are doing more broadly with initiatives such as the Queensland Resources Common User Facility in Townsville which is a large-scale demonstration plant. Things like the RCOE provide us with the opportunity to do more targeted, pilot-scale work as well. Even in this last week or so, not only have we been having conversations with them but also we have progressed a project looking at the recovery of various critical minerals from coal tailings. Some of that work will be undertaken at the facilities at RCOE.

Mr MARTIN: Graham, following on with respect to this special contract: how unusual or usual is a special contract like that within the department? Are there other contracts that are similar to the one Ian Davies had or is it an uncommon thing?

Mr Fraine: There will be from time to time cases across the business where the public sector will utilise contracts to get special expertise in to assist with matters. As you would be aware, this government is clear around how we, in using those, look to do skills transfer into the public sector so that we are minimising the use of external parties where necessary, but it is not of a nature that is setting a precedent. Certainly, the processes followed for this are processes that were followed for others where they were done.

Mr MARTIN: But this was not an open EOI or open recruitment process; it was a selective appointment?

Mr Fraine: That is correct.

CHAIR: I remind the hearing that we are doing the briefing on the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing and Regional and Rural Development annual report 2024-25, if we can keep our questions related to that.

Mr G KELLY: Graham, I am interested to know the outcome of the regional forums when they came to Roma, Emerald and those areas out in the western country?

Mr Fraine: The forums that the member is referring to, for other committee members, are two fora that the minister hosted as the first of a series he will be doing over the course of this term of government and, indeed, has already started to lay out the areas for next year. Jason, would you care to speak to this? Certainly when Jason does, you will see that there are already some quite concrete and specific things that have happened such that those fora are not simply a matter of getting people in a room, having a conversation and then it is never heard of again. They are all about continuing to build that connection between government and community and about focusing that connection on actual outcomes. Building the relationship is a fundamental part of it, but it is a relationship with purpose.

Mr Kidd: Further to Graham's response, we had over 70 regional reps at Roma and over 60 people at Emerald. The forums are a really good opportunity for the minister to directly connect with key stakeholders in those two regions. As the director-general mentioned, we will be rolling out more of those forums over the next 12 months. As also mentioned by the director-general, a key part of that is about that direct engagement, allowing us as an agency to collate all of the issues that are raised and have those discussions with partner agencies across government, which we have been doing. An example of that work, for the committee's reference, is that we have worked with the Department of Education to look at consolidating some existing school infrastructure to potentially make available underutilised government owned land in Roma to ease some of the housing pressures. Also out of Roma, there was work done around assisting a community radio station to be connected to locally-based experts who can help with land availability to increase their broadcast zone. We are also looking at improving childcare services options in the Roma area.

We have a long list of activities from Emerald, but I will just give some examples. Following on from the Emerald forum, we have been investigating government contributions to the Central Queensland Inland Port and worked with local stakeholders to determine the optimal level of support required across all levels of government and industry to progress that precinct. We have also helped to advocate for the local school in Blackwater to acquire a bus for accessible transport options between Blackwater and Emerald. That was a key issue raised. We have been doing some work with the Queensland Farmers' Federation and our colleagues in DPI to look at solutions around student-to-workforce transition, which was also raised in both forums as a key issue. We will continue to follow up on those sorts of actions and a range of others.

Mr G KELLY: Perfect. I look forward to you heading up our way.

Mr SMITH: Mr Fraine, I want to ask this question with sensitivity to your professionalism, which is paramount. This is relating to Mr Ian Davies, who was employed during the financial year 2024-25. You have said that the minister made a recommendation or engaged and may have suggested the name of Mr Ian Davies to the department in terms of the contract. Was the need for a strategic adviser contract first put forward by the department to the minister, or by the minister to the department?

Mr Fraine: Certainly, as we commenced the planning for negotiations with Glencore as a counterparty to this, we identified as a department, similar to when other pieces of work of this nature had been done in the past, that having some assistance to help us frame and understand the nature of the task that we had around the north-west and the work we were doing was something that we considered of value to undertake.

Mr SMITH: What was the recruitment process that the department undertook and did they shortlist a range of names for interview?

Mr Fraine: We undertook normal process to identify relevant skill sets that we needed and, as I mentioned earlier, through discussion with the minister's office, settled upon Mr Davies.

CHAIR: Page 12 of the annual report under KPIs refers to increased opportunities in regional and rural communities. I am really interested in the results of \$21 million in manufacturing programs and grants that were awarded. I would like your thoughts on that—whether it was an increase and what benefits we see in the regions.

Mr Fraine: Certainly, thank you. To that point, Chair, we continue to roll out key elements of support for the manufacturing sector in this state, grants being one example of that, certainly through our manufacturing hubs. We have recently this year, as members would be aware, opened a new hub both on the Sunshine Coast and in Toowoomba. The grants have formed a critical part of helping give a hand up to small and medium enterprises across the state that are looking to get into advanced manufacturing in particular. The grants across the various grants programs are really all about doing that, and that will continue through the work of the Transforming Queensland Manufacturing Grants. That was both an election commitment and something that came through in this year's budget. We are in the process at the moment of developing the guidelines for those grants for rollout in the new year. In terms of the grants programs that we have been rolling out, I will ask Jason to provide some details.

Mr Kidd: Projects completed to the end of June 2025 have created or supported over 8,800 manufacturing jobs and leveraged over \$178 million in total project investment. We have a co-contribution model with most of our grants programs. Over 4,900 of those new jobs were in regional Queensland. As the director-general mentioned, we are finalising the design of the new grants program. Certainly, there will again be a strong focus on jobs creation, supporting local and particularly regional manufacturers in the design of that program. We hope to see some announcements in the near future around what that looks like, including the government election commitment, and that will build on the success of the existing program. The grants that are still being rolled out in terms of contractual arrangements we will continue to support through to their completion whilst rolling out the new program.

Mr MARTIN: Can the department provide the committee with a list of other similar contracts for strategic advice that the department has engaged in the financial year for this report? I could not see that in the report. We are all aware that, obviously, Ian Davies was appointed, so what I would like to know is other contracts that come under that same category of strategic advice for Natural Resources.

Mr Fraine: I will just check with my head of corporate, but I would think our contracts will all be on the contracts register.

Ms Venables: Yes.

Mr MARTIN: Can you provide that to the committee?

Ms Venables: I would defer to my director-general on his comfort with that, but yes.

Mr Fraine: I am certainly happy to provide the link to the Open Data Portal.

CHAIR: Protecting commercial-in-confidence, I guess.

Mr DALTON: The report highlights improvements in mining tenure processing times. How do processing times for applications originating in the Mackay-Bowen Basin compare with other resource regions?

Mr Fraine: I will ask my deputy director-general to talk about that, noting that I think specifics for the Mackay region may be something we would need to come back to the committee on.

Mr Grabski: I just need to look up some numbers here. In terms of specific times of the applications in Mackay specifically, I do not have that here, but I can certainly look into that for you. In terms of how we are tracking with the grants of authorities for the 12 months from October 2024 through to December 2025, in terms of coal we have awarded two exploration permits, no updates on mineral development licences, but also one mining lease completed and issued. That is in that 12-month period. If you take that over the previous four years, for MDL exploration permits we have had five. We have done two in the last year and five in the four years previous, so there is certainly a maintaining and continuing strong focus on coal applications. We do have numerous applications in play at the moment, so it is continuing to be the focus.

Mr MARTIN: I want to ask a question about Griffith University and the Mount Gravatt campus. I understand that Griffith University is handing the keys back. There was an announcement made by the minister that there is an extra 12 months to work out what is going on. Has the department looked at what could possibly go on that site? I know that there are obviously a number of limitations—it is a unique site—but has the department had a look at options for what could go there?

Mr Fraine: You are right: we have been in some negotiations with Griffith University which have resulted in them continuing their tenure there for a further 12 months. That gives us time to consider those other options you are referring to. You may recall that, certainly in the previous term of government, some options were looked at around that site, for instance with regard to housing. Ultimately, the previous government did not proceed with that on the basis of a number of factors.

Certainly, we are looking at a range of possibilities for that site. Of course, as you would know, member, there is not only the university itself on that site at the moment but also Yarranlea Primary School, and there are a number of sporting and community facilities or facility use that Griffith have at the moment. What we will be doing over the early part of next year is looking at how to get a best use for the future of that site. That could involve anything from other educational institutions to what is done in terms of the forest area there and how that is managed. Also, this government has given commitments to Yarranlea school about their future and how any future use of that site protects the interests of that school into the future. Those will be the sorts of things we will be looking at as we engage with the market and others in that space.

Mr MARTIN: For full disclosure, my son goes to Yarranlea Primary School.

Mr G KELLY: Graham, the state has invested in stock route and bore upgrades. What projects, if any, were delivered into Central Queensland, let alone the electorate of Mirani? Where are we with that?

Mr Fraine: I will ask my deputy director-general for lands to speak to that.

Ms Rosanowski: We do not have specific details by electorate for this information, but we have invested close to a million dollars over the financial year period in projects working closely with local councils, and that work continues through into this year. I am happy to see if we can get those details for you.

CHAIR: In conclusion, there are some details to come back to the committee on the stock route question and there is a link to be provided on contractor selection. Thank you for your work this year; it has been appreciated. All the very best for the festive season.

Mr Fraine: Thank you, committee, and also to you.

CHAIR: You have been very forthright in coming before the committee and we appreciate that. We wish you all the best. Thank you.

Proceedings suspended from 10.30 am to 10.44 am.

EGAN, Mr Brendan, Chief Engagement Officer, Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority

NOYES, Mr Peter, Chief Operating Officer, Queensland Rural and Industry Development Authority

CHAIR: Welcome. I invite you to make an opening statement. Then the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Noyes: Thank you, Chair and committee members, for this opportunity today to outline the work of QRIDA and its role in growing and supporting rural and regional communities across Queensland. I would like to make a brief opening statement in relation to our performance in 2024-25. Then we will be happy to take questions from the committee.

QRIDA is a statutory authority and specialist provider of government financial assistance and advisory support to rural and regional Queensland. QRIDA has a network of 11 regional area managers based across rural and regional Queensland who are available to meet on-farm to help producers with queries and assist them with their applications. In 2024-25 QRIDA approved 12,703 applications, totalling over \$267.2 million in financial assistance across all schemes. There was steady demand in 2024-25 for the Primary Industry Productivity Enhancement Scheme—PIPES—with a total of \$98.9 million in First Start and Sustainability loans approved to 128 new and existing primary producers, and 95.83 per cent of all PIPES applications were assessed within 20 business days.

During 2024-25 QRIDA administered Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements assistance for four activated disaster events. QRIDA also administered Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements assistance for five active disaster events. In 2024-25, 2,030 disaster grant applications were approved, totalling \$30.8 million—92.96 per cent of all applications were processed within the standard response times. In 2024-25 there were 43 loan applications approved under category B disaster assistance across nine events, totalling \$6.7 million—95.37 per cent of all applications were processed within the standard response times. QRIDA processed 99.59 per cent of all applications requested for review within the standard response time.

In 2024-25 QRIDA continued to administer five drought assistance schemes, allowing for the preparation for and management of future droughts without requiring a drought declaration. In 2024-25 these drought programs saw approved loan funding of over \$2.8 million—94.74 per cent of all applications were processed within the standard response time for each of these schemes. QRIDA approved drought grants funding of over \$7.8 million—99.07 per cent of all applications were processed within the standard response time.

In 2024-25 QRIDA secured three new fee-for-service programs, generating fee-for-service revenue, and continued to administer 11 other fee-for-service programs. In 2024-25, 10,168 fee-for-service program applications were approved, totalling \$120.09 million—90.29 per cent of all applications were processed within the standard response times. QRIDA's financial performance for 2024-25 confirms solid progress in relation to its strategic vision of fostering growth, sustainability and economic development in rural and regional communities.

Loan arrears were low, at less than 0.33 per cent. This figure is well under the performance target of one per cent, demonstrating QRIDA's responsible lending practices and management. The Farm Business Debt Mediation program manages the compliance of the Farm Business Debt Mediation Act 2017, with lending institutions required to offer mediation to primary producers before taking enforcement action. QRIDA has managed a total of 588 mediation matters since the program began on 1 July 2017. There are 24 mediators accredited for the program within our register of mediators.

The Farm Debt Restructure Office, which manages the Farm Business Analysis Assistance program, facilitates the provision of independent financial advisory services for primary producers in financial distress. Since commencing on 23 January 2018, 126 applications for assistance have been received, with 121 of these finalised, including 10 withdrawals and one declined.

In the 2024-25 financial year client satisfaction with QRIDA's services was 84 per cent, with 90 per cent of those clients likely to recommend QRIDA to other people. QRIDA's program owner satisfaction was 91 per cent. Finally, QRIDA's strategic direction continues to support the Queensland government in creating jobs and a diverse economy, delivering frontline services, protecting the environment and building safe, caring and connected communities through the programs and assistance delivered to Queenslanders. Thank you, Chair. We are happy to take any questions.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about fraud and dealing with fraud. I think there have been some controversial cases such as the issue up in Cloncurry. Can you outline QRIDA's current process under the Fraud and Corruption Control Framework for detecting suspicious applications? How do you go about those internal investigations? Also, how many referrals have been made in the 12-month period covered by this annual report?

Mr Noyes: QRIDA has quite an involved regime for dealing with fraud applications. All of the fraud applications are from clients, not internally. We have established a fraud team. Since around 2021, our technology has meant that we are now better able to detect much more fraudulent activity. Some of that activity may be people putting in multiple applications from similar IP addresses, phone numbers and email addresses. That is identified through the technology that we have built since then.

The process internally is that, as those issues are flagged, we flag it within our loans and grants system and then it is forwarded to our fraud team. We do not investigate. What we do is ensure we pull all of the relevant information together. We have what we term a financial crimes committee. When we get to the stage that we believe we potentially have a case for referral, we meet with the committee, which includes members of the Queensland Police Service. We utilise their expertise and their advice as to whether they think it is now at a stage for referral. We then leave it to those crime bodies to do the investigation. It is up to those crime bodies to determine if they want to bring it to prosecution.

From memory, we have referred around 800 cases to those bodies, but I can get back to you with the actual number. We do have some prosecutions coming through. As you mentioned, there is a case that has gone to prosecution. QRIDA is really quite diligent in detecting those fraudulent activities. In reality, what we are doing is using the expertise of those crime bodies. Our role is to pull together the evidence and leave it to the crime bodies.

Mr DALTON: The Mackay region continues to face labour shortages in agricultural and industrial sectors. How many Mackay businesses access the QRIDA administered workforce and business expansion grants, and what outcome measures were observed?

Mr Egan: What was the particular grant program?

Mr DALTON: The workforce and business expansion grants.

Mr Egan: With respect, I am not sure that is a scheme we administer.

Mr DALTON: My apologies.

Mr Egan: I will check that and come back to you.

Mr DALTON: I will change the question then, if that is okay. Rainfall variation is increasing in the Mackay hinterland. How many Mackay producers access Drought Preparedness Grants? What investment trends are emerging in that area locally?

Mr Egan: Over the past four years QRIDA has been delivering on behalf of the Department of Primary Industries a range of drought programs, including the very successful Drought Preparedness Grant. In the end, I think about \$20-odd million in grants was delivered. That represents 25 per cent of projects. Across Queensland, \$80-odd million in drought resilience work has been undertaken, including in the Mackay region.

I would need to take the question on notice to get you that figure for the Mackay region, but the Drought Preparedness Grant, which is a co-contribution grant of 25 per cent up to a maximum of \$50,000, has been very popular. Even though we have had four La Nina years, everyone knows the next drought is just around the corner, and the new government has been focused on preparedness and resilience.

It was announced publicly in the last budget that the government has committed another \$20 million over the next four years for the Drought Preparedness Grant. There will be some minor amendments made to the Drought Preparedness Grant, and that will be opening shortly in this financial year. Again, that will be an opportunity for Mackay region producers to invest in on-farm infrastructure such as more efficient water irrigation—centre pivots or the like—that really improve their water use efficiency and drought resilience going forward.

The good thing about the Drought Preparedness Grant is that it is not limited to one industry, like the old freight subsidies, which were just about the livestock sector. This is for every sector. Over the last four years we have seen every sector, from horticulture through to livestock and many other industries, take advantage of the Drought Preparedness Grant. It will be available again from this financial year for the next four years for people to prepare, including those in the Mackay region.

Mr DALTON: I am sure the producers will look forward to that grant.

Mr SMITH: Under grants and subsidies, there is the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Grant Scheme, which is through TMR. Do you have any data around accessibility in different regions and how much is being provided throughout the regions? Is that data you would have on hand or is that a question for TMR?

Mr Egan: We would defer to the policy owner, which is TMR. We are administering it on behalf of TMR and TMR would have that data as the policy owner. We certainly do break it down because there are accessible taxis across regional centres. Predominantly they are in South-East Queensland, but I am aware that there are regional centres that have taken advantage of that scheme, which has had a number of iterations over the last few years and, again, is continuing. We would refer you to TMR to get the specific figures because it is their program that we are administering in the background.

Mr SMITH: I was just wondering whether or not you track where the funds—

Mr Egan: I am aware that there have been taxi service providers who have taken advantage of that scheme across some of the major regional towns as well as in the south-east corner.

Mr G KELLY: What challenges do field officers report when servicing remote areas of Central Queensland, let alone Eungella, the Pioneer Valley and rural areas around Marian and Mirani?

Mr Egan: As Peter mentioned, and as you would be aware, we have a network of 11 regional area managers located around the state including in your electorate. You have one in Mackay and one in Rockhampton covering those regions and west. Those regional area managers work closely to get around those communities, working with industry allies as well as meeting one on one with individuals to go through whatever is the application or assistance. It might be a PIPES loan or it might be a DPG or, in times of disaster, it might be a disaster recovery grant or the like. That network, which we have expanded over recent years, is the jewel in our crown in the sense that they are out there working with those communities to help producers requiring assistance through QRIDA. Indeed, I think now about 30 to 35 per cent of our staff are based in the regions. We welcome that and we would like to see more, given our focus is all about supporting and growing rural and regional communities.

Mr MARTIN: I have a question about contractors. Looking at the report, I note that over \$4.2 million was spent on contractors in 2025. Looking back at 2023, I note that it was \$2.8 million. There has been an increase over time in contractors. Can you explain to the committee what is going on there?

Mr Noyes: The significant increase in contractors relates to our information technology program. We have a program that manages our loans and grants. It is complex owing to the fact that we need to take loans out to 20-odd years. We manage that internally. We have a range of IT specialist programmers et cetera who manage that program. We do the coding. We do the improvements. We also have a portal for the online application. There is a lot of very specialist knowledge. A small agency such as QRIDA really relies on that technical knowledge including where we have further IT contractors—for example, our system architect. It is quite specialised.

As schemes come on board, we need to at times get temporary staff in. We cannot always get employees, so we will use temporary contract agency staff. Generally, those are for grants where they can come in and do the assessment. Once the scheme is over or the activity drops, we are then able to offload those staff. We really run a surge model. They are listed as well under those contractors.

That is what the increase was. Specifically, we are also undertaking an automation program within QRIDA regarding our applications. We are trying to bring in the use of automation—speeding up and getting efficiency. We have contractors working on that as well. Again, they are specialist contractors in IT.

Mr MARTIN: Getting to the point of the difference, I would assume you had IT requirements in 2023 as well. Do you have new IT systems or is it just that these things go up and down over time?

Mr Noyes: Yes. They go up and down. Essentially, a significant part of that is the commencement of the automation program. That is a program we commenced during 2024-25. We also brought in the temporary agency staff as we brought on disaster recovery grants and a number of those other fee-for-service programs where we needed that extra assessing capability. Then we drop them off towards the end. Again, it is related to activity; it is not an ongoing issue.

CHAIR: Your opening statement was very thorough and I might have missed something. Page 4 of the annual report talks about loan application numbers and the dollar amounts that have been approved. It looks to me that we have a trend of slowing up. Is there a reason or can you give some explanation to the committee about the trending of loan applications, or is that not a fair assessment of what page 4 tells me?

Mr Noyes: That is the graph down the bottom?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Egan: I think the reference there is in relation to overall applications. That includes grants and loans. That goes to our fee-for-service type work. We have regular ongoing programs such as the PIPES concessional lending program, which has been going for 30 years and continues to roll out each year. We have a current lending cap of \$120 million a year. That fluctuation of overall applications approved relates to the fee-for-service work we do. A few years ago we were doing a climate smart energy scheme. We did 90,000 application approvals in that particular year. That is how QRIDA is designed. We scale up and we scale down depending on what government asks QRIDA to do in terms of new fee-for-service type programs. That probably correlates to the variation in application approvals from year to year, depending on the size and volume of schemes that are coming our way. In terms of disaster events, if you go back to 2022 or even back to 2019, they were big years because of the volume of disaster grants and loans we were doing because of the seasonal conditions. There are a number of factors that impact application approvals up and down—again, that is grants and loans.

Mr MARTIN: Looking at workforce data on page 16, it looks like there has been a marked increase in staff employed at AO7 and above, as well as some AO5s and AO6s, but a decrease in staff at AO4.

Mr Noyes: The management levels—AO7 and above—are essentially the team leaders we bring on as we bring schemes on. As we bring on staff at the lower levels, we also need to bring on staff at the higher levels. Whilst there is an increase there of six, those six are then required to manage the quantum of the staff who are working across the different schemes. Again, some of them are temporary and some of them are permanent.

Mr DALTON: I have another workforce type question. On page 16 of the report the diversity groups seem to be a lot lower than one would normally expect or maybe they just are. What is the department doing about increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disability or culturally and linguistically diverse people onto your teams?

Mr Noyes: QRIDA now has in place an equity and diversity plan that we have brought on in accordance with the requirements of the Public Sector Act, which prior to 2022 QRIDA was not captured under. As the government then revised the act, QRIDA has been captured within that, as have many other statutory authorities. QRIDA has a range of strategies in place. A lot of that is more around reporting. It is about getting the staff to report that they are also captured within that. We do not really have the specific need that we identify positions for those specific groups. We have recruitment policies that are open and encourage those applicants. As people do the annual surveys, we also encourage them to self-report that they are within those target groups. But we do have those processes. We have internal events where we try to celebrate festivals and weeks to help make those staff feel like they want to report. For such a small agency that does not have a large turnover, it is not easy to raise those diversity groups quickly, as many other organisations may be able to.

Mr GKELLY: You mention in the annual report that a Toowoomba saddlery business received a grant under the Rural Economic Development Grants Scheme to help them compete with imported products. Can you give some examples of other businesses that have been successful under this program?

Mr Egan: The Rural Economic Development Grants Scheme is a scheme that QRIDA has administered on behalf of the Department of Primary Industries, formerly the department of agriculture and fisheries, over seven rounds over the last seven years. Toowoomba Saddlery were one of the successful applicants in round 7. I have some numbers here I could share with you. That scheme has provided a range of assistance, remembering it is a competitive grants scheme. The last round was up to \$200,000 co-contribution—up to 50 per cent or a maximum of \$200,000. We saw a wide range of businesses across the state, from horticultural businesses putting in packing sheds and expanding through to equipment manufacturers or even something unique like a saddlery manufacturer in Toowoomba. Another one is a company called Little Tuna in Cairns. They do packaged tuna, value-added tuna, for the food and beverage industry. It is been a highly successful scheme over the last seven years or seven rounds.

I will get some more information on it for you. As I mentioned, it is a competitive grants scheme and everything is merit-based assessment and ranked based on eligible projects that demonstrated the highest economic benefit in regional areas and created employment in agricultural value chains. For round 7, which Toowoomba Saddlery was part of, expressions of interest closed on 22 November last year. In the end, 20 projects were successful in securing \$3.74 million in the last round in grant

funding which was estimated to create 128 long-term jobs. Again, those 20 projects from round 7 were located across 13 local government areas. Those projects, which were notified on 30 May this year, have until December next year to complete those projects.

I think overall the Queensland government's RED Grants Scheme has provided just over \$23 million in funding over seven years to support 134 successful regional agribusiness projects worth around \$75 million. It is estimated that the RED grants program in its entirety has created more than 3,200 new direct and indirect jobs, so it has certainly been a successful program.

Mr G KELLY: Well done.

CHAIR: We have talked about programs that have started and some that have finished. Would you talk more about some of the programs that have ended and programs that have been initiated in the last financial year?

Mr Noyes: From a disaster perspective to start with, we had brought on four programs for events which were declared disasters in the last financial year. They were the summer southern rainfall and flooding event, the North and Far North tropical low, Tropical Cyclone Alfred and that severe weather event, and the Western Queensland surface trough and associated rainfall. That is four disaster programs that we had brought on.

Our fee-for-service work is programs that we administer on behalf of other government agencies. We really become the delivery agency; we are not the policy agency. We delivered the E-Mobility Rebate Scheme towards the second half of 2024, the Regional Drought Resilience Planning Scheme and the Queensland Sheep and Goat Electronic Identification Rebate Scheme, which we are still delivering.

We continue then to administer 11 other fee-for-service programs including the Battery Booster Rebate Scheme, the Fisheries Structural Adjustment Scheme, the Horticultural Irrigation Pricing Rebate Scheme, the North Queensland Restocking and On-farm Infrastructure Grant, the Queensland Business Energy Saving and Transformation Rebate Scheme, the Remote Communities Freight Assistance Scheme, the Resilient Homes Assistance Scheme, the Rural Economic Development Grants Scheme, the Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme, the Wheelchair Accessible Taxi Grant Scheme and the Zero Emission Vehicle Rebate Scheme.

I think what these schemes identify is that QRIDA provides support across many industries and many different parts of Queensland, but many of those are located in the rural and regional communities of Queensland. That is at the heart of what QRIDA does is—supporting rural and regional Queensland—and we are able to do that by many different programs on behalf of government.

CHAIR: Our time is up. Gentlemen, do you want to give a shout-out while we are on the record?

Mr Egan: Yes, for the Queensland Rural Press Club, which of course last year celebrated 50 years as an organisation that promotes rural journalism. I highly commend it. These ties are certainly a collector's item.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that and thank you for your time this morning. One question was taken on notice.

Mr Egan: There are some that we might be able to answer for you now. Chair, with your permission I can give you a quick response on the fraud statistics for 2024-25. Apologies that we did not have that for you earlier. As at June 2025 QRIDA had 1,895 suspicious applications across 1,094 client files, with a requested amount of \$52.4 million. Of those suspicious matters, 846 files were externally referred to appropriate agencies for investigation, of which seven client files have led to charges—four are currently before the courts and three matters have been finalised with recorded convictions, which I think you were referring to earlier. I think that demonstrates the comprehensive fraud. Sadly, in this day and age, as an agency that is delivering government funding, our IT investment and things into more fraud management, using both technology and the human element, have been absolutely crucial and continue to be so, given the nature of dealing with the public and taxpayer funds.

With your permission, I have some figures on Mackay. We do not report by electorates but I can tell you that, for the Mackay local government area, in 2024-25 I think we had approved some 54 applications for \$1.73 million. That ranged across a number of schemes: the Fisheries Structural Adjustment Scheme; the QBEST scheme, which is the Queensland Business Energy Saving and Transformation scheme; wheelchair accessible taxis—there you go, there is a regional centre; the Zero Emission Vehicle Rebate Scheme; the Battery Booster rebate scheme; and the E-mobility Rebate Scheme. Again, there is a range of existing and fee-for-service type things for the Mackay LGA.

Mr DALTON: Thank you for getting those statistics.

CHAIR: Thank you. It has been very enlightening.

CHAMBERS, Ms Rachel, Queensland Food Farmers' Commissioner

CHAIR: I now welcome the Food Farmers' Commissioner. I invite you to introduce yourself to the committee and give a brief opening statement. We will then have some questions for you.

Ms Chambers: It gives me great pleasure to address you today. Good morning, Chair, Deputy Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the progress as Queensland's Food Farmers' Commissioner. I want to begin by thanking the government for placing its trust in me to lead this important portfolio. It is an honour to support and advocate for the people who form the foundation of our food: our farmers. Queenslanders should be deeply proud of the extraordinary contribution our producers make to this state and, indeed, this nation.

As we enter the festive season, it is worth reflecting on just how much of our Christmas table comes from Queensland: our tiger prawns, ham, bacon, smallgoods, berries, the mangoes on the pavlova, the eggs and sugar that go into our baking, the sausages and steak on the barbecue, the many and various salads of every colour and flavour that we get to consume, the coffee that wakes us up and the milk that goes into our lattes. We are incredibly fortunate to have such quality nutrition grown in our state. At this December briefing, I wanted to wish every Queenslanders a wonderful Christmas breakfast, lunch and dinner and, of course, the multiple snacks in between, each made possible by the remarkable people who in all likelihood will not get a break as farming, as we know, is 24/7.

Today I will report against the statement of expectations issued to me by the Minister for Primary Industries. Since my appointment, my office and I have approached this work with discipline, urgency and an unwavering commitment to fairness and transparency in our food system. Firstly, we have been tasked with building trust both in the role of the commissioner, being a fairly new position, and also in the independence and confidentiality of our online portal. I am happy to say that in the first month we have doubled the number of support requests coming through this portal. This is an early but important signal that farmers feel safer seeking help without the fear of commercial retaliation. I encourage anyone in the supply chain to share their feedback or information through this portal, which is available through our website. However, awareness, not just of the portal but of the position and the support it affords, is a challenge and, increasingly, it is a priority. We are in the process of refreshing to reflect our expanded remit, and farmers now through the portal will just answer five core questions, making it simpler, faster and more accessible.

Across the portal and our broader engagement thus far there have been several consistent themes, the first being global compliance frameworks which are poorly aligned with the Australian context which may inadvertently create risk of an unlevel playing field. Private label practices continue to raise concerns, particularly with the potential for cheaper-to-consumer products made from imported farmed foods displacing Queensland grown produce. Rising import costs remain a dominant issue, with returns failing to keep pace, and there is a growing sense of uncertainty persisting around the long-term security of Australian produced food. Despite these challenges, however, the best way to build trust is simply to do the work of supporting farmers, and that remains my key focus.

Secondly, I have been tasked to work closely with the federal government, including the ACCC, to advance the recommendations of the supermarket inquiry. We have met with the Coles mediator to share our early work in simplifying the complaints process and it unfortunately took me nearly two days to map out the current pathways available to our farmers. No wonder this process has been rarely used. We have now almost finalised a clear ready reckoner for farmers that shows them their eight options and their intended consequences. It is my intention to meet with all stakeholders including mediators, code supervisors and the ACCC in the new year to further this work. We are also working our way through our stakeholder list and, to this end, have scheduled formal meetings with Coles and Woolworths early in the new year and have reached out to the AWU and await their response.

During this initial work we identified that a key document referenced in a retailer complaints-handling framework was not publicly available, as they had suggested, which was an unacceptable gap for any producer seeking to remedy any issue. This has been remedied through the retailer. Our current work in this area is to understand where this office can take immediate action rather than waiting on long-term national reforms. One example is our work on recommendation 16 concerning the horticulture produce agreements. The ACCC reported they had strong concerns around the method or formula approach by merchants in this space which can shift commercial risk on to growers. To unpack this further, we have this week written to Fresh Markets Australia and also Brismark to advise them of our upcoming inquiries as to how the market is operating here in Queensland to begin in the new year.

Thirdly, we have been asked to actively contribute to the national food security strategy. Food security has been raised by every farmer that we have spoken to. Concerns include competition from imports, competing land use, rising land values that make selling more attractive than farming, declining viability in some sectors, and increasing regulatory pressures, notwithstanding rising import costs and price squeezes. These issues weaken resilience and threaten long-term domestic capability. It is important to me that our work in food security is viewed through a multiple lens, system-based approach. It is only by understanding the complexity of our food security that we can all work together to solve problems and capitalise on opportunities. To this end, we recognise that this office has been supported by the whole of cabinet and, as such, our role is to advise all departments with the lenses that they may view and contribute to food security in order to safeguard that every action taken across Queensland strengthens Queensland's national food security strategy.

Fourthly, we have begun our early conversations with industry about a potential market reporting tool. Our focus is on reducing data asymmetry but without inadvertently tilting the table further in any direction. Finally, we continue to work closely with the Department of Primary Industries to support the Primary Industries Prosper blueprint. We meet regularly with all participants to share trends and emerging issues from the field and to ensure the policy reflects the real-world experiences of Queensland producers. I would also like to thank the Queensland government departments that have responded quickly to my requests for further information and clarity over the last six weeks while I was getting my feet under the table, and they have included Queensland Health, Biosecurity Queensland, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland and the Department of Primary Industries.

Chair, how good is food? It is something that we all share. It brings us together, it shapes our cultures, connects us to the land and the community and underpins our health and wellbeing. I am absolutely privileged to serve to help to solve these wicked problems and help further opportunities that exist between policy, production and people for the benefit of not just those who love to farm but consumers as well. Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

CHAIR: Thank you, and I think the timing is wonderful as we cruise into lunch. It will be no surprise to you that I want to talk to you about the soybean industry. I know that you have already been engaged in that space, but I just want to get on record that the Wide Bay-Burnett, Mackay, Burdekin, Atherton Tablelands, Far North Queensland and Darling Downs regions are all growers of soybeans. It is the issue of food labelling that I wanted to talk about in that Australian water can be included in the ingredients on labelling, and up to 87 per cent, I think, is now included in some of the soy milk products. I am just interested in your comments on that. I know that you are already working on it, so I did not want to give it to you without notice, but it is a serious concern and I just thought we could have a talk about that for the committee's benefit.

Ms Chambers: Yes, Chair. I actually have been down quite a few rabbit holes since the request came from the soybean industry. The first thing was to work out how things are labelled. We have been in contact with the Australian Made Code of Practice, and I think there are some learning opportunities for consumers but also some deep reflection that we have to do internally in the code of practice. I did not know that the code of practice had some self-reportable guidelines that go in and, yes, there were inquiries in 2011, 2016 and 2021 which recommended that water be excluded from ingredients. There are guidelines in the code of practice that talk about water. Unfortunately for soybeans, it talks about water constituting an ingredient. What we think has happened is that soybean milk, or soy milk as we know it, is not a reconstituted ingredient; it actually is an ingredient of an isolate which then is mixed with water to produce what we then would call a milk, and we think that might be a bit of a gap here. In effect, due to the water content of a soy milk product, it is deemed as a product of Australia as to the reasons that you have said—a certain percentage—and it could have, for instance, a Chinese protein-based isolate mixed with it, but for me the issue sits with whether we are really reporting the accurate information to consumers and this is the best way of going about it.

CHAIR: Locally, our motivation is those growers who have such a lot to contribute, particularly the soybean industry.

Mr SMITH: I am glad to hear that you are going to look into the website and completely change it. That is fantastic. I will take that question away. I appreciate that these questions are based around the annual report for which you were not the commissioner. Looking through the annual report that was formed by Mr Burke and the annual report of the Department of Primary Industries, there do not seem to be any statements of exact finances, expenditure, FTE equivalencies or employment numbers. In your role now as commissioner, are you able to provide the previous financial year's office expenses, financial statements and so forth for the office of the Food Farmers' Commissioner?

Ms Chambers: I presume that everything is discoverable by government. I can take it on notice and certainly report back.

Mr SMITH: That would be wonderful. In terms of taking a holistic view, I am after how much it was for website design, the number of employees in the office, whether or not there was any turnover, remuneration—anything with a dollar sign in front of it.

CHAIR: We have to be careful: it is the policy of government that sets a lot of that sort of stuff. You have been appointed commissioner, but we do not have to break it down. If you are just after a budget position for a commissioner, I think that is a fair and reasonable question.

Mr SMITH: Generally in the annual report of an office—for instance a department—they put down full-time equivalencies, any turnover rates and the expenditure of the office.

CHAIR: I get all that. I am guessing maybe the minister's office might be a better place—who would have drafted the annual report—

Mr SMITH: I thought Mr Burke drafted the annual report. I thought departments—I did not think ministers drafted annual reports.

CHAIR: Anyway, Rachel, some discretion—

Mr SMITH: It would be appreciated.

Ms Chambers: I will help in any way I can.

Mr DALTON: This is interesting and it is something that, as a consumer and an enjoyer of food, I am very interested in. I want to ask you how we can promote farmers markets—we know they are local and food is being produced locally; they are often small family businesses—compared to the supermarket, which has massive buying power and there are also very difficult distribution issues, in terms of distance more than anything else. How can your area assist those farmers markets? How can their viability, their locations and so on be increased?

Ms Chambers: That is a really interesting question. The pursuit of fit-for-purpose food production and accessibility is a really noble pursuit. I investigated what a strategy would look like just to feed the Greater Brisbane area. To give you some concept of how much food we consume—I did it on avocado trees, because that was the notional plant that came to me—to feed the Greater Brisbane area, which includes Ipswich and Logan, enough avocados, with the current consumption we would have to plant 65,000 trees and someone would have to tend to their pest, disease and biosecurity controls—let alone who is going to go up the ladder and pick them and those kind of things. We would also need to disperse them to the consumers who want to eat avocados, per se.

One of the things we say is: yes, we are in a very imperfect system; however, anyone can go down to their local retailer at any time and basically get a plethora of whatever food they choose to eat. I love the question about farmers markets. I think there is a real cultural piece there. I think they add to the fabric of society. Everyone loves going to the markets on a weekend to get that really rich produce. It also gives a sense to the community of where their food comes from. You usually get to speak to someone not so removed from the business of farming. I think there is a place for them. I just think the place and the reality of how much food we consume is a long way off. I do not have a direct answer as to how we can promote them, but I think they are an important piece of the fabric of our community.

Mr SMITH: This question may at first seem a bit obscure. When the Supermarket Pricing Select Committee brought forward the representatives of Coles, Woolworths and Aldi there was a different approach. At the moment you are under the standing orders, but you have not sworn an oath or an affirmation. Those witnesses were asked to swear an oath or affirmation and if they were to mislead the committee it could be an extreme breach of the parliament's standing orders. As you continue to uncover practices by the major retailers, would you consider reading through those transcripts to discover whether or not there has actually been a breach of oath or affirmation to the parliament? The legislation very much entitles you to report to the parliament and the minister in that the parliament may wish to take that further.

Ms Chambers: Those findings are a matter of public record. They certainly add to my knowledge and also my undertaking in my role. I read all of those. Taking that into consideration in my future endeavours would suit this position, I believe.

Mr SMITH: I am not leading the witness here, but someone may have deliberately wrote that so that these things could happen in future.

Ms Chambers: Noted.

Mr G KELLY: Can you provide more information in relation to your review into the Geared Up Growers program?

Ms Chambers: I cannot review the program just yet as in the previous commissioner reviewed it. Considering that I also was the CEO who ran it, it probably would be a conflict for me to review it.

Mr G KELLY: Fair enough.

Ms Chambers: I can speak to it, however. What would you like to know about the program?

Mr G KELLY: I am not too familiar with it, so please tell us what it is about.

Ms Chambers: The Geared Up Growers campaign came from the back of the Queensland supermarket inquiry. In my then role as CEO of Queensland Fruit & Vegetable Growers, we deemed there were things we could do as industry that were within our power. There were a lot of things outside our power and outside our remit. There were some behaviours that needed to be cleaned up by other parties, but our own behaviour was something we could work on. That behaviour meant we had to learn the ways of negotiation. When you are dealing with data asymmetry, where data sits with one party and there is a lack of data and lack of clarity with another—that is one thing, but not knowing the process and how to negotiate was another really big thing that we could improve upon. I am so grateful that we were funded for the program and so happy with the results. We put over 200 growers through it and we had a 4.6 out of five star rating. Growers said that they had no idea that buyers from retailers were put through intensive training programs. We spelt out what that meant for them—the really nice things that the buyers may say and do for them was actually just part of bumping down the price. I think it was a really valuable contribution to Queensland industry. Ironically, the federal government has just funded \$2 million to further this across the nation.

Mr G KELLY: Very good, thank you.

Mr MARTIN: I was wondering if you could expand on your opening statement in relation to national food security, in particular land use—it is something the committee has heard in other inquiries we are doing, especially in relation to sugar—and the pressures for housing, and also the importance of protecting agricultural land. Have you looked at that or are there any international examples you have looked at that balance those two competing factors? Is there anything you can share with the committee in relation to land use?

Ms Chambers: I can share with the committee that it is a concern. It will probably end up being something I report on next year. Currently, if you take pre-2020 land valuations, there are a lot of farmers getting some bank loans off their land valuations. Our concern is: if you removed the value of their land, would they still be getting a loan on their business? That is concerning because if we cannot have a secure food production that is sustainable in profit—the previous commissioner's submission into the national food security strategy was that we are missing a key component in food security, that is, profitability—then in the future we potentially may have banks coming back on their loans because of land valuations.

We also have a situation right now where I can name—I will not—three farmers in the South-East Queensland area who have already been tapped on the shoulder by developers and they are asking, 'Why wouldn't we?' The reason they do not want to is that they are a farmer. They want to farm food. It is a noble pursuit, it is what they know how to do and they do not want to do anything else; however, the valuation of the land at the moment means they would not have to farm for the rest of their life and their children would not have to farm for the rest of their life. That is the daily struggle they have. I have no advice for government at this time, because I am not understanding the depth or breadth of it. I just know that if your business is not making the money and your land is then decisions weigh up differently.

CHAIR: I want to come back to beans. Are you feeling any appetite by the big two to waive some of the shelf fees on our local producers? Is that a conversation that has happened?

Ms Chambers: No, it has not been a conversation as yet. However, there have been conversations about what we are doing as a Commonwealth government on tariffs—how we are using the levers available to us. There have been conversations about whether the retailers, given their market share, have an extra duty of care that they currently have not officially been given—like banks. Banks are under a duty of care, regulatory-wise, in not putting up their interest rates so as not to break community. Is there an extra duty of care that we would expect from people who make decisions such as bringing in imports? At the moment I would say they are in a tricky situation where an import may be giving them a cheaper cost to consumer but also some profitability, without having to have due concern to the sustainability of Australian grown produce.

CHAIR: The shelf fees that are paid by Australian producers has not come up as a real thing to try to drive the competitive market that we are looking for?

Ms Chambers: Interestingly, the shelf position that people paid for used to be that middle-shelf range. We are trying to work out whether that is still the case or whether the consumer eye is changing—whether the consumer is looking for the lowest cost and whether the pricing around that is changing. It is certainly a question that we have on our list for when we meet in February; however, I think there are more questions to ask as well.

Mr SMITH: It is my recollection that Coles and Woolworths, when they were witnesses, said that shelf fees did not happen and at no time did they offer larger companies to be in that middle section of the shelf, so that is very interesting. During the inquiry, Coles and Woolworths were asked about whether or not they deliberately overinflate contracts to effectively lock a grower into becoming bigger and bigger and oversupplying so that there is less demand this season and then dropping down the prices. Have you in your role, or in your previous engagement with the industry more broadly, seen examples or been informed of examples where growers become contracted to one of the major retailers, become larger and larger but then find difficulty in terms of if crops being destroyed not being able to pay back the debt or being effectively locked in to only negotiating with one of the major retailers, to their detriment?

Ms Chambers: With all due respect, there are a lot of questions in there. If I pull out the natural disaster component, the natural disaster component impacts Queensland and my concern is that natural disaster may be impacting Queensland more readily than other states, putting us a bit on the back foot in terms of what you said about recovering. How do growers in a supply-and-demand market—of course, the buyer just wants the best price—then make up for all of the losses they get?

Mr SMITH: Are you seeing examples where major retailers are deliberately distorting the market through their exclusive contract arrangements?

Ms Chambers: The ACCC speaks about this quite a lot in the recommendations. I think they did not come to an absolute conclusion but they teetered around the edges with respect to some things that probably need to be clearer. I have seen many examples of growers trying to grow into an arrangement. That is fraught with issues, because if you had a profitability issue in the first place then growing the issue may not equal further profitability. I think that is some of your point. I think there were a lot of growers who said that was the case, but the ACCC has not actually come out and said that it found clear evidence of it. I am happy to provide an update to you.

CHAIR: We have come to the end of our time together. Mr Smith has asked for some details about the department or the area. That was the only question on notice. Thank you very much for coming in today. It is great to see you in your new role and we look forward to talking to you some more.

Ms Chambers: Thank you, everyone.

CHAIR: That concludes this briefing. I thank everyone who has participated today. I thank the Hansard reporters. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course. The timeline for responses to questions on notice is by 17 December.

The committee adjourned at 11.47 am.