



Speech by

Hon. HENRY PALASZCZUK

MEMBER FOR INALA

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Sugarcane Smut

Hon. H. PALASZCZUK (Inala—ALP) (Minister for Primary Industries) (10.02 a.m.), by leave: The Australian sugar industry has been on red alert ever since the recent discovery of the disease known as sugarcane smut in sugarcane plantings in the Ord River irrigation area of Western Australia. Sugarcane smut is the most serious exotic disease threat to the Australian sugar industry. In susceptible plants, it has the potential to cause a yield loss of 30% or more and to make ratoon crops unprofitable. The spores of the pest are spread on the wind and can survive for several months in soil. Even though the disease was discovered in Western Australia, it could be spread to Queensland by the movement of sugarcane plant material and on equipment or clothing that has been in contact with the soil or infected sugarcane material.

The Queensland Government has acted quickly and decisively on several fronts to protect the State's sugar industry, which is worth more than \$2 billion in 1998. As Minister for Primary Industries, I have set up a task force with representatives from the DPI, the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations and industry. The task force met last Friday and will hold a further meeting on Friday of this week. In the meantime I have issued and signed a quarantine order under the Plant Protection Act which declares the smut organism to be a pest and prohibits the movement of any sugarcane plant material or farm machinery into Queensland from Western Australia. Vehicles, clothing and footwear which have been in contact with cane or cane lands in Western Australia will also have to be thoroughly cleaned of soil and smut spores before entering Queensland.

I point out that there has been a high level of cooperation between my department, the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations and the Western Australian Department of Agriculture in the handling of this gravely serious situation for the sugar industry. Western Australia has provided details of all farm machinery which has moved from the west into Queensland since the beginning of last year. Staff from either the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations or the Cane Protection and Productivity Board have now made contact with the owners and operators of this machinery. Growers who are part of the harvesting groups where this machinery has been used have been contacted and fields that have been cut with this machinery have been identified. Since the optimum time to first see smut symptoms is when ratoons are two to three months old, these fields will be watched closely over the coming weeks.

The acting Director-General of the DPI, Dr Warren Hoey, was in Western Australia last week and was able to examine the problem first-hand. He also held detailed talks with Western Australian agriculture. We have also acted to provide a range of support measures for the Western Australian industry and Government officers who are dealing with the smut problem in the Ord.

I am pleased to report to the House that a survey of more than 14,000 hectares of the most susceptible cane areas and varieties in Queensland has found no presence of the smut problem. As well, 30 extension officers from around the State's sugar-growing regions have already been brought to Brisbane for detailed briefings on sugarcane smut and even now are back in the field briefing growers on what to look for.

Last week, I issued invitations to all members of this House to attend a briefing later today on the smut problem, and I certainly hope that most members will avail themselves of that invitation. A

national free-call hotline is now operating Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m. The sugar hotline number is 1800 303 310.

I would like to conclude by paying tribute to the highly professional way in which this situation is being handled by some of the world's best sugar industry scientists in the BSES and by officers of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries with the full and active support of the sugar industry itself. In conclusion, I urge all members of this House to support the need for continued vigilance to protect one of the State's most important industries.
