



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 23 March 1999

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (10 a.m.), by leave: The Queensland share of relief for natural disasters in the far north, north, south-east and south-west of the State this financial year is more than \$60m. Starting with Cyclone Rona in February, communities in far-north Queensland are experiencing their biggest wet season for 20 years. Since the cyclone crossed the coast north of Cairns on 11 February there have been only intermittent breaks in the weather. As a result, the ground and river/stream catchment areas in all regions affected by Rona remain saturated. We have had extremely heavy falls of more than 400mm in 24 hours, renewed flooding in coastal and river systems between Tully and Cooktown, and also flooding in areas of the Atherton Tableland.

By midday Monday, all highways in the area were cut, as were most other road systems. The rail line was cut between Cairns and Townsville and a number of low-lying suburbs around Cairns were inundated. Businesses and schools were disrupted. Crops already affected by Rona received even more damage, and extensive damage was reported to avocado and vegetable crops on the Atherton Tableland. The low pressure system causing the adverse conditions did not start to break up until Thursday, 18 March. Thunderstorms and heavy rain persisted over a number of areas. Since Friday weather conditions have been slowly easing, but some isolated heavy falls persisted over the weekend. A final flood warning was issued for the Tully River on Sunday morning. All rivers are now under minor flood levels.

Because it very quickly became apparent that damage from renewed flooding would exceed the trigger point for the activation of Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements, I approved the reactivation of a number of relief measures under those arrangements on 15 March. It will not be possible to give an accurate estimate of the damage until floodwaters recede, but it is expected that costs from the latest flooding will be in the millions of dollars. The far north has been saturated twice in the past month—from Cyclone Rona and subsequent rainfall and last week's deluge which inundated a wide area.

I have visited the far north twice in this time for inspections and to meet and speak with local mayors and others affected by the big wet. One thing is certain—the wet season will leave a massive damages bill and one from which many people will take months to recover. Eligible damage under the NDRA for Cyclone Rona alone amounted to \$28.5m. Massive crop damage will swell the overall bill to more than \$100m. Eligible damage under NDRA up to and including Rona was estimated at \$111m. The latest flooding in the far north will swell that to over the \$120m mark.

The State Government pays the first \$30.172m, the next \$22.595m is shared 50/50 by the State and the Commonwealth and the Federal Government contributes 75% of eligible damage beyond that mark. The State bears the vast majority of the cost in most years. This year will be the first for some time that the Federal Government has contributed a considerable amount to the relief funding.

The latest rain could not have come at a worse time in places such as Innisfail. There, scores of people who had just cleaned up after Rona found their homes and businesses under water again. But north Queenslanders are resilient. Already they are again picking up the pieces of their lives—a difficult task made easier by the magnificent work of local SES volunteers and other community-minded people. With the wet season continuing, there could be more tough times ahead. The Government continues to stand ready to help Queenslanders devastated by floods and other disasters.