



Speech by

Hon. MERRI ROSE

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard 25 August 1999

STATE COUNTER-DISASTER ORGANISATION AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. M. ROSE (Currumbin—ALP) (Minister for Emergency Services) (11.59 a.m.): I move—
"That the Bill be now read a second time."

This Bill that I present to the House today is a vital step in ensuring that the safety and protection afforded to Queensland communities continues into the new millennium. I am sure that honourable members will agree that Queensland's disaster management system is a very sound one that has successfully managed many natural disasters in the past. However, in today's complex world new challenges would be presented if any of our essential services suffered a major disruption or malfunction. A failure in an essential service could have serious ripple effects on other essential services and infrastructure systems.

Under the current legislation, such an event—a technological or man-made event— would not be sufficient for activation of our disaster management system. Under the current arrangements, there would be no legal basis for the operation of the State Emergency Service; no indemnity for action taken in good faith to protect lives or property. Local government would not be mandated to respond; nor the disaster districts; nor our State Counter-Disaster Organisation. Certainly, Queenslanders can be assured the disaster response would come, but without the legislative support of the State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act.

This Act, which created both the State Counter Disaster Organisation and the State Emergency Service in 1975, provides the definition of "disaster" to which the Act is applicable. And it is this definition which is inadequate. Honourable members, particularly those from northern electorates, are well aware that disruptions occur during our tropical cyclone season. The Act currently has a natural disaster focus and does not include factors such as failures in essential services and infrastructure that could occur. A disaster under the current definition can include a flood, earthquake, seismic sea wave, cyclone, storm, tornado, eruption or other natural happening. It can be an infestation, plague or epidemic. It can be a fire or oil spill.

This amendment ensures that the definition of "disaster" in the Act is broadened to allow for appropriate disaster response to be undertaken at any time in the future should an essential service or infrastructure system fail or be disrupted. It also ensures that an event "may be natural or caused by human acts or omissions". A change in the definition of "disaster" will have no impact on current arrangements to declare a state of disaster or natural disaster relief arrangements. The new definition would cover other possibilities, such as dam failures, the collapse of a freeway system, terrorist acts against an electricity distribution system or possible failures in essential services caused by Y2K problems at the turn of the century.

A failure in an essential service such as water or sewerage or power could have a significant adverse impact on the operations of Government and the private sector. It could have serious ripple effects on other essential services and infrastructure systems. The Department of Emergency Services is coordinating the development of a Year 2000 State disaster contingency plan to mitigate against possible problems.

The amendment Bill also gives a clearer legal basis to disaster contingency planning currently being undertaken by local governments and disaster districts. It extends indemnity provisions to

volunteer and permanent operational staff conducting response and recovery activities related to failures in essential services and infrastructure systems. This is an important issue to volunteers and members of this House should show support for these dedicated volunteers by supporting the Bill. Furthermore, the proposed amendment Bill appropriately extends the authority to declare a state of disaster in accordance with the broader amended definition of the term "disaster" in the Act. We are leaving nothing to chance. If something does go wrong as the clock ticks over from 1999 to 2000, the Government will be ready for action.

We are being super cautious. We are taking out insurance; we are drawing up a plan we believe will never be necessary. But we must be prepared. It is vital that Queensland's disaster management system is ready for any challenges that arise at any time. Part of that preparation is ensuring that the disaster management system can respond to a problem in an essential service or infrastructure system with the protection and power that applies to natural disasters under the existing legislation.

This amendment Bill reinforces the Government's commitment to ensuring the safety of Queenslanders and provides more support to communities and the volunteers who protect them. I commend this Bill to the House.
