



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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SUGAR INDUSTRY

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (7.14 p.m.): On 8 and 9 April, Mackay had the distinction of hosting the first two-day motivational conference hosted by the Canegrowers Network, Mackay, for local sugarcane farmers and their wives, and indeed for farmers and other interested people all over Queensland. Honourable members would be only too aware that my electorate of Mirani is responsible for 25%—one quarter—of the sugarcane production in the State of Queensland. It is an accolade of which I and every hardworking man and woman in the Mackay district is immensely proud, and justifiably so. Sugarcane is the backbone of the area.

I suggest that most members would be very much aware of the difficult times that the sugar industry is going through currently. It is facing a price of US5.5c a pound, which is a 13-year low. The increase in the dollar to around US65c is also having huge impacts on the sugar industry. It is noteworthy to mention that Australia's multimillion-dollar sugar industry is a world leader and amongst the most efficient sugar industries anywhere around the globe. However, we can ill afford to rest on our laurels. We must constantly harness the talents and contributions of others to ensure that our agricultural producers are at the cutting edge of technology and utilising world's best practice.

The aptly named Sweet Horizons Conference did just that. The event fielded almost 30 guest speakers, including identities of such calibre as world marathon swimming champion Shelley Taylor-Smith. It was amazing to hear her speak about how she was able to conquer the world marathon championships numerous times in spite of a huge disability. All speakers, including the Federal member for Dawson, De-anne Kelly, and Westpac's Debra Heitman, imparted knowledge and expertise accumulated in their chosen field to a very attentive audience. Over the two days of the conference, many of the high-calibre speakers imparted not only worthwhile knowledge but also some good commonsense, which is something that I think we all lack sometimes.

I wish to share with honourable members some of the more notable comments resulting from the conference's deliberations. Professor John Schneider informed farmers and their wives of some of the health hazards that their properties posed. He mentioned that handling chemicals, underground water supplies, farm machinery accidents and under-age driving were some of the occupational hazards confronting farmers and of which they needed to be aware. Not least of these hazards, of course, is stress—another of the issues that we have to deal with in rural communities. Most members would be aware that suicide is a huge problem in rural Australia. I would also go a step further to say that everyone should be made aware of the plight of the man on the land. Farmers operate under trying and very difficult conditions for much of the time. Sometimes it is made all the more difficult by Government policies that penalise people who are not within walking distance of Queen Street. The uncertainty in recent times in relation to water allocations, which is the backbone and heartbeat of rural industry, is of real concern. Vegetation-clearing guidelines, particularly in relation to freehold land, is a huge issue. Recently, the changes in workers compensation have imposed a heavy burden on employers.

It is incumbent on the Government to assist the wealth producing sector, that is, the primary industries sector, in every possible respect so as to ensure that primary producers have the safest possible working environments and that they can work at optimum capacity. Honourable members should bear in mind that when farmers are earning money—and I mean real money; new money, not recycled money—the State of Queensland reaps the rewards.

Wise words were spoken, too, by Pinnacle canefarmer Mary O'Neil, when she addressed the issue of social change in rural Australia and highlighted the need for rural producers to spend more time in leisure and relaxation. It is only too easy for people who are rostered on seven-day harvesting, as they are in many farming communities——

Time expired.
