



Speech by

Mr M. ROWELL

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DROUGHT, SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Mr ROWELL (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (11.19 p.m.): The worsening drought in much of southern Queensland has highlighted major deficiencies with the Beattie Government's drought policy. There are the ongoing reports that the DPI is interpreting the criteria for individual droughted property applications as narrowly as possible and is not activating local drought committees to advise on the situation. Why? Because they have received a directive from the head office, presumably so that the Government can minimise its financial exposure to providing drought relief. Of course, the Minister denies this and has been merrily issuing media releases inviting producers to apply for the IDPs.

Producers have been lodging IDP applications and are being knocked back in many cases without even receiving a visit by the local stock inspector or without consideration by the LDCs, or local drought committees. In other cases, producers are not bothering to lodge applications because the DPI has told them that they will only be knocked back. The question must be asked: is the Minister cynically misleading these drought stricken families? Honourable members do not have to take my word for it. Here is what some of those producers at the coalface have said. One from the Trap Rock district wrote—

"While the Minister has consistently said the guidelines haven't changed, property owners in this region were able to get IDPs on higher 12 month rainfall totals in 1994 and 1997 than has been the case this year.

The worst hit properties, and these have been refused IDPs, have had less than 250 mms since the beginning of this year and some considerably less than that. All these properties have been feeding stock since April and some earlier than that. Many producers have already sold or sent stock away and are heavily feeding those that are left. The drought assistance scheme will be of little or no use to them if they cannot access it before most of their stock are dead or sold.

The first ... 9 months of this year are in many cases the lowest recorded rainfalls for 60 to 80 years. IDP applications have not reached any further than the local stock inspectors simply because they did not qualify under a 12 month rainfall formula. The stock inspectors must be given the flexibility to assess each application for an IDP on its merits and not on a 12 month figure on a piece of paper."

Another letter states—

"The Minister ... has stated that the guidelines have not been changed. However primary producers have been told by the relevant authorities not to bother applying because their rainfall figures for the last 12 months are too high. IDP declarations are being issued on rainfall totals for the preceding 12 months only."

Despite the Minister's claim that local drought committees are being used, that producer informed me that as of yesterday the Warwick drought committee for one had not been activated. There are five other criteria that should also be considered, including pasture and water availability, stock conditions, stocking rates, destocking and drought feeding.

Another major deficiency with the Beattie Government's drought policy is that it just does not have one. The Minister for Primary Industries has completely ignored the very strong advice of industry groups such as Agforce and has revived the failed Goss Government's 1992 decision to scrap the State's Drought Relief Assistance Scheme for the year 2002. Predictably though, it is everyone else's

fault. The Minister has variously claimed that it is the Federal Government's fault; it is the industry's fault because of some newspaper clipping his press secretary dug out from 1992; or was it the fault of the Borbidge Government? I have news for the Minister. Industry does not support his decision. The Federal Government has confirmed that there are no risks to the AAA package, and the Borbidge Government never agreed to the end of drought relief in 2002. It is his decision and it stinks.

This is a mean-spirited Beattie Government which, just like the Goss Government, wants to rip every dollar it can out of the bush. It is a disgrace that the Minister is trying to cut the State's role in providing a safety net for drought stricken families. I call on the Minister to stop blaming everyone else and stop telling falsehoods and take responsibility for his own decisions.

Time expired.
