



Speech by

Mr T. MALONE

MEMBER FOR MIRANI

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SUGAR INDUSTRY

Mr MALONE (Mirani—NPA) (11.20 p.m.): Tonight I wish to bring to the attention of the Parliament the terrible plight of the sugar industry in Queensland. In 1998 there were severe adverse weather conditions, with very unseasonal heavy rain during August and September, a time of the year which is normally dry for planting the new crop and harvesting standing cane.

In some areas the plant crop totally failed, and farmers in other areas replanted up to three times at a huge cost in an endeavour to get a crop. Adverse harvesting conditions continued for the rest of the year, and many paddocks were destroyed by growers trying to harvest in wet conditions, which meant the ratoon crop also failed or was substantially reduced.

In the end, a vast amount of cane was left in the paddock because of the impossible harvesting conditions in the hope that it would stand over in the paddock for harvest in the following year. Unfortunately, this proposal was faulty and the standing cane in 1999 was a disaster, with low sugar content and tonnages. Not only that, but the vermin rats found that the standover cane provided a tasty meal and a place to breed. Huge losses were experienced and the rats continue to be a major problem in the field, even this year.

In their wisdom, EPA officers have imposed draconian methods of controlling the pest, leaving farmers exposed to disease when rebaiting bait stations within the crop. Many farmers have been affected by life-threatening diseases. It is about time Minister Welford—my mate—got a bit of background and got some results in this effort. Even at this stage, more than \$20m lost in the central district of Mackay seems inevitable.

There is still no effective measure for control of rats in sugarcane. Numerous farmers are absolutely desperate as they watch their crops being destroyed. In a further kick to the embattled industry, the most important productive variety, Q124, has been affected by orange rust disease, which has decimated the crop. Some farmers have almost 100% of Q124 on their farms.

With the beginning of the crushing season just under way, those farmers' worst fears were realised with massive losses of the crop tonnage and sugar experienced as the processing of the crop moved forward. In my own mill area of Plane Creek in Sarina, the estimate for this year's crop was around 1.8 million tonnes. Now, after just a few weeks of crushing, the expectation is more in the region of 1.1 million tonnes—almost 700,000 tonnes less—and with a very substantial reduction in sugar content. This is disastrous for the mill areas right throughout Queensland.

This scenario is being repeated throughout the sugar growing areas of Queensland. There are huge losses for both farmers and millers, with major impacts on the regional communities throughout north Queensland. For example, machinery dealers are conducting hardly any sales. In the retail area, shops are closing. There is rising unemployment. The list goes on. The practical effect is that a season that normally runs for more than 25 weeks could this year be over in less than 15 weeks. This represents an enormous loss in employment throughout the industry.

The Federal Government currently has an assistance package for the sugar industry before it. I have made many representations, urging John Anderson and his colleagues to come to an early decision on this matter. However, I must ask: where is the Queensland Government? It is lost in action. We have heard not a peep from it. Where is the Primary Industries Minister? He is also lost in action. He is too busy putting together unnecessary, unwanted reform of the industry, but is silent on any support for an industry devastated by three disastrous years.

In previous years the Queensland Government has been the leader in support for short-term, repayable loans, and the Federal Government has always come in behind with equal support. It must be recorded and remembered that the industry has always repaid any financial support with interest, and this time will be no different. It is blatantly obvious that the Queensland Government is more occupied with building super stadiums, raiding port authorities and working out slick strategies to sell sick Budgets and so on than with helping productive battlers in regional centres.
