



Speech by

ELISA ROBERTS

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

Hansard 8 November 2002

DAIRY FARMERS, FEES AND CHARGES

Miss ELISA ROBERTS (Gympie—Ind) (4.31 p.m.): As everyone in this House—and in Australia, for that matter—would be aware, the current drought conditions are having devastating effects upon farmers. Not only is the lack of rain affecting the farmers on a day-to-day basis but also many dairy farmers have lost a great deal of their income as a result of the deregulation of their industry. Many have huge debts that they are currently struggling to repay. On top of that, dairy farmers are forced to buy water and feed so that they can continue to feed their cows, so that they can milk and so that they can pay their children's school fees and put food onto their tables. I know of one farmer who has spent \$14,000 on freight alone—and that is the amount before GST—over a four-month period. This cost does not include the actual cost of the feed.

I do not believe that those within the Primary Industries Department who are insisting on applying additional fees and charges to farmers are actually aware of the reality of the financial situation that our farmers are facing. In Queensland, our farmers are provided with a 20 per cent subsidy for the transport of fodder for milking cows, whereas all transport costs for fodder for other cattle are subsidised 50 per cent. Nobody can deny that this is a huge discrepancy and grossly unfair to dairy farmers.

This government is actually making things more difficult for farmers rather than easier. With the initiation of the new systems for food safety and workplace health and safety at this point, it is ignoring the fact that farmers are not making the money that is needed to pay for these new programs. I ask members to not get me wrong: both of these programs are important, but it is not the right time for them to be put into place. There have been no cases of food poisoning in Queensland as a result of unsafe milk. So why is this government placing these charges on the farmers when they just do not have the money needed to carry out the control processes?

As it stands now, all processors who receive farmers' milk carry out numerous tests and checks even before the pasteurisation process and before it even leaves the dairy farm to ensure that the milk is fit for human consumption. The milk, which is sent from the farm to the processor, has gone through a checking process before it is released to the supermarkets. Therefore, there is no need for further testing to be carried out at this level of production. What most people do not realise is that milk at this early stage is GST free as classified by the Australian Taxation Office. Nevertheless, samples of milk are taken before it is taken away by the milk tanker. If there is too much bacteria, for example, it is not accepted and is condemned.

I have requested that the minister delay the implementation of this new policy just until the farmers get back on their feet. But he has denied this request. Once again I implore the minister to please provide Queensland farmers with a grace period until the drought is over so that they can get back on their feet. I do not understand why, when farmers are applying for exceptional circumstances funding and the rest of Australia has donated millions of dollars to the Farmhand appeal, this government chooses this time to introduce new laws that will cost farmers too much money.

I invite any city based member of this House and the minister's staff to come and meet with some of the farmers in my electorate just so that they can witness first-hand what our farmers are going through. I am positive that if they could see how desperate the farmers are, they would support the request for the postponement of any new fees at this point.