



Speech by

Hon. HENRY PALASZCZUK

MEMBER FOR INALA

Hansard 29 October 2002

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Drought, Exceptional Circumstances Assistance

Hon. H. PALASZCZUK (Inala—ALP) (Minister for Primary Industries and Rural Communities) (10.07 a.m.), by leave: I can report to the House that I sent an application for exceptional circumstances assistance for the drought-stricken producers in Peak Downs shire and parts of Belyando and Emerald shires to federal Agriculture Minister Warren Truss yesterday. The application was prepared by Agforce and the Queensland government through the Department of Primary Industries. The application area covers about 220 properties and there is also a recommendation for a buffer zone. I believe that this application meets the tests for an EC declaration.

The application cites DPI estimates that the gross value of agricultural production in Peak Downs shire declined by 50 per cent to \$45 million in 2001-02 compared with the year 2000-01, and a further fall of 45 per cent to \$27 million is projected for this financial year. Exceptional circumstances assistance is in the form of welfare measures and farm business support which is in the form of interest rate subsidies. The federal government must first determine if the application is a *prima facie* case for exceptional circumstances assistance and, if so, welfare assistance is immediately triggered.

As minister, I have actively sought reforms that will ensure needy farming families can not only access exceptional circumstance assistance, but that they can do it quickly. Despite the agreement of all Australian governments for EC reform, the federal minister will not implement changes such as a four-week deadline for assistance applications until the Commonwealth gets agreement to reduce its share of funding for its own program. In the case of this application, the reforms could be the difference between producers receiving full exceptional circumstance assistance before Christmas.

My argument has been based on what is in the best interests of our farming communities. I have also noticed that, in September, the National Party federal council decided to require that exceptional circumstance applications be assessed within four weeks. It is unfortunate that our Queensland Nationals support Mr Truss's refusal to implement exceptional circumstance reforms because they ignore what farmers need, what the states want and what their own party demands of them.

I would also like to thank Queenslanders for their support of the Farmhand appeal for drought assistance. On Saturday night, together with Stuart Copeland, his wife and my wife, I joined farming families and local residents in Clifton on the Darling Downs. Clifton was one of three centres in Australia to host special barbecues to coincide with the Farmhand concert in Sydney. The Farmhand appeal has now raised more than \$30 million. The Queensland government has contributed \$500,000 towards that appeal. Farmers appreciate the help but, more importantly, they appreciate that people now understand what they are going through.

While some areas have received some rain in recent days, the falls have been too light and too sparse to be of real benefit. Unfortunately for some producers the dark clouds also brought hail which devastated some crops. Our producers appreciate the rain that has fallen but there needs to be more—much, much more.
