



Speech by

Mr JIM PEARCE

MEMBER FOR FITZROY

Hansard 27 November 2002

DROUGHT

Mr PEARCE (Fitzroy—ALP) (6.30 p.m.): The amendment which was moved by the Premier and seconded by the Minister for Primary Industries says it all. The Queensland government is doing what it can in response to demands caused by the current drought. The Premier has already outlined what the Labor government is doing. I am proud to be part of a Labor government that understands what is happening in rural Queensland.

My constituents are saying to me that they want the Federal minister, Warren Truss, to cut the red tape and get on with the job. They want him to accept the urgency of the situation and implement effective reforms. I call on that mob sitting on the other side of the House—National Party members—to do what they were elected to do and that is to stand up for rural Queensland. I call on them to do the job that they were elected to do.

This drought is a very serious issue for Queensland—for people on the land and for small business who are dependent on the cash flow that is generated through the primary industry sector. The drought has the potential to impact on consumers as produce volumes decrease due to failed crops and the availability of livestock for slaughter.

I represent a large area of central Queensland and much of it is feeling the impact of drought. The way I see it is that this drought will go down in rural folklore as the drought that simply will not go away—a drought that at times over the last 10 years seemed to have broken, but it is still there. Some people are saying it is the worst drought in 100 years. With no indication of changes to the weather systems it could become the worst drought ever. Every day that passes without rain means failed crops, loss of pasture, declining water resources and lost farmer incomes. It is the farmers who suffer first. It is the farmers who suffer most. They are suffering now, and their suffering is spreading fast to hurt small business operators, rural industry employees, contractors, rural towns, consumers and export incomes that depend on what we produce in rural areas. This drought is big time and we need to be working as one to assist those in need to prepare for what I believe will be the most serious crisis that a Queensland government has ever had to deal with.

This debate tonight should not be about political point scoring; it should be about the realities of this drought—the impact it is having, what the potential consequences are and how we can best respond. Everyone on that side of the House should be offering a spirit of cooperation that encourages the Beattie government to be proactive and effective instead of just sitting over there whingeing and being negative. One of the realities is that this drought has contributed to a level of debt that is so big that many will never recover. I see that and the minister sees that, so do not try and tell us that we, as Labor members, do not understand what the people of rural Queensland are going through.

It is about time that we, as leaders, cooperated at both the state and federal level so that there are no time delays in processing drought assistance and exceptional circumstances applications. A bit of bipartisanship is what we need.

Today, for the information of the House, I received information from the Red Cross Farmhand Distribution Committee who, with the assistance of volunteers, are processing applications for emergency relief. We should congratulate those volunteers who are giving up their time. I need to draw the attention of honourable members to the enormity of the crisis that Queensland has to deal with. To date in Queensland there have been 3,227 requests for assistance and this amounts to some \$37 million. Last week, the committee approved \$1.7 million to 1,100 applicants. By this Friday, a further \$820,000 will be distributed. By the end of this week a total of 1,840 families will have received a cheque, and the committee is still processing applications. Those figures alone should ring the alarm bells, but if that is not enough to alert people to the seriousness of this drought I would like to read into *Hansard* some of the information that has surfaced through the Farmhand assistance applications. The first comes from Charleville. It reads—

We don't have enough money for petrol to take the kids to school. They have holes in their socks and shoes and I don't want them to be embarrassed.

The second comes from Jandowae—

Am tired of fighting drought and struggling with the overdraft. Sometimes I have a guilty feeling. I'd like to go to sleep and be off this planet.

I have another one here—

We have sold our shares and our credit cards will be full soon and at this stage we are unsure how we will survive until Christmas. We are now considering selling off the farm machinery that we can manage without. With three small children it is quite worrying what the future will bring.

Time expired.
