



Speech by

**HOWARD HOBBS**

**MEMBER FOR WARREGO**

Hansard 13 November 2003

#### **DISASTER MANAGEMENT BILL**

**Mr HOBBS** (Warrego—NPA) (4.28 p.m.): I am pleased to speak to the Disaster Management Bill 2003. As the shadow minister said, the opposition will support this bill. It makes a number of changes that will help to consolidate and improve the management of natural disasters throughout this state. It will help communities to mitigate the potential adverse effects of an event, to prepare for managing the effects of the event, and to effectively respond to and recover from the disaster or emergency situation. The bill replaces the State Counter-Disaster Organisation Act 1975. It establishes volunteer emergency service units that could perform rural fire, SES and first-aid functions in rural and remote areas. With limited resources in those communities, emergency service units could provide improved service delivery by offering a broader volunteer emergency service.

The legislation requires the state group to prepare a state disaster management plan. Obviously we have that now, but this is a better mechanism. The bill requires councils to establish a local management disaster group. That local group is responsible for the development of the local disaster management plan to include mitigation and counterdisaster planning. This brings me to a point of experience I had with what we thought was a natural disaster in my district—in my home town of Tambo, where I have a property.

In February of this year we had a roaring drought and then we had a roaring flood. As matter of fact, we had a drought declaration in place and eventually another disaster declaration, in a sense, at the same time. I think it is important that I outline the problems we had in arriving at that situation.

In February of this year it was quite clear that the district had been in severe drought. All livestock were in poor condition and were being supplementary fed in some way. It was clear that livestock that were being fed every two or three days would not get fed for several more days due to the extreme conditions and had already gone without feed for several days and would soon die due to the boggy and cold conditions unless fodder could be got to them. This substantial area—probably a million acres—had had eight or nine inches of rain over a few days.

The local shire had a counterdisaster plan. That counterdisaster plan covered everything we thought would ever befall the area, whether it be a flood, a fire, a bus turnover or a road tanker tipping over in the main street. Plans were in place for those things, but nobody ever really considered for a minute that we would end up with a million acres of quagmire in the district. While there was not a lot of danger to human life, there was an enormous risk to animal life.

As this event unfolded I contacted the local coordinator of emergency services to alert him of the situation. He was most helpful and advised that the process was for the local council to request a state natural disaster coordinator—that was the district police inspector in Charleville—to assess and declare the event. The Tambo shire requested declaration of a natural disaster event so that fodder drops to these livestock could be carried out. All systems were working well, and the district police inspector, Tony Rann, had been alerted to the situation in the first instance by the emergency services officer. The mayor of Tambo shire, Councillor Dougal Davidson, and the CEO, Ken Timms, were responding to the needs of the shire. Everybody was geared up. They were doing the right thing.

The trouble started when I was advised that fodder drops were no longer in the natural disaster relief plan and that maybe DPI could help. I could immediately feel the cold hand of bureaucracy. I knew well that we were in trouble and that these livestock would start to die. I rang the Director-General of DPI, Dr Warren Hoey, who was at a meeting. Mr Tony Rayner, the district manager of DPI from

Longreach, responded, and he was very helpful. However, it was clear that there was no process in place for DPI to take over fodder drops. It was becoming clear that other avenues had to be pursued.

Later that night I was able to contact the federal member, Bruce Scott, who was able to make contact with the ministry of Defence. We were advised to make an application for assistance, which was done by the mayor first thing the next morning—Tuesday, 10 February. I understand that we could not get military assistance until we had an official disaster event. So if there was no event we could not get help from the military. However, we could not get a declaration because it did not involve humanity and the value of assets damaged, or something like that, did not quite meet the criteria. In the end we got agreement out of DPI to give us a hand. We got a couple of helicopters in and we were able to manage to feed some stock, which we did on my own place as well.

In the end, hundreds and hundreds of livestock—mainly cattle—actually died. Over 1,000 just around us alone were shot. It was quite a traumatic time for everybody, because people had been feeding these stock for quite some time to keep them alive and suddenly they had come up against this situation of it being boggy everywhere.

Basically, fodder drops have been taken out of natural disaster relief plans. I think that situation was as big a disaster as anything we have faced in the town. Sure, at that stage human life was not in danger. It could have been. Had it rained for a few more days we could easily have gotten into a situation where human life was in danger, because it was an extraordinary amount of water that was flowing around. Even my son nearly got caught on a tractor when a dam upstream actually burst while he was trying to move and feed cattle to keep them alive.

This is the kind of situation we need to be able to include, or we need to have the ability, along with those local controllers, to declare that area as a natural disaster area. The situation I have explained was unheard of. In my lifetime we had never had anything like that. I am third generation in that area, and I do not think my family has ever faced a situation like that. The whole of the blacksoil plains—one million acres—went from drought to an absolute quagmire. In the end the DPI did help. It paid a third, the council paid a third and the owners paid a third for the chopper hire. Of course, land-holders paid all of the fodder costs. The help provided was certainly appreciated.

I felt at the time that had this situation affected people who did not have access to the local member or to someone who knew how to work their way through the bureaucracy, it would have been days before those people got help. I thought to myself that in one sense we were lucky that it happened in my area as we were able to get some sort of a response. This new system may just help that kind of situation. That is one issue.

Ever since drought has been taken out of national disaster systems we seem to have had troubles. If we get to a situation where we have exceptional circumstances, we may need some sort of connection to natural disaster systems. If we have a normal old drought we will not want to go through the rigmarole, but if there is an exceptional circumstances declaration made there may need to be some sort of connection with natural disaster processes.

We have seen what happened down south in relation to fires. We will have some severe fires. It is essential that we manage all of the land that is locked up in national parks and so on. Otherwise we will end up with a huge disaster like they had down south. I encourage this department to talk with Environment and other departments to ensure they do effectively manage national park areas, particularly where there are a lot of communities. Otherwise we will end up with a disaster similar to the one faced by those down south.