



Speech by

Mike Horan

MEMBER FOR TOOWOOMBA SOUTH

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DROUGHT ASSISTANCE

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (12.15 pm): With some 60 per cent of Queensland already droughted, I want to speak today about the very serious issues facing our state and, in particular, the farming families of Queensland. I also want to point out how the Queensland government is not doing anything additional to help these people, whereas there has been a massive announcement of assistance by the federal government and very substantial packages put forward by both the Victorian and the New South Wales governments.

The Victorian package provides immediate relief for irrigators via a \$5,000 rebate on rural water bills where the allocation of water is less than 50 per cent. Irrigators whose water bill is more than \$5,000 will be able to defer the remainder of the payment for up to five years interest free and the rebate will cover water bills for 75 per cent of irrigators. Compare that with Queensland where we have many people paying for water they simply do not get because it is not available.

The New South Wales package is comprehensive. It already provides a \$250 million package but also has a \$30 million emergency relief package for families on the brink. It has a mental health package that provides assistance by providing mental health workers to be transferred to the bush immediately, for bush GPs to be trained in emergency mental health treatment, 50 mental health first aid training sessions for frontline health workers and a partnership with the depression organisation beyondblue to give country families access to services addressing depression and anxiety.

In addition, it is providing assistance to help with paying household bills, payroll tax relief for small business and waiving farming levies and fees, including water levies. This drought package provides \$1 million in payroll tax relief for small businesses in the bush and more help for families to pay their household expenses and, importantly, their utility bills. The extra drought relief that farmers will be given will include a waiver of water fees and a range of levies that will be deferred until they get back on their feet.

So what is Premier Beattie and the primary industries minister in Queensland doing about this massive problem we have in Queensland with more than 60 per cent of the state droughted and with a massive reduction in grain production this year right across not only our state but Australia? Well, they are giving us some more information services. Isn't that typical of this government, which likes to come out with posters, magazines and all sorts of strategies and plans? Whilst it might be helpful for the people of western Queensland to be provided with information on what is available, in particular through the federal government's Exceptional Circumstances program, what the people of western Queensland and the rest of the state who are beset by drought need is some real and practical help and assistance.

The Beattie government's new drought measures have no new money for small businesses, no new support for families, no waiving of fees for irrigators who are receiving little or no water allocations, no waiving of any fees and no tax relief. They are left with the exact same system they had before of assistance with fodder, transport of fodder and transport of agistment cattle one way.

In the ABARE report we find that the national wheat crop is forecast to be down 15.5 million tonnes from last season. It is the smallest since the nine million tonnes produced in 1994-95. The barley crop is down 64 per cent. The saleyard indicator price for beef cattle is forecast to fall by 13 per cent. We are going to have a real disaster in our intensive industries with the price of grain. Grain, now \$310 to \$350 a tonne, has a dramatic impact on the dairy, poultry, piggery and the feedlot industry.

One of the things I want to call on the primary industries minister to do is to gather together all of the heads of our various industry organisations, such as QFF and Agforce, and the retail organisations, such as Coles, Woolworths and the others, and bring about a decent price increase for those people who are going under because of the cost of the inputs of this drought. If they can get a price increase for dairy farmers, for example, they need to ensure that it does not go to the processors but directly to the farmers.

We now need two things in this state: firstly, an immediate new package from the government additional to what it provides now to provide practical, on-the-ground support—not information evenings. We need some real waiving of payroll tax for small businesses in country towns, some decent financial assistance to help people get through this particular drought and contribute to the state again. Secondly, we need an emergency meeting with all those involved in wholesale and retail to ensure they get fair compensation for the additional inputs they are faced with now.