



Speech by

Rosemary Menkens

MEMBER FOR BURDEKIN

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NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1) 2007

Mrs MENKENS (Burdekin—NPA) (8.59 pm): I am delighted to rise this evening to support the shadow minister's disallowance motion. I particularly want to commend the member for Darling Downs for his foresight in bringing this matter before the House for discussion, because it is an important matter. We are aware of the drought. We hear a lot about the drought. We hear about the drought because it is affecting the cities, but it is also ravaging many thousands of hectares of southern Queensland and many landholders are suffering enormously as a result.

Many landholders who are faced with absolutely no pasture as a result of the drought have taken their stock on to the stock routes in an effort to keep them alive. As they use those stock routes, landholders are required to pay agistment to the value of 83c per week per head of adult cattle and 10c per week for calves. The process is that local councils are required to charge this, but as the management of the stock routes is divided between councils and the Department of Natural Resources and Water half of those fees are paid by the council to the state government. The purpose of this motion is to cause the department to seriously consider this whole matter—to seriously consider this matter and to drop its charges. As a result, many councils will also be willing to waive their charges as well. The shadow minister has spoken with many councils and he is aware that they would be conducive to considering this situation if the state government will waive its charges, and that is the purpose of this motion.

We are facing some extraordinary climatic conditions. We are hearing a lot about climate change and we are hearing all sorts of things about this being the worst drought we have ever seen. However, this is also being faced by landholders, and that is the message that is not getting out there very strongly—that is, it is not just our urban water users who are facing the drought but landholders as well. We are hearing over and over again that this is the worst drought in history. As such, if that is the case, these are mitigating circumstances—totally mitigating circumstances.

As the shadow minister said, this motion does not do away with all fees. Nobody is asking for a total grant for these people. It only gives government the power to waive its part of the fees. So this motion is asking the government to consider some of its constituency. It is the state government department that must take the lead on this issue, as councils are locked into the current regulations and must abide by those current regulations. Very few of us are aware of what is actually happening out in western areas. There are many small property holders facing this problem and there are dozens of families who are out in the long paddock, as those stock routes are euphemistically called. The people we are talking about are not large companies. They are not large companies that employ staff. Rather, they are struggling families—husbands and wives, fathers and sons and fathers and daughters, and they are doing it tough.

I am told that there are whole families who have left home with their children and who are out on the road. The mothers are no doubt giving their children schooling as well as working with the stock, trying to feed the family and trying to pay the bills, and that is the biggest issue. Taking stock on to the stock routes to survive is not easy—gambling on feed between waterholes and working in with other mobs of cattle being driven on the stock route. As well as this, when they are working the stock routes there are often

problems with neighbouring stock and also with neighbouring landholders. There is occasionally animosity from neighbouring landholders and of course there is always the battle for access to any available pasture. It is an extraordinarily stressful and thankless task. Many economists say, 'Why don't these people just sell their stock and wait out the drought?' But it is not as simple as that. That stock they have out on the road has possibly been bred for many years and they may have developed certain breeding strains that will take them years to rebuild. That stock is their entire investment. Their mortgage rests on that asset. Once that stock is sold, at no doubt very little return because of the poor state of the stock, their asset has diminished. They will have lost their breeding stock. This is their breeding stock. To replace that after this drought finally breaks if they sell it could be very unviable.

At the end of this drought—and no doubt it will break—store cattle will be selling at an absolute premium rate once the drought breaks, because there are many property holders out there looking to restock as soon as they get grass and decent pastures. Also, the cost of breeder cows will be totally prohibitive, and to a certain extent that is probably what the majority of these families out in the long paddock are counting on. They are protecting and preserving their breeder stock. Keeping that stock is the only real alternative that most small producers have. I certainly know from our own personal experience from 1987 to 1990 during the northern drought how very difficult financial survival was for rural producers. North Queensland at the moment has been a little bit more fortunate than the southern areas this season, but by golly it suffered in the past. Different areas of Queensland over the years have certainly suffered.

I noted the member for Fitzroy's comments, but I would also put it to him that maybe his area is not suffering as much as the further south-west is. The plight of rural people is fast being forgotten as the masses centre in city areas. Queensland is becoming city-centric. Perhaps in itself—maybe in some ways—that is not bad, but let us not forget that it was the rural industries that created Queensland. As the popularity of city life becomes economically more popular and socially more popular, country people are falling further behind and, tragically, this is a real fact. The biggest export from all of our country towns and all of our country areas is our young people. We need family farmers. We need small family industry. The intent of the motion before us tonight will assist in no small way towards supporting those people.

I support the shadow minister's call and ask the government members opposite to have a heart—to have a heart and support these struggling Queenslanders. What is a quite insignificant sum to the department's budget could mean the difference between survival and ruin for so many families, so I repeat the shadow minister's call. Minister Wallace, have a heart and consider these people! The minister comes from a country area. He understands drought. He understands how country people work. These are exceptional circumstances and we know the south-east is suffering from a lack of water. These people are not just suffering from a lack of water but a lack of feedstock as well. Their livelihoods are on the thinnest edge. I support the shadow minister and coalition in this initiative, and I commend the motion to the House.