



Speech by

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MEMBER FOR DALRYMPLE

Hansard Thursday, 6 August 2009

APPROPRIATION BILLS: ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E

Mr KNUTH (Dalrymple—LNP) (11.58 am): In speaking to Estimates Committee E, I would like to respond to some of the minister's comments in the parliamentary estimates regarding the floods in the Gulf of Carpentaria this year. Approximately a million acres of land have been completely wiped out, including our native flora and fauna, and hundreds of thousands of head of cattle. I appreciate that the minister has been making an effort to try to secure EC funding, but I believe it needs to go a little bit further than this. The minister acknowledged during estimates that, since the water has receded, it has created the same effect as a drought. Basically, that land is not pasture, it is not grassland; there is no native flora and fauna and the cattle are not feeding off that area. There is just nothing there. It is like an atomic bomb has been dropped on the place.

It is very important to support the people up there. They are special people. In reality, they are used to doing things on their own and with their own resources. They do not require much intervention. When they are faced with challenges and difficult situations they always manage to cope and come up with innovative solutions with scant regard for how things were done in the past. They work on the theory that if something can be done they are the ones who will do it. Despite their independence and nonreliance on others, help is now desperately and urgently required.

Earlier this year, as members are aware, almost the entire gulf region was covered in water after one of the most devastating floods ever recorded. Some areas were inundated with water for three months. Of the one million hectares of workable and flourishing land, between 70 and 100 per cent of it was covered with water. In comparison, the Swire oil spill off the coast in Moreton Bay caused a 10-kilometre oil slick.

The scale of the flooding in North Queensland is incomprehensible. The long-lasting effects will be unknown. The flooding event is unprecedented. There exists no records for the experts or the landowners to find out when or if ever recovery will occur. The ground fauna and flora which flourishes in these areas has gone. There are no living ground animals or plants left, nor is there any topsoil. Months after the event there is nothing and no signs yet of any regrowth. This is too severe for many of the hardy gulf residents to cope with.

To make matters worse, rivers, dams, waterholes and creeks have become contaminated with the remains of dead animals and nutrients that once sustained and nourished the land. Reports of fish killed and dying crocodiles feeding on contaminated fish are too frequent. This is devastation on a scale never seen or experienced. There are fears that this water will eventually contaminate the drinking water of the towns of Normanton and Croyden and the properties along the river system. Situated amongst the devastation are the landowners—those who toil from dawn to dusk to earn a living for their families, produce food for the population and manage the land for future generations. These people are in desperate and urgent need of our assistance.

While the efforts of the minister are greatly appreciated by the families and they are encouraged by his efforts to secure exceptional circumstances assistance, this process will not come into effect until early next year. Currently, the financial burden carried by many of these families is extreme. The Salvation Army

has been extremely helpful, but their resources are limited. The Northern Gulf Resource Management Group has mobilised its workers to lobby on behalf of the tired and drained gulf residents.

Now it is time for the government to step in and provide financial assistance immediately. We cannot sit back and watch, wait and hope that they can sort this out for themselves. It does not matter that they are at one end of the state while we sit here in privilege and luxury. These people are Queenslanders too and thus deserve every ounce of effort we can muster and dollar we can give to get them back on their feet. Their lives have been turned upside down and there is nothing to suggest things are going to recover quickly. In fact, some believe it will be 10 years before the land begins to recover. There is no idea whether it will be as profitable or as diverse as it was previously. These people need our help now. I call on the minister to immediately mobilise his department to assist the people in the gulf.