




Speech by

Stephen Bennett

MEMBER FOR BURNETT

Hansard Tuesday, 12 February 2013

MOTION: NATURAL DISASTER EVENTS OF 2013

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (11.24 am): I rise to share the experiences and the devastation of the Bundaberg and Burnett electorates, which started on Australia Day 2013. Who would have thought a tropical depression would cause so much damage? In my community, the name 'Oswald' is not popular. Oswald remained over the Burnett Valley catchment for 36 hours. During the events leading up to the tornadoes ripping through Bargara and Burnett Heads, we knew that we were in for a large flood in the Burnett River, as we had received hundreds of millimetres of rain over several days and there was no reprieve. Some areas of the electorate received half a metre and some one metre of rain in several days.

Tornadoes tore through the Coral Coast—three different tornadoes crossed the coast at Burnett Heads and one at Bargara, causing havoc. My coastal communities suffered severe damage. In Burnett Heads, 70 homes were affected and 50 of those received roof damage. The latest reports are that two homes on the coast will have to be destroyed. The Bargara community experienced a narrow but serious event, with damage to homes and the bowls club. Our iconic tourism highlight, the Mon Repo turtle rookery, has been forced to close this season with major concerns that all remaining nests have been washed away.

After the tornadoes we saw amazing community spirit, with the Burnett Heads community hall activated to provide meals and support. The service was initiated by Rhonda Rowleson, the wife of local councillor Danny Rowleson, and continues to provide a safe place for community outreach and a meeting place for the dissemination of information. It is also important that other members of the community banded together to demonstrate what we already knew that, even without power and being isolated, the community is strong and supports each other. I watched and noted Councillor Danny Rowleson's particular commitment to doorknocking and supporting those in Burnett Heads who needed help. I was happy that we could continue to help with more resources for the SES to allow for the clean-up and the securing of homes to be completed.

Councillor Greg Barnes managed the operations in Bargara. Greg took a leading role in caring for the wellbeing of affected residents. Again, there are many stories of amazing people and their commitment to securing and rebuilding their communities. I discovered a group of public housing tenants living in damaged units that had no rooves or ceilings. The community, led by the Bargara Chamber of Commerce, rallied to provide meals and support until the roads opened and the tremendous workers from QBuild secured the premises, working overnight and through the weekend. I worked with the Department of Public Works on the planning and establishment of transitional housing. I thank the minister and acknowledge Deputy Director-General Graham Atkins and Director Bruce Cory for their leadership and the professional services they provided. It was encouraging to see the recognition from government agencies and Education Queensland on the vital role QBuild played in ensuring that government assets were returned to service as quickly as possible. I found out early the value of social media, in particular Facebook, which allowed large numbers of people to communicate and coordinate action in the communities.

The flood event was unprecedented on many levels. The heights came up so quickly that the modelling from the Bureau of Meteorology, which had been relied on by local disaster management groups, quickly turned into educated guesses, which made decision making difficult given the pressures of impending flood heights. I congratulate and recognise the Bundaberg Regional Council's engineer, Andrew Fulton, who accurately calculated and predicted the flood heights from council modelling. The disaster was managed well and saved many lives. That modelling was so important to the decisions on planned evacuations and projected numbers of homes to be affected. I remember the morning when the district disaster management group tabled the one-in-200-year modelling to predict the areas affected and I remember the mood in the room when the predictions for North Bundaberg were first discussed.

Our district disaster coordinator, Superintendent Rowan Bond, was outstanding in the management of the execution of the evacuation orders for 3,000 people in three hours from North Bundaberg when the river broke its banks, saving many residents. The evacuation of nursing homes and the evacuation of the hospital were meticulous in their execution. I note the joint coordination and location in the same building of the district disaster management group and the local disaster management group worked very well, with quick access to all key stakeholders vital in the effectiveness of operations.

Other key persons I would like to acknowledge are Inspector Kev Gutheridge, who was deployed to the North Burnett to facilitate command, and Grant Markus from the Bundaberg police. Bundaberg Regional Council planning and disaster management processes were faultless. Dedicated professional staff provided 24/7 service to the community. CEO Peter Byrne and Deputy Mayor David Batt led a great team. Matt, Ashley, Nancy, Kim Ovens and other staff maintained the district centre. Councillor Wayne Honour, Alan Bush and Tony Riccardi were isolated in their divisions and were a pillar of strength and support to the community. Bundaberg councillors Judy Peters, Vince Habberman, Ross Sommerfield and Lynne Forgan supported their areas while providing hours of aid in the evacuation centres. It is in all situations that strong leadership and strength is needed. Bundaberg Regional Council Mayor, Mal Forman, proved to all his passion for the community. His desire to achieve results ensured seamless decision making and that all possible support was provided.

The record floodwaters rose quickly. It hit hardest in East Bundaberg and North Bundaberg. We have many cases emerging from rural areas such as Winfield, Baffle Creek and Lowmead and surrounding farming ventures experiencing significant damage. The current situation is difficult. Approximately 50 homes have been condemned, 4,000 homes have been flooded and 1,500 people are still out of their homes. The majority are being looked after by family and friends. It may take months or years for these issues to be resolved. This fact and the commitment of my community to look after one another shows that we will recover and come back stronger.

We have in our community temporary accommodation in the form of dongas and a substantial tent and mobile city at the Bundaberg showgrounds. This consists of air-conditioned tents and communal dining. The fire services, both urban and rural, have maintained forward command centres at Salter Oval after the fire station was affected. This is also in the form of tent style accommodation, which has maintained hundreds of crews from all over Queensland tirelessly and professionally assisting in the safety and clean-up after the devastation.

It is important to acknowledge and recognise the capacity of emergency services in disaster events, from the swift water rescue teams to the rapid assessment inspection teams and the many additional police officers who were deployed. The Queensland Ambulance Service station was also affected, but the professional staff continued to provide core services without any real disruption.

The recovery continues and local government has commenced many tasks. One initiative that is proving valuable assistance in the Bundaberg region is the Bundaberg business recovery centre. The floods across the region have had a major effect upon residents and businesses. The Bundaberg Regional Council, as part of the economic recovery process, has established a business recovery centre based in the Bundaberg Enterprise Centre. Across a number of rooms they have established 20 laptops, phones, print-fax-scan facilities and also IT support to assist businesses re-establish an office environment. Thanks to Cameron Bisely and Peter Peterson for their continued support.

The appointment of Deputy Commissioner Brett Pointing to the recovery effort is a welcome initiative. I am excited by the opportunities that this level of expertise will bring to my community.

As part of the rebuilding phase we need help. The unemployment rate in our electorates before the floods was 10 per cent. This is against great results in the remainder of the state of around 5½ per cent. The tornadoes and floods have devastated our communities which had double the rate of unemployment and had a large number of lower than average income earners.

Our Burnett River is a mess, with numerous vessels lost or sunk. We witnessed for the first time yachts and trawlers washed onto local beaches along the coast. Currently there are 18 vessels washed up on our beaches. The local fishing industry is on its knees with no infrastructure left—no wharves and fuel storage; they have all been destroyed. Currently any fishermen operating are utilising other ports like Hervey Bay.

Labour is needed on our farms, with debris widespread. It will need to be cleaned up quickly. It is of interest how easily items can cause problems. One example is the plastic used in small crop trickle irrigation or weed control. It is now in cane fields. It means that this has to be cleaned up or they cannot harvest. Debris and fencing all requires attention across large areas of the electorate.

Farmers in Queensland are resilient—give them the assistance that is needed now and the economy will come back. The cost of damage to crops is hard to gather but we are making headway. We have just enough to justify the welcome declarations of category C and preferably category D assistance. Many growers have been affected. Some are even seeing damage now that was not present a week ago.

Mixed messages in the public arena are going to have an impact on the longer term viability of the industry if not controlled. Everyone wants to know or needs to know the damage. However, the marketplace needs to know what is still available to prevent the unnecessary importation of goods. The best thing we can all do is say, 'Support Aussie farmers and buy Queensland products.'

Some crop losses will not be known for months. In terms of many tree crops we will see trees die in the coming months even though they may appear to be okay for now. I am already hearing that, for example, some avocado trees are dying now from too much water, further increasing crop losses this season and into future seasons. The cost of crop losses is nothing compared to the infrastructure damage and loss of farms, tree crops and limited access to irrigation water. This is not a recovery event for many growers, this is a rebuilding event. The morale among many growers is far less than it was in 2011. On the irrigation matter, there are two primary concerns. Both pose a significant risk to the continued productivity of crops still in the ground. Being unable to access pumps in rivers or massive on-farm irrigation infrastructure and the damage to Sunwater pumps and distribution systems means critical water supply issues in the Isis and Woongarra sections of the lower Burnett irrigation system.

Growers are using valuable resources in cleaning up their farms in order to get back to business and repair the damage yet industry has been unable to get immediate assistance in coordinating a program of volunteers like a mud army to get businesses back on their feet. Industry has been in recovery since 28 January however they have been doing it alone in many cases.

Without the guidelines of category C assistance, many will struggle to have this cost reimbursed. It is still not clear whether growers will be able to claim the costs of their current local workforce rather than what happened in 2011 when they had to use new staff for clean-up or recovery. The whole supply chain is going to hurt from growers to transport companies, industry support services and market agents. The cane industry has had nearly 8,000 hectares inundated. Up to 800 hectares of farm land has been totally destroyed. Some 5,000 hectares of cane stool has been lost to flood and silt.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the state ministers who have made adjustments in the agricultural sector: Minister Cripps for announcing that no permits are required; Minister McVeigh for waiving fees for those affected and for allocating departmental resources when they were urgently required. I also acknowledge the mobile vans that are now circulating in the Burnett and others areas. That is a welcome initiative.

I say thanks to the Treasurer and the cabinet for facilitating the national partnership agreement. You don't know what a relief that was for some of my farmers to hear that announcement last night. Two weeks after the event, the desperate businesses and farmers need the category D recovery provisions activated. I respectfully request the federal government to expedite these essential provisions to save my community in the recovery efforts.

The Australian Defence Force deployment was monumental in the evacuation and recovery phases of disaster. The Black Hawk trafficked hundreds of people to safety and provided rapid response capabilities in the weeks after the event. On-ground troops mobilised the mud army volunteers and provided the strength and organisational expertise to ensure that the clean-up was managed well. The Army engineers provided temporary access over our major traffic bridge. I congratulate the ADF personnel and acknowledge the vital role they played.

Volunteers and NGOs are what make our communities strong. The SES, Red Cross, Rotary, Lions, Meals on Wheels, the Salvation Army, St John's, CareFlight, Royal Flying Doctor Service, Surf Life Saving Queensland, churches and Lifeline all need to be congratulated and acknowledged. Some 15 rescue helicopters provided essential services and operated for many hours in trying conditions.

I want to acknowledge my parliamentary colleagues who supported and assisted Minister Jack Dempsey and me during the event. The phone calls, the emails and the text messages were welcome. It was comforting to know that you were there with support.

A lot of people are starting to organise fundraising and donation drives. We have seen semitrailer loads of goods come to the area organised in Brisbane by federal member Andrew Laming, assisted by the member for Capalaba, Steve Davies, and the member for Redlands, Peter Dowling. They were assisted by Hammond 4WD in Capalaba. I also acknowledge LNP President Bruce McIver for arranging the transport on behalf of my community—a big thankyou.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Premier and cabinet. Their support has been tremendous. I could not have asked for any more. The leadership team really did manage a difficult situation well. The Premier's personal involvement in disaster provided invaluable community confidence and assurances. Many times members of the public expressed their gratitude to the Premier and staff for their leadership on the work being done.

My thanks go to all the ministers and their staff who worked tirelessly to ensure the affected communities were being managed. It was vitally important that as a government we demonstrated not in words but in actions that we were in control and they were not forgotten.

The work continues with strong commitments and strong cabinet leadership with the department of communities continuing their essential work in outreach and ongoing counselling. I thank the minister for the personal interest and phone calls and the real support for my community. Support and planning with our local government is underway. The work with temporary planning instruments is very important. The minister also rang and visited many times all while providing tangible outcomes and strong leadership. I thank the Minister for Small Business and Tourism for the great support in rebuilding that part of our community. The experience of the ministers for education, transport, health, sport and recreation infrastructure has proven essential in my community's recovery.

As a local member, my family and I were not immune from the impacts of flood. I thank my neighbours Geoff, Caroline and Katherine who were also affected. I also thank the members of my Rotary club, Bundaberg Sunrise, and the friends who also provided support and muscle in the clean-up—it was appreciated.

I thank my electorate staff Kath and Jain, who had their own issues of course, and Robert Edgar, who has supported the electorate office during this difficult time. Our staff continue to work under difficult circumstances taking many calls, as many members would appreciate.

In this condolence motion our thoughts are with the family of Wolfgang Kaden, who tragically drowned in the Burnett River, and of course we thank again Superintendent Rowan Bond for his leadership in addressing what would have been a tragedy in North Bundaberg.

In closing, the stories of courage and community spirit will continue for many years. We need to remember the goodwill and commitment to each other in shaping our future.