




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR GREGORY

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MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Western Queensland, Drought

 **Mr MILLAR** (Gregory—LNP) (12.44 pm): I wish to draw the attention of the House to the terrible conditions affecting my constituents in western Gregory due to the worsening impact of drought. With the failure of another wet season, there is widespread agreement that this drought is at historic proportions. When we speak of a category 5 cyclone, we all agree that we are speaking about a public crisis. Unfortunately, droughts are not rated for length or severity. Currently, nearly 80 per cent of Queensland is in drought. Drought is a creeping phenomenon and this drought started in the west. I am sure that my colleagues the member for Mount Isa and definitely the member for Warrego would agree with me when I say that what the far-west is suffering right now is at the top of the scale. Across the west, primary producers have not had an income for years. The Longreach saleyards have cancelled all future sales until further notice, so members will understand that the landscape is now essentially destocked. Those fortunate enough to have retained a small herd of breeders are relying on donated hay bales or the stock routes in eastern Queensland to keep those herds alive. Those small herds and flocks are a tenuous promise to our children that there will be a future, if the drought breaks.

The scale of this drought is such that it is wreaking destruction well beyond the farm gates. Social and economic calamity threatens the very survival of historic towns and settlements across the west. In Gregory, I worry about our major centres such as Longreach, Blackall, Tambo and Barcardine and cannot forget our beautiful small communities such as Ilfracombe, Aramac, Muttaborra, Isisford, Yaraka, Stonehenge, Jundah, Windorah and Quilpie. Can members imagine a life without a supermarket, a butcher, a pharmacy, a baker or a mechanic? Currently, cash is urgently needed to keep the economies of those towns alive and viable, so that there will still be a base on which to rebuild once the drought breaks. Each job lost is a body blow as families leave, threatening schools and other services.

I have been urging the Queensland government to consider every avenue that it can use to prime our economic viability in those towns. For instance, the Barcoo Shire is pleading for road funding to keep its road gangs employed, as is the Barcardine Shire and the Longreach Shire. If the local shire councils can continue to employ road gangs, we can keep families in the communities. With no Queensland government appeal, good and well respected locals have set up the Western Queensland Drought Appeal so that the public can donate cash with confidence to help defend those communities. I encourage all members to find that appeal on Facebook and to spread awareness of it amongst their communities.

Suicide stalks every western community as the drought grinds lives and dreams to dust. Community life is normally a defence, a safety value. It is where people can give each other support and comfort; it provides a place where people can gather and look out for their mates. Sport plays a central role in that, yet even that release is disappearing as playing fields are too dry to use. In

Ilfracombe, the Scorpions Rugby League Club is the focus of wider community life, catering for special events and sharing its ovals with other sporting groups. This year, the club was eagerly anticipating hosting the under 12s Rugby League carnival, which would have been a major event bringing cash into the town. Instead, the club has not even been able to host any home games. Any team fielded will have to travel away for every match they play, so there is added expense without the economic input a canteen brings to the town. I know other Rugby League teams are spreading the word within the league community to try to help. I truly thank the Queensland Rugby League for what it is doing. However, not only is sport disappearing; right across western Gregory, parents—both bushies and townies—are having to withdraw their children from their community's cultural life because they can no longer afford to subscribe to extracurricular activities such as dance classes, netball and tennis. As country show season arrives, this year the Longreach Show Society is 70 per cent down on sponsorship.

I also call on the state government to launch an outback tourism campaign, which is something that the shadow minister for tourism and former minister for tourism spoke about a couple of weeks ago. That will get people, from not only South-East Queensland but also right across Australia and overseas, to come into those communities and spend new money. They will spend cash in the towns to keep them alive. Tourism is our third commodity: we have wool, we have beef and we have tourism. I acknowledge the visits by the Premier and the Minister for Agriculture, and I also acknowledge the efforts of Deb Frecklington, our shadow minister for agriculture. She has been on a nonstop drought tour since gaining that role. I thank her and Lawrence Springborg for coming and sharing this with me and for their understanding. I thank the House for listening.