




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR BURNETT

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**AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE: REPORT, MOTION TO
TAKE NOTE**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (12.09 pm): I want to congratulate the Agriculture and Environment Committee, which has changed several times over the last couple of years. To finally have this report tabled and available for debate is very satisfying. Having been a member of this committee at the inception of this review in July 2015, the inquiry into the drought assistance measures administered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries was very exciting and fulfilling. I acknowledge the regional members, who consistently raised the concerns of many who are affected by drought and its devastating effects on Queensland.

Recommendation 1 is welcomed. We heard many times from those most affected that an updated model for drought assistance that reflects the National Drought Policy is needed. The department should be consulting with AgForce and the Queensland Farmers' Federation to develop this important reform. The many submissions and presentations to the committee clearly articulated the strong feelings and concerns that exist. Many issues, though serious, were not within the scope of the drought assistance scheme the way it currently exists. These issues do highlight that there is an opportunity to address the many areas that I feel need attention.

The payment of assistance under DRAS is linked to drought declarations. As we know, a drought declaration is official acknowledgement that an area is drought stricken. In recommending that a region be drought declared, local drought committees chaired by DAF consider rainfall and other factors. As we know, the focus of DRAS is animal welfare, and this needs to be expanded. A current example in my region is that problems associated with delays in making drought declarations effectively can be seen as abandoning farmers and irrigators. Our region is in crisis and we call for compassion. We thank the minister for finally heeding those calls.

As a result of drought declarations—especially when our region has had the lowest February rainfall in living memory—within declaration parameters we now have the opportunity to gain assistance in areas such as land rent rebates and water licence waivers; electricity charges relief for water supply; community assistance package; funding for additional rural financial counsellors and much more. As well as receiving the much needed declaration for much needed drought assistance, locally we are focusing on individual drought assistance. This is time consuming and frustrating for all concerned. These individual drought declarations are helping agricultural, horticultural and sugar enterprises.

The issues of DRAS were widely explored and the report canvassed many issues. The review was needed, considering it is now nearly 50 years since DRAS was conceived. I think it is important to state that DRAS is well managed by DAF within the frameworks provided, with a good participation rate. I know that all welcomed submitters' engagement and suggestions to improve DRAS. They include improving the scheme by increasing payment caps, reviewing the rates for transport subsidies, shifting emphasis to drought preparedness, making assistance conditional, extending eligibility to long-term agistment businesses, and expanding the role of local drought committees. Several further proposals

involve expanding or modifying the scheme to provide much needed assistance and support for drought-affected rural communities, small businesses and local governments that is not related to animal welfare.

The issues of dam desilting works and educational expenses for remote regional families also need attention. I remember the submissions from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association highlighting the monetary disadvantage faced by many families in providing education for their children in times of drought. I believe that their calls for an education subsidy package for families in drought-declared areas through DRAS need further investigation. It is hard to support the position that desilting dams does not have a direct impact on animal welfare. The maintenance can only be carried out in drought, when dams are dry, and has a direct result on water management when the regions finally receive rain.

I also highlight the committee's response to the macropods issue. I attended several meetings in Western Queensland at which we heard about and witnessed the explosion in the numbers of kangaroos and wallabies. The effect on drought-affected areas is devastating, adding grazing pressures. While a lot of departmental advice on this issue was provided to the committee, the damage mitigation permits issue was the most frustrating for farmers as it is completely tied up in the Nature Conservation Act 1992. The issue needs to be simplified. I urge those involved to allow a self-assessment model. If anyone visited these areas they would find it difficult to understand why such a complicated permit renewal process exists. There is no threat to this protected species, particularly in drought, and we need to leverage the opportunities for kangaroo harvesting for meat for human consumption, for pet food and for skins as a method of managing the kangaroo numbers.

I acknowledge the important role of wild dog fences and cluster fences. This important infrastructure is essential in excluding wild dogs from areas and restricting movements. These fences also help manage kangaroo numbers and migration. I hope the committee's recommendations in appendix C are actioned. I again thank the committee for its results.