




Speech By
Tony Perrett

MEMBER FOR GYMPIE

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PRIVATE MEMBER'S STATEMENT

Fire Ant Eradication Program

 **Mr PERRETT** (Gympie—LNP) (2.24 pm): Minister Furner has completely mismanaged the fire ant eradication program and his excuse is that he just needs more money. The minister accepts no responsibility, fails to listen or act and runs from accountability. Almost \$1 billion has been spent and the infestation keeps growing. It is a systemic failure of management. Warnings were ignored yet the minister continually claims success. The fire ant footprint has grown from 40,000 hectares to 800,000 hectares. It is incompetent to claim success. How can you claim success without a functioning information system to collect reliable performance data?

Two years ago, the minister received a report that said, 'The loss of momentum between 2015 and 2018 set the Program back some years ...' It recommended a major change of plan. The minister sat on it, did not act on it and only released it in June. That is mismanagement. Last year, the minister said that fire ants remained eradicable providing substantial changes are made. The only change was renaming the eradication program a 'suppression task force'. That is mismanagement. Warnings that fire ants had spread during last year's floods were dismissed, but in estimates the minister admitted that they can raft down flooded rivers. That is another year lost. It is incompetence.

Since 2019, three reports clarified the government's lack of progress, mismanagement of programs, funding shortfalls and KPI failures. The minister has never fully implemented or accepted recommendations and refuses to implement independent assessments of the program. Fire ants are only an issue for the minister because they threaten closing Gold Coast beaches and threaten reaching New South Wales. In July, New South Wales triggered orders ramping up restrictions on high-risk Queensland businesses and Gold Coast businesses are now closing, yet last month the minister claimed that fire ants were surrounded. It is ludicrous.

The minister's latest plan says they will ramp up compliance activities and have created an advice tool. When the footprint was 40,000 hectares, they employed 20 compliance officers. Between 2018-19, seven compliance officers conducted 912 checks. Thirty per cent of cases were not resolved in a month. How will they conduct 12,000 audits a year across 800,000 hectares? Since 2003, successive estimates hearings were told that eradication was working. Premier Beattie's minister, Henry Palaszczuk, said it was successful, slashed fire ant staff and promised the all clear in 2006.

In 2016 Minister Donaldson said, 'The eradication strategies are working.' In 2019, the director-general said it 'is a very promising on-the-ground report from what we have been doing, and we will continue to do it'. In 2020, Minister Furner said Queensland's management is 'a glowing example of how we have been able to contain it'. This year the director-general said 'we are confident with the strategy'. Minister Furner said 'we are winning'.

Labor has never controlled fire ant eradication. The minister's credibility is in absolute tatters and he has become the 'friend of the fire ant'. Queensland pays a high price for this chaos and crisis and it will cost industry billions.