

FARMERS — ASSISTANCE PACKAGE

218. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Premier:

Can the Premier please update the house on the effectiveness of the state's assistance package for our farmers, and inform the house where the state government is at in negotiations with the federal government on its announced assistance package?

Mr C.J. BARNETT replied:

I thank the member for the question, and also for joining me at some meetings when I toured that area of the wheatbelt along with the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Hon Ken Baston. Following that, and conscious of the perilous situation many farmers found themselves in, the state government put together an assistance package. It was criticised by some sections of the agricultural community.

Several members interjected.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: Yes—and some of my colleagues.

Since then, fortunately, there have been quite widespread and good rains through the agricultural area, and to this point, the season looks a lot better.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Carry on, Premier.

An opposition member: Congratulations on all the rain you delivered.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: You are so witty! The opposition laughs at a situation. Has the Leader of the Opposition been into the agricultural area? No; he has not been near it!

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Let the Premier answer the question so that we can move on.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: The state announced its assistance package of \$7.8 million on 22 April this year. It includes several components, but in particular a \$25 000 grant to assist farmers who are in serious financial difficulty. To this point, 79 applications have been approved—there has been a quite significant uptake—of which 23 have been paid, and payments will go out during this week to others and continue. Also, nine shires have sought and received assistance to run some community support events. Our commitment to provide extra rural counsellors into that area has also been met. We have been getting on with it; and, combined with improving growing conditions, it has been well received.

I have been interested to see that the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Joe Ludwig, and the federal Treasurer, Wayne Swan, have even today been in the media criticising the states, particularly Western Australia, for not getting on with their rural assistance. It is worth noting the difference between this state, which is actually getting on with it, and the commonwealth and what it does. Members might recall that when the federal government went out and announced its so-called \$60 million package for each state, it announced it to the media prior to any discussion with any state in the country. That \$60 million was not assistance. It was loans. It was not a grant. It was loans. The state immediately said that we would work with the commonwealth, and we have been endeavouring to do so. Only this month, in June—five weeks later—has the commonwealth said to the states and to the farmers what the interest rate will be and what the conditions will be. Also, only now has the commonwealth decided who will deal with the issue of bad debts, because, as I have said, these are not grants; these are loans. We still do not have key details about the administration cost and responsibility for this scheme. It is, therefore, pretty rich for the commonwealth to be out there criticising the states.

There is just one other little point—a slight detail. Officials in Western Australia have been advised now by the commonwealth that it may need legislative change to put its scheme in place. So here we go, all that time later, and nothing! It is significant that not one single state or territory has signed up to the commonwealth scheme. This is not some political conspiracy. It is just the commonwealth going out with a media announcement with no detail, no follow up and no delivery of loans.

Mr P.C. Tinley interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Willagee, I call you to order for the first time.

Mr C.J. BARNETT: We are now six weeks on from the big Sunday morning announcement by the commonwealth, with no money flowing to the states or to any farmers. We are continuing as a state to get on with it. Every week, the minister in his office gets on to the federal minister and says, “Give us the details; when

is the money coming?” We are cooperating. There is a stark difference between a government that does what it says, and a Gillard government that promises and never delivers.