

## FLOOD-STRICKEN FARMERS

### *Motion*

Resumed from 12 April on the following motion moved by **Dr G.G. Jacobs** -

That the government plans to make real contributions to flood-stricken farmers in any Western Australian natural disaster assistance program.

**DR G.G. JACOBS (Roe)** [4.19 pm]: I thank you, Mr Acting Speaker (Mr G.A. Woodhams), for this opportunity to continue my remarks on a motion I moved a couple of weeks ago concerning the issue of real assistance to flood-stricken farmers in my electorate, and also in your electorate and other places north of Perth, with which you would be particularly au fait.

By way of summary, there was significant flooding on 13 January - I believe it was a Friday - as a consequence of tropical cyclone Clare. This flooding severely affected areas in my electorate, particularly Lake Grace, Pingrup, East Pingrup and the Holt Rock area, removing significant amounts of topsoil and causing significant damage to fences, stock losses, and other effects that I alluded to in my previous remarks.

I must correct my previous remarks in response to a question from the Leader of the House about Ripper Road. On further investigation in the area of Nyabing, which is the area the Treasurer comes from, I found that Ripper Road was closed about three years ago. There was a real problem where a creek crossed the road. A constituent of mine who lives in the area said that the shire could not afford the upkeep on the road, and it was therefore closed. This constituent is not sure when the sign was taken down, but he said he would get back to me with that information. I wanted to correct some of those statements, because the Leader of the House asked me whether the floods had caused the problem with the road on this occasion. In fact, there have been problems with the road for some time.

The thrust of my motion is my concern about real assistance. When the area was declared a natural disaster under the Western Australian natural disaster relief assistance program, assistance was made available for flood-stricken farmers. I want to talk about some of the things that were offered and what was actually delivered. In trying to ascertain the real, tangible assistance that was delivered I asked some questions on notice of the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure and the Minister for Agriculture and Food on 28 March 2006. One of the questions I asked of the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure was -

What contribution will the State Government make to helping local shires to repair and reconstruct flood damaged roads in Western Australia?

The media statement of the Department of Agriculture dated 17 January - four days after the flood - stated that support may include a professional advice grant of up to \$1 500 to obtain advice specifically related to recovering from the effects of the declared national disaster event and eligibility to apply for a loan interest subsidy of four per cent for loans of up to \$150 000 to assist with repair of infrastructure, additional to carry-on finance, if the ability to obtain finance for those purposes is not available from within the existing business resources. The press release went on to say that the natural disaster relief arrangement did not provide compensation, nor does any other scheme or source, and losses that could be claimed under insurance cannot be considered in a claim for natural disaster relief assistance. In trying to determine what assistance was accessed and what was delivered on the ground, I asked this question of the Minister for Agriculture and Food -

How many farmers have accessed the \$1,500 grant for consultation fee following flooding in country Western Australia following tropical cyclone Clare?

The answer was -

To date, two farmers have applied for and been granted Professional Advice Grants.

Two grants of \$1 500, in my maths, totals \$3 000. The professional advice grant was accessed by two farmers up to 2 May. My second question to the Minister for Agriculture and Food was -

How many farmers have accessed the 4% subsidy for interest rates on amounts of \$150,000?

The answer was -

To date, four farmers have applied for interest subsidy on loans. Three have been approved and one is awaiting further information for assessment.

In fact, three subsidies had been granted. This is where the maths get a little more difficult. Let us assume, conservatively, that a farmer has borrowed \$100 000 at seven per cent interest over 10 years, and compare that with \$100 000 at three per cent interest over 10 years. The total saving is about \$24 000. That amount multiplied by three totals \$72 000. As members can see, this is a major contribution to disaster relief! We may talk about who has accessed that facility and find that not many people have done so, but that begs the question

of whether there is a problem with the application mechanism. Is the program thought to be of no use? If farmers cannot get access to \$150 000 through other commercial arrangements, they actually have to be on the bones of their bottom - out the gate - before they can even apply for a grant. I will come to that matter a little later. I will share with members the third part of the question on notice that I asked the minister. It reads -

Has the assistance administered by the Department of Agriculture delivered anything tangible to farmers?

I was perhaps leading the witness when I used the word “tangible”. The answer states -

Yes. In addition to the direct assistance -

I have shared with members the fact that the assistance was not exactly huge -

provided the Department of Agriculture and Food has provided advice to farmers on options for dealing with their situations following the floods.

Hang on! Is that not the same as they would get if they were granted a professional advice grant? They are still looking at getting advice. The answer continues -

This included drainage issues, stock health and weed control.

I suggest that that is not tangible. That is exactly the same as that covered in the first part of the answer about advice. The fourth part of the question reads -

Will the Minister undertake to review the Western Australian Natural Disaster Assistance programme to make it deliver real and immediate assistance such as a “perimeter fencing reconstruction fund” to farmers?

After this incident, when I visited places such as Kulin, Lake Grace, east Pingrup and Hollands Rock, I found that not having a fence along the perimeter of their properties is what puts farmers out of business very quickly. I have had some 30 years’ experience as a farmer’s son, as I was brought up from an early age on a farm. My father has experience of farming but has been retired from farming for the past 10 years. Farmers who did not have a perimeter fence to keep in their stock - the stock that were left and were not drowned in the flood - were out of business. What farmers were looking for, therefore, was immediate reconstruction of their perimeter fences so that they could remain viable at least in the short to medium term. Farmers at Kulin were saying that they needed to re-establish their perimeter fence so that they could at least run a rudimentary operation.

I will tell members the answer to the next part of the question. Asking questions of constituents is how members find answers to such problems. Members actually ask people what they believe is the best way for them to receive assistance. There is an old adage in the medical profession that if we listen to a patient long enough, he or she will give us the diagnosis. We do not have to think about it. If we listen to people long enough, they will tell us the diagnosis and what they want and need. The answer to the fourth part of the question about perimeter reconstruction as a notion for producing something tangible, instead of waffle, did not deliver. As members know, two people have taken advantage of the grant and three farmers have actually taken advantage of the interest subsidy. In global terms, that is not an amazing number asking for assistance; however, only three were granted.

**Mr A.D. McRae** interjected.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** If the member for Riverton had been listening, he would know that to date four farmers have applied for the interest subsidy. This is now May. The flood occurred on 13 January and the media statement was released on 17 January. Four farmers have applied; three have had their applications approved and one has to provide further information for assessment - he has to jump through a few more hoops. The answer to the fourth part of the question about the possibility of a perimeter fencing reconstruction fund reads -

The suggested assistance can be provided under the existing measures available to farmers under the Western Australian Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements . . . by way of access to loan funds.

In other words, under the loan arrangements farmers should buy their new fences and employ a team of people if they need them constructed quickly. The answer continues -

Land managers make their own decisions on how best to apply the funds, this is preferable to specific purpose funds which limit land manager’s choices.

I will tell members what choice they had: without a fence they had no choice; they were out of business. The only other way they could do it was, in fact, to use their own funds. Members can see that in the method of accessing funds under the interest-rate subsidy loans the process for at least one farmer has taken from January until May.

**Mr A.D. McRae:** But you don’t know when that farmer made his application.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** Hang on! The member for Riverton cannot make the argument that this is a significant program to provide relief to flood-stricken farmers; that is my point. As I said, the answer reads -

Land managers make their own decisions on how best to apply the funds . . .

These are funds that they did not actually get. So far only three farmers have received funds and only two got professional advice. What about the 33 farmers who were surveyed? There were 16 farmers assisting people during the flood; 27 farmers reported that a total of 114.7 kilometres of fencing was lost, ranging from one to 30 kilometres on different farms; 11 farmers reported a total loss of 1 609 sheep; 19 farmers reported 58 dams lost; and one farmer lost 10 dams across two properties. In answer to a question asked by the Leader of the House when I was speaking the other day on this matter, I said that 24 farmers reported instances of erosion: paddocks, farms, roads, tracks, fences, creek lines, contour banks, sheet erosion, gullies through paddocks and washouts. The erosion damage ranged from extensive to most farms, numerous paddocks and creeks, to small amounts of erosion to gullies and creeks and one driveway and one paddock.

The concern is that it is not as though damage has not occurred. Why, therefore, have only a very small number of farmers accessed these programs? Is there something wrong with the program; is there something wrong with the farms; or are the applications still in process? I suggest that eligibility for this program will expire, if we are not careful, as the eligibility period for this assistance is six months. Guess what? This flood occurred in January. Where are we now? We are nearly at the end of the six months. I suggest that very few farmers will access this program and very few funds will actually hit the ground. I put it to members that this is Clayton's assistance. This is not real assistance at all. This is window-dressing. Very few farmers have been able to access this assistance program. I worked in a trade in which people are either healthy or unhealthy and women are not a little pregnant. We need to address this issue and see it for what it is.

Another point I will make is about roads. Roads are not directly on farms, but they are beside farms.

**Mr A.D. McRae:** That has nothing to do with the motion.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** If the member will let me make the argument, I will suggest that roads significantly impact on farmers. If they do not have a road to their farm, they will be out of business, because they will not be able to deliver their wool, get their sheep in and out or get fodder in to feed the sheep that are dying from a lack of food as a result of the whole country being scarred by a flood. I believe that the government has been wanting on the issue of roads, including roads to farms. I also suggest that there are programs that really work, and I will propose some solutions. In the Shire of Lake Grace, more than 300 kilometres of roads have been washed out. I could not believe this, so I had to ask the shire and its chief executive officer a second and third time. I am not talking about just the road that has been made dysfunctional by a creek that flooded. That is the length of roads in the shire that have been taken out. An assessment done in the Shire of Lake Grace shows that there has been \$4 million worth of damage done to the shire roads alone, and that does not include the farm damage that I have referred to. I have made the point previously that such an amount is onerous for a small shire with 200 or 250 ratepayers. Under the federal-state agreement, once the second threshold has been reached, for every dollar that the state government puts towards natural disaster relief, the commonwealth will contribute \$3. However, the state government has not contributed significantly to shires. For instance, the Shire of Lake Grace is committed to contributing about 25 per cent of that \$4 million. To date, there has been no state funding to help the Shire of Lake Grace fund that work. Even if the shire had the plant, it would take years to repair that destruction. If the shire roads are not repaired, there will be problems with access to the farm gate. If there are problems with access to the farm gate, there will be problems with farmers getting their produce in and stock out, as well as all the other things that happen at the farm gate that allow farmers to run a viable enterprise.

I appreciate the support of the National Party in suggesting that the matter be sent to a committee for examination. Obviously, we have a system that does not deliver any real tangible assistance. I consider myself a reasonable person. I am able to work for my constituents. However, I do not appreciate members of the National Party jumping onto this work - I hope, Mr Acting Speaker (Mr G.A. Woodhams), you do not take offence to this - and making it theirs. The last time I raised an issue during private members' business, I spoke for 15 minutes, and shortly afterwards a press release was put out by the member for Stirling on behalf of the National Party as though it were his work when, in fact, the original motion was mine.

**Mr D.T. Redman:** We raised this issue last year, member for Roe. We have also been working with people who have been involved with these issues, as, I am sure, you have. We share the issues that you are putting forward. I do not think it is right to say that this is a matter of trying to jump onto someone else's court.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** As I have said, I am a reasonable man. However, if I do the work - I hope it is obvious that I do the work, because I find out about the problems, and I am not saying that the member for Stirling does not - I do not appreciate someone jumping onto the issue. I have not even put out a press release on the issue. I have heard the suggestion that this is almost National Party work.

Several members interjected.

**The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr G.A. Woodhams):** Order, members! I am sure that all members want to hear the comments of the member for Roe. Members will allow him to proceed.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** The member for Stirling probably will not want to hear what I have to say. I am very prepared to work in concert with others to deliver advantages and to address the problems of constituents, and the member knows that. However, I do not appreciate his grandstanding on some of the work that I have done on the issues that I have raised during private members' business.

**Mr D.T. Redman:** This is not grandstanding on your issues.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I put on record that the member knows how cooperative I have been over the past 13 or 14 months. We both know that we have to work for the bush.

**Mr D.T. Redman:** The issue that I raised was my intention to call on the government to refer this matter to a committee.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I make that point because sometimes one must stand up for what one believes. I do not believe that by letting it happen I received the respect that I would show the member for the work that he does on an issue.

**Mr D.T. Redman:** Are you suggesting that I have not worked on this issue?

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I am not suggesting that. I am referring to the incident that happened the other day, and I am saying that I did not appreciate it.

Having got that off my chest, which I think was worth doing, I am very prepared to work with anybody on a committee that will genuinely examine this issue to address the problem, so that we have a program that will deliver and we do not just talk about delivering. I agree with the member for Stirling: we must work on this issue so that we have a program that delivers. I say to the member for Riverton that if this matter is referred to a committee to analyse this problem, I will be very happy to participate in that committee, not to make it political but to make it work. We all know what happened to the perimeter fencing idea. It was given the thumbs down and we were told it would not work. If we put our heads together, it will work. Many farmers say it will work. It is one of their priorities for when such an event occurs again.

I will talk about the New South Wales natural disaster assistance schemes. Loans of up to \$130 000 are available subject to certain eligibility criteria at a concessional interest rate of 2.7 per cent per annum. The loans are used to meet carry-on requirements - a fence is a carry-on requirement - and for the replacement of livestock and plant. Inquiries may be directed to any bank, which will forward applications to the New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority. What happens in the application process in this state? There is an application procedure for state natural disaster relief through the Department of Agriculture and Food. Applicants must complete the state natural disaster relief arrangements application form for primary producers and submit the application to the Department of Agriculture and Food farm business development unit. The application contains a consent and statutory declaration to give authorisation by the applicant for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority to seek and/or share information. For measures other than the loan interest subsidy, the applicant will need to submit with the application a tax invoice for an expected reimbursement plus GST to the Department of Agriculture and Food. Reimbursement payments for professional advice and stock transport and other minor costs will be assessed and paid by the Department of Agriculture and Food direct to the applicant's nominated bank account. However, expressions of interest for interest subsidy loans will be reviewed by the Department of Agriculture and Food, recommended to FESA, and FESA will then decide the eligibility for the subsidised loans. When approved, FESA will make payment of the subsidy direct to the lending institution annually in advance. I suggest to the member for Riverton that there are too many steps. We do not need this and that department. The New South Wales model works around the New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority. I do not care what it is called in this state - whether it is a Western Australian rural assistance authority or the Department of Agriculture and Food. We should have only one body. We should not have a charade whereby a scheme is administered by the Department of Agriculture and Food but managed by FESA.

**Mr A.D. McRae:** In New South Wales that office does not administer the funds. It does not administer all elements relating to relief to rural industries. It acts simply as a post office. It acts as a facilitator in the process. It is not being fully truthful for the member to come in here and try to pretend that New South Wales has a beautiful streamlined single one-stop shop system and that is the model to follow. They have a range of departments and agencies involved in delivering the programs.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I thank the member for Riverton for his comments. I am sure he will have the opportunity later to make further comments. I have tried to honestly analyse why, with all the carnage, only two farmers

have accessed the advisory grant and only three have accessed the loan subsidy in almost five months. As I said before, there is something wrong with farmers or there is something wrong with this program.

**Mr A.D. McRae:** Alternatively, there is a lot right with farmers in the way that they manage their businesses and the way in which they understand their circumstances and get on with things. That might be an alternative answer.

**Dr G.G. JACOBS:** I will take the member and show him Mr Grant-Williams' property in east Pingrup, "Hollands Rock". Irrespective of what sort of a manager he is, that property had almost two metres of water run through a raceway and through the homestead. I have already read out a list of some of the carnage and decimation that occurred. What the member is saying is rubbish.

I return to the New South Wales model. Primary producers can obtain road and rail subsidies of up to 50 per cent on the carriage of fodder and livestock. That is quite clear and unabashed. The maximum subsidy is \$15 000 per annum. Inquiries should be made to the nearest NSW Department of Primary Industries office. In one case there is the New South Wales Rural Assistance Authority for certain applications. In the other case there is the Department of Primary Industries office for other applications. One was for the loans and the other was for the direct subsidies to transport fodder direct to properties. Not every case involved two departments that would play the issue like a political football and fudge the issue. That is what happens when two departments deal with an application, whether it is for a loan or for professional advice. There is political football and fudging when two departments are involved. That is what has happened. It has happened because things have dropped through the cracks. That is why the service has not delivered. The parliamentary secretary and the Minister for Agriculture and Food cannot be proud of the state program that has delivered so little to so few. The "so few" is a very relevant point; so few people have been able to access funds and so few have found that the program delivers. We have to eradicate the tortuous steps. All the farmers I visited told me that the program sounds good but they query whether it will deliver. They ask not to be put through too many hoops. If they are put through too many hoops, the program will not deliver. The farmers will not be able to access the program because they have to get on with putting up fences and trying to get their farms up and running and productive again.

The reason I brought this private member's motion to the house is that the program has not delivered. The figures show that. I asked a question on notice to the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure about the state government contribution to shire and service roads to farms. I wanted to know what contribution the state government would make to the Shire of Lake Grace for the \$4 million worth of damage to the roads that needed to be repaired and reconstructed. The question states -

- (1) What contribution will the State Government make to helping local shires to repair and reconstruct flood damaged roads in Western Australia?

The answer is -

- (1) The State Government has established relief measures designed to address Local Government roads in communities affected by flood damage. Special funding assistance is provided under the State Road Funds to Local Government Agreement . . . The State Road Funds to Local Government Advisory Committee makes special funding assistance available as a contribution towards the cost of repairs and to any part of the local road network that has sustained damage as a result of an abnormal event.

On approval of flood damage applications from Local Governments, reimbursement of 100% of opening up costs and 2/3 of reinstatement costs . . . can be accessed.

I have information from the Shire of Kulin that for five months no hard funds have been approved, let alone seen. Not even over the horizon can they be seen. The question continues -

- (2) What contribution will the Federal Government contribute to repairing and reconstructing shire roads?

The answer states -

- (2) The Federal Government lays down the principles, guidelines, practices and processes . . . under their Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements . . .

I have explained those arrangements in this house previously. The quantitative amount is about \$50 million. There is a first threshold and a second threshold. If the state government meets the second threshold, in quantitative terms in Western Australia the amount is about \$50 million or \$52 million. Once that has been reached by the state government, this program kicks in, so that for every dollar the state spends, the feds spend \$3. The answer continues -

- (3) The Federal Government provides the State with financial assistance through NDRA and reimburses the State for 75% of their actual expenditure in the event of a natural disaster.

That presupposes that the state government has spent its dollar. For every dollar the state spends for 75 per cent, the \$3 kicks in. I asked another question about whether the state government takes out distribution fees. According to my knowledge, the figure was eight per cent. The answer to that question was -

- (4) No. The State makes no deductions on Federal contributions.

Thank goodness for that.

In closing, I say that it is very clear that the Western Australian natural disaster relief arrangements have not been tangible. They have not delivered. The number of people who have accessed the assistance could be counted on one hand. The process is too tortuous. One instrumentality manages the arrangement and another one administers it. In effect, the funds have not delivered tangible relief to the flood-stricken farmers in the state of Western Australia. I suggest that we need - other members might talk about this - to be very serious about this for the next time, whenever that might be. We can bet that there will be a next time. We have seen what has happened in the past few years with the unpredictability and the inconsistency of climatic conditions. We need to get this right for the next time, so that the government of the state of Western Australia can seriously deliver tangible benefits to flood-stricken farmers. Despite all the mining resources, we are still very reliant on the income from primary produce generated by farmers on the land, who pay significant taxes in this country and, as I have said before, contribute significantly to the gross state product of Western Australia. This is what they need and what they deserve.

**MR D.T. REDMAN (Stirling)** [5.04 pm]: I will also talk on the motion that has been moved by the member for Roe and continue the debate that we started a couple of weeks ago. Before I get on to that discussion, I want to give a quick response to the member for Roe regarding the issues that he raised with me about my commitment, if one likes, to farmers and the issue of natural disaster relief. I believe he raised a concern about a media release that I put out following the debate that we had a couple of weeks ago. I want to highlight that the media release followed a discussion that I had with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture and Food to inform him, and hopefully the Minister for Agriculture and Food, of my intention to move a motion, if we were not to continue this debate, calling on the government to refer the issue of natural disaster relief to a committee for examination. My thinking was that it was timely. I will raise that amendment later. That was the focus of my media release. I take offence at any inference that is made about my not being committed to this issue and not being as committed as is the member for Roe to the people in his electorate.

We went through the issues 12 months or so ago, as I am sure this house will recall, when the great southern floods of 2005 took place. That was a significant event. It started in Bunbury. A lot of people will recall that there was significant damage in Bunbury. I remember the Premier's statement at the time. The floods went right through the great southern area. After some time, we called on the government to provide support for farmers who were hit by those floods and who suffered the storm damage. Fortunately, some support came through. That is an issue which we dealt with last year and which was significant. I understand that between 1 200 and 1 400 properties were affected. While I am talking about the great southern floods, I should say that something like 16 farmers applied for natural disaster relief under the WA natural disaster relief arrangements. Loan subsidies were approved for eight people. Eleven people received support for professional advice, and two applications were rejected outright. Certainly, some support went to those people. There was no formal relief in the South Stirling area for the floods that followed in June last year. Some members might be interested to know that significant rains went through the South Stirling area all the way to the south coast. There was significant erosion damage and significant flooding. One of the issues with this event is that, for the erosion that occurred, there is no support program that fits. It was not a fence that was damaged, a house that was knocked over or a dam that burst; it was simply erosion in a paddock. There are no options for those farmers to deal with that. In most cases, unfortunately, all they can do is put in their crop around those damaged areas. I have with me a couple of pictures that members might be interested in looking at. Those two significant events in my electorate happened last year. I have had a number of discussions since that time about the appropriateness of the natural disaster relief arrangements, and in particular how well they were targeted.

Incidentally, in addition to the loan subsidies and the professional advice that some farmers received, there was some fee relief also for the potato farmers on the south coast. That was part of the discretionary arrangements that come under the natural disaster relief arrangements. It was not a big figure; nevertheless, the potato farmers in that area got some support for the fees that were payable.

Of course, the more recent event that has been highlighted at some length by the member for Roe is the impact in the Lake Grace area this year of cyclone Claire and the extensive damage that occurred as a result of it. As the spokesman for agriculture for the National Party, I took the opportunity to speak with some people from that area and discussed with them the implications for them of the floods, and their views on natural disaster relief

arrangements and some of the things that could well be changed in those arrangements to better target farmers in those areas and people who have been affected by those events.

I will go through a couple of the issues that have been raised with me. They are quite complex, and I want to highlight them. People regard the financial assistance of \$1 500 as a spit in the desert. Farmers have used this financial assistance to get their next budget in place. However, when flooding occurs they would rather spend that money on fencing or something more tangible. The concern is that it is not a support of any substance. Nevertheless, they are happy to receive it.

The subsidy of four per cent of a loan of up to \$150 000 to assist farmers to deal with the problems that arise from that rain and the flooding is out of date. Many farmers in the broadacre areas have overdrafts that are a couple of times greater than that figure. The limit of \$150 000 as a loan subsidy has not kept up with modern broadacre farming.

Last year I took the time to talk to a number of people in my electorate who were hit by those floods, and I got a range of views. On the one hand, some farmers held the view that as farmers they had to manage whatever came out of a natural disaster. They believed that farmers must cope by themselves. Some farmers support the view that perhaps there should not be any government assistance. On the other hand, farmers at the other end of the scale believed the government should pay \$10 a head, or a nominal value, for stock losses from these disasters. In the order of 100 000 sheep were lost in the great southern floods last year. I reiterate that there are a range of views in the community. It is generally recognised that natural disaster relief is not a free grant to someone's business. It is also recognised that assistance should go to areas of genuine hardship, and must be very well targeted to keep farms viable and to keep farmers on the land.

A point made by the president of the Western Australian Farmers Federation, which I totally support, is that young farmers should be encouraged to stay on the land. If a farmer buys the next door neighbour's property, there is a period in which he is financially exposed. If the farm is hit by a natural disaster which has a significant impact on the viability of the business, it is appropriate to provide assistance to keep young people on the land to support the primary production industry. It is a complex issue and there are a great variety of views in the community. A number of those views have been expressed by the member for Roe today and people who either represent the farming community or have been directly associated with those events.

Another issue is insurance. It is generally accepted that people can insure for certain things. People cannot insure for loss incurred by a flood; however, they can insure for loss caused by storm damage. In the great southern floods there were differences in the way insurance companies treated those insurance claims. For example, damage incurred by a waterway is considered a flood and, hence, was not covered. Some insurance companies did support damage that occurred adjacent to those waterways. They could have made a case that it was a flood, but they supported those farmers. There are differences in how the insurance industry manages claims as a result of these events. It is an issue that perhaps needs investigating.

I know the idea of multi-peril farm insurance has been around for some time, and it is something that farmers have been looking at for a long time. However, no-one has come up with suggestions on how it should be managed. It would be great if farmers could insure against these damages. The point is that right now they cannot; therefore, it is appropriate to institute a natural disaster relief arrangement to deal with hardships caused by these events. I do not want to retread the areas that were covered by the member for Roe. I support his comments.

*Amendment to Motion*

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I move -

To add after "program" the following -

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- (2) that this house refers the issue of natural disaster relief assistance to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee for review, specifically to address the adequacy of existing state government assistance under the program for anyone affected by a natural disaster; and
- (3) that the committee report to the Legislative Assembly by no later than 17 August 2006.

It is an appropriate time to consider the issue of natural disaster relief. By that I mean that we do not want to be assessing objectively these issues in the middle of a natural disaster. It is appropriate to consider this issue now because of the memories people have of the great southern floods and the floods in the south Stirling area. These events are fresh in people's minds and they understand the issues that have arisen. Some of them have been through a process of applying for natural disaster relief; some have been successful and some have not. Likewise, the issues that arose from the more recent Lake Grace floods are fresh in people's minds and they have

been through what is a significant and disastrous event. In some cases it has hit them to the tune of between \$200 000 and \$300 000; it is significant. The issues they and the community faced are fresh in their minds, and it is appropriate that they be able to make a contribution to a parliamentary committee in a very objective way by outlining the issues that they faced. Also, they can suggest changes to the arrangements that are in place. We cannot ignore the community concern. Members can raise in this place the specific issues of the natural disaster relief arrangements. An argument could be made on the appropriateness of those arrangements.

I will refer to an article that appeared in *The West Australian* on Saturday, 11 February 2006. A couple of comments were reported in that article, and one was by the president of the WA Farmers Federation, Mr Trevor De Landgraft, who said -

... while the State Government had acted quickly in declaring the area a disaster zone, the financial assistance was not practical and the eligibility criteria were too tough.

...

“There is a need for the Government to step in and conduct a review because if we’re going to have assistance it should be meaningful and well directed,” -

Likewise, constituents from the member for Roe’s electorate, Leanne and Neil Grant-Williams said -

... it was frustrating that despite facing a damage bill of \$300,000 they were unlikely to get any assistance.

They are a couple of comments about the recent floods in the Lake Grace area. Members will recall that a significant number of people commented last year. We cannot contest the fact that there is concern in the community, particularly the farming community, about the relevance of the current disaster relief arrangements and how well they are targeted to achieve the outcomes that they are destined to achieve. I will highlight again that it is a complex issue. Therefore, it is an issue that merits the deliberations of a parliamentary committee which can talk to not only the farmers who have been affected, but also the shires that have been affected. The member for Roe referred to the issue of roads in the regions. Roads were hit really hard by these floods. Shires are reimbursed only a portion of the cost of repairing the damage caused by those disasters. Again, they must go through a process to obtain that funding, and that takes time. Many shires have not yet received any funding to assist them with the costs that have been incurred. For small shire councils, in this case the Shires of Lake Grace, Plantagenet and Cranbrook, having a net cost incursion of \$300 000, \$400 000, \$500 000 or in the millions is too much to bear. There are more appropriate ways to target funds to support those unique events that have a significant impact on shires. It is a complex issue about which there are a variety of views. A parliamentary committee should deliberate over the issues that have been raised and the options that we have before us so that it can make appropriate recommendations to Parliament about how Western Australian governments should deal with future natural disasters.

In summary, I will highlight four points. First, a number of issues have been raised about the adequacy of our natural disaster relief arrangements; therefore, it is appropriate that we have a serious look at them. Second, it is timely that we look at those arrangements, because they are fresh in our minds and people are able to reflect on the issues that arose during those events. We are also far enough removed from those events to make an objective assessment. Third, it is not appropriate that we look at these arrangements while a natural disaster is happening. That reinforces the timeliness of having a committee look at this issue now. Finally, I reinforce the fact that this issue is complex. It will take time and the appropriate deliberation by a parliamentary committee to tease out the issues, make objective assessments and recommend to this house how we can make changes to more appropriately target natural disaster relief for people who have been affected by recent disasters and for those who will be affected by a future natural disaster. I commend the amendment to the house.

**MR A.D. McRAE (Riverton - Parliamentary Secretary)** [5.23 pm]: I thank the members for Roe and Stirling for their contributions. The key response that I want to give as the Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture and Food and for Forestry is that these issues are complex. Indeed, I begin by picking up where the member for Stirling finished by acknowledging that these issues are complex. By definition, natural disasters in Western Australia can be small scale and intense events that cause localised damage. We have seen many tornadoes rip through the wheatbelt, the great southern and coastal areas and cause tight but intensive damage in a short period. We have had large-scale regional events that have literally affected tens of thousands of people and businesses and communities right across regions. Indeed, the floods in the great southern earlier this year represent a large-scale event, although rather than tens of thousands of people being affected, thousands of people were affected. Some of that floodwater is only now draining off the surface, four months after -

**Mr M.W. Trenorden:** It is flowing down the Avon River.



**Mr A.D. McRAE:** Yes. It finishes up in the southern end of the Avon River catchment. Some of it is going down the great southern coastal floodplains. All of that has large-scale implications. We can add to that the sorts of state responses that happen on a regular basis when cyclones hit the north west. Agriculture, rural, mining and remote Aboriginal communities with very few resources have to respond to those kinds of disasters. They are typical of the communities that are faced with having to respond to natural disasters from time to time. Indeed, only just over a year ago a mini tornado hit the southern south metropolitan region, taking out Melville Primary School. It also hit Shelley, which is in my electorate. The impact of these localised natural disasters can be as stark as what I am about to outline. On one side of the street, trees and telephone poles were taken out - some simply snapped off. I am talking about very mature trees that were over 40 or 50 years old. They were uprooted completely. On the other side of the street, not a twig or leaf was disturbed. The starkness of the situation was quite extraordinary. People in the metropolitan region who do not often see the impact of severe weather events were surprised by the starkness of the margin between disaster and being untouched. As was mentioned by the members for Roe and Stirling, it was the same in the great southern. A hailstorm that went through that area in July or August last year literally cut a swath about a kilometre and a half wide. It flattened crops in its path, and what was left looked like a crop circle. The crop was flattened off in one direction about two inches above the ground.

**Mr P.D. Omodei:** Are you going to support the amendment?

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** I will be moving an amendment to the amendment.

*Amendment on the Amendment*

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** I have had a discussion with the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. We do not necessarily have great difficulty with the amendment proposed by the member for Stirling, although the time frame suggested is impractical and unrealistic given the committee's current workload. I move -

To delete "17 August" and substitute "December".

This will mean that the committee will be required to report to the house by no later than December 2006.

I will respond to some of the other issues raised during this debate. The member for Roe did himself a disservice when he suggested that the New South Wales rural disaster relief office is a great model. I think that is the name of the authority he cited in his presentation. It is not a one-stop shop. No state has a single facility to deal with these issues. The reason that that is impossible is that in any single disaster the government might have to deal with a combination of transport, medical, security, financial, basic food and personal security emergencies. Any one of those emergencies can occur during a national disaster. It is in the weeks after when people are getting back on their feet, when businesses are looking to resume productive work, when shops are looking to open again and when farms are looking to see what crops are available for the next season or what animals have escaped death that the nature of the response changes. It was not honest of the member for Roe to say that New South Wales has a beautiful model in which everything is streamlined but that Western Australia's system allows government agencies and public sector workers to somehow deny those in need a reasonable hearing and assessment. I think the member used the expression - correct me if I am wrong - that it allowed the departments to slip the applications between the cracks, suggesting that somehow they could allow the applications to disappear on purpose. What the member was suggesting was not what I considered appropriate in the course of this debate, either in the comparison between New South Wales and Western Australia - New South Wales does not have a single smooth system for dealing with the complexity of disasters that befall any community - or in the implied suggestion that public servants administering Western Australia's system sought to block an applicant's access to relief by using some devious bureaucratic means. That is not true at all. My view is that Department of Agriculture and Food and Fire and Emergency Services Authority staff are passionate about serving the communities they live in and work with and are employed professionally to serve.

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** Can you tell me what one instrumentality does when it manages and what another instrumentality does when it administers? One manages, one administers. Tell me mechanically how that works.

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** The member is using language in a way that -

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** You can't tell me how it works.

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** I have let the member interject, so he should let me answer his question. One agency has the responsibility for having the funds allocated within its budget and for allocating those funds to approved recipients under guidelines established at a federal and state level. That is the administration of the funds. The management of how people get access to the funds is something else altogether. For example, I would not suggest that a bank manager or an accounts manager make an assessment about a farmer's need for fencing, crops or animals. That is not appropriate, and that is why the Department of Agriculture and Food is involved in

assisting with the application process and making the assessment. We do not want the Department of Agriculture and Food to be the manager of the fund; we just want it to make the assessments, and that is absolutely appropriate. Quite distinct roles and tasks and levels and nature of expertise are involved in each of those two functions. If the house agrees to refer this matter to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee, and that committee undertakes some sort of inquiry, the member for Roe can make a submission on how that process can be improved. It is well within his purview to do that, and it is an entirely appropriate thing for him to do. I do not have a problem with the distinction between the manager of a fund and somebody who administers applications and does field assessments based on need. They are clearly two different tasks requiring different people.

I thought that the complaint of the member for Roe that the member for Stirling was stealing some of his thunder was also a little precious, quite frankly.

**Dr G.G. Jacobs:** I am not asking for a mark out of 10 from you. I am not asking for you to give your assessment of my performance in this debate.

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** I was not asking for an invitation either. My view is that the member was being overly precious, and he should probably recognise that he did not invent this idea that something should happen. He did not invent the idea that it is probably time to collaboratively and cooperatively look at this issue. The government is saying that we should have a look at it. Let us send it to a committee that represents both sides of politics, and, if it is time to update some of the processes and policies, that is probably a good place to do that. I am sure that the member's community will give him credit and respect for being involved and for initiating this debate. That is sufficient for him to say that he is part of the process. It is not the member on his own, and he did not invent this issue just yesterday.

I have heard lots of debate about who is responsible for cleaning up after a disaster. Particularly for businesses, that debate goes on and on. Society does not function without good businesses operating, and we cannot expect to have the level of wealth and the standard of living that we have come to enjoy without viable businesses. When a natural disaster impacts upon businesses in our community, it is to be expected that there would be a discussion about the level of state involvement required to assist businesses back onto their feet and into a productive and profitable state. That is a reasonable discussion. The suggestion by the member for Roe that the government's assistance was so miserable as to cause permanent, long-term damage to the profitable nature of farming businesses in Western Australia is not supported by the evidence at all. There is no evidence to suggest that a natural disaster has stopped profitable businesses from operating in the long term in Western Australia. There may be individual businesses that fail because of a natural disaster, but the government by itself cannot shore up every business against every circumstance. It would be a nonsense to think that that was true. I do not think any farmers in Western Australia would be able to argue in all honesty that the government should prop them up regardless of what happens. We accept that there are levels of grey in this debate; it is not a black and white question. There are shades of grey about what sort of assistance goes to primary producers and in what circumstances when they are subjected to a natural disaster.

One of the things that the government has done that will reduce the number of farmers exposed to financial disaster when they experience a natural disaster has been to make farming more sustainable. It is no coincidence that the Gallop government and now the Carpenter government is spending \$158 million, matched by another \$158 million from the federal government, on natural resource management. That money is targeting soil degradation, salinity damage and reforestation to ensure that farms are sustainable in the long term. Farms that are placed on a very sustainable footing will be able to withstand the shock of natural disasters.

**Mr D.T. Redman:** I was amazed at the damage that occurred in the South Stirling area. It was in an area of knee-deep grass and clover and there was not much catchment above where it happened. That is the sort of damage that occurred in that paddock. I tried to approach SCRIPT, the South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team, down there to look for support from it, and had some difficulty. There are some issues that go outside the scope of what you are talking about.

**Mr A.D. McRAE:** I am not saying that it is the only answer. I am not for a moment saying that natural resource management is the only solution to responding to natural disasters. I absolutely accept the argument that there will be circumstances in which extreme weather events cause damage that no amount of good husbandry of the land will be able to forestall. That will just happen. There was gully erosion long before land clearing and other farming practices in the south west. There is plenty of evidence of that as an old feature of climate and geography.

I have only two minutes left and I want to touch on a couple of matters. Firstly, the process in Western Australia is not necessarily bad, but it is possibly time to review it to see whether we can improve on some matters. Secondly, our response to such occurrences depends on the circumstances. Nobody in agriculture that I have spoken to would suggest that government is there just to prop up every business. Businesses in all

circumstances, whether it be in agribusiness, services, manufacturing, mining or wherever, are subjected to unforeseen market changes. That just happens. It is the nature of the world, and no government can insure against businesses being exposed to those kinds of difficulties. However, it is probably time to review the services that we are providing, how we are providing them and who has the most appropriate access to them in the modern circumstances to which we understand businesses are subjected.

Finally, although examples have been given about some of the responses in New South Wales, I was drawn to consider the way in which the Queensland government responded to the cyclones in March, in particular cyclone Larry, which went through north Queensland in mid-March. For the information of members, the departments and agencies in Queensland involved in responding to that cyclone were the Department of Emergency Services, the Department of Communities, the Department of Energy, Powerlink Queensland, Queensland Health, the Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation, the Department of Public Works, the Queensland Police Service, schools, the Department of Employment and Training, the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, Queensland Rail, the Department of Main Roads, Queensland Transport and the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water. These are proof that it is a complex matter and I urge members to support our amendment to the member for Stirling's motion.

**MR P.D. OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood - Leader of the Opposition)** [5.42 pm]: I rise to support the member for Roe for his initiative in bringing forward the original motion, which is very short and to the point, and calls on the government to make a real contribution to flood-stricken farmers. The opposition will support the amendment. Obviously, anything that improves the plight of farmers who are facing a natural disaster is a step in the right direction. I say to the parliamentary secretary, the member for Riverton, that the information available on the disaster assistance schemes in New South Wales is comprehensive. It refers to personal hardship and distress, primary producers, small business, assisting councils, trustees of parks and reserves, sporting clubs and others, such as churches and voluntary non-profit organisations.

There have been two natural disasters in Western Australia: one in the great southern in South Stirling and one centred in Kulin. Last year I took the opportunity - along with the then shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food, the members for Roe and Capel and Hon Anthony Fels, the member for the Agricultural Region - to visit that area directly after the floods. We visited the area on the basis that we had heard of huge damage to farms there. We talked to the member for Roe's constituents, listened to what they had to say and tried to find some solutions. I cannot emphasise enough to members the impact of seeing massive lakes, which had never before filled in a man's lifetime, fill and overflow at a huge rate. There is no doubt in my mind that heavy rains this winter will cause flooding as a result of those lakes from Lake Grace heading into the Avon catchment and the Swan River. We will therefore watch with interest to see what happens there. Lake Grace, and Kulin in particular, had nine inches of rain in 26 hours. It is hard to contemplate that amount of rain falling at any one time. In Lake Grace itself the sewerage system started to back up and the power went out for a temporary period. Obviously houses in the lower part of Lake Grace would have been in real trouble with sewage flowing into the houses. For some unknown reason, the power came back on and away it went. We travelled to Lake Grace. First of all we landed at Kulin and visited the Shire of Kulin. We were joined by councillors and farmers from the Shire of Kondinin and we discussed the outcome of the damage. Many farms were stripped bare; fences had completely disappeared; drainage systems were completely destroyed; and there were stock losses and damage to terrain and bush. So what was available?

I will go a little further. We flew to Lake Grace and when we landed there the bitumen airstrip itself was the only part that was sticking out of the water. We had to wade through a couple of feet of water to get to the car park. We were picked up by the shire councillors and taken to the outskirts of Lake Grace where the highway and the railway line were flooded under about two and a half metres of water. One old farmer there said that it was the first time Cemetery Lake had been filled in his lifetime. We caught a fishing boat and travelled over a kilometre and a half. The lake covered more than 1 000 acres and obviously had cut off the rail and the road. We went into town and talked to the councillors, many of whom the member for Roe knew personally; he has a great rapport with that community. It was very good to see a local member of his standing in the Parliament react so quickly.

We then headed for the railway line. The railway line was significantly washed out. There was a train load of wheat stacked on the Lake Grace-Newdegate railway line, and I think it stayed there for about six to eight weeks. Obviously the lake had to be drained. To do that the government had to either pump out the water or dig a massive eight-metre wide drain for about a kilometre or so into south Lake Grace. I understand that the government later not only started a pumping system, but also finally drained it. I would have thought one option would have sufficed, and I thought the drain was the best way to go. However, we went there and had a look. Obviously the damage to roads and the town infrastructure was significant. When going into town in the boat, we saw the powerline with the power boards and electricity poles only about a foot out of the water. How the electricity was still running and had not shorted out was almost a miracle. The damage, therefore, could have

been a lot worse. Telecommunications were out; the mobile phone system had shorted, so the town was in real trouble. However, the aspect that really brought home to me the impact of the flood was not only the cutting off of the roads and the damage to infrastructure, but also the physical damage to properties. It stripped the grass and the seed off the paddocks. When we went to catch the boat to go across Cemetery Lake, we could see a whole load of straw on the shoreline. There was a wave action of about a foot - 30 centimetres in the new language - and the grass was piled up. On inspecting the grass, we saw dead bungarras, birds, ducks and so on, and the ground was moving. There are some photographs that the member for Roe took. In the grass there were millions and millions of ladybirds. We could have picked up 400 or 500 ladybirds in a handful of grass. Those ladybirds in my vineyard would have been very valuable; I forgot to take a bagful home! The important aspect is that it brought home to me that the flood not only caused infrastructure damage, but also stripped the grass seed and even took ladybirds, insects, predators and the balance in nature from those paddocks and properties. Also, of course, problems occur with flyblown sheep and so on. The damage to fencing was the most dramatic aspect. To this day a lot of farmers in Kulin and Kondinin have not replaced their fencing; that will be a long process. Imagine going along ringlock netting with grass and sticks through it and trying to straighten it up; it has to be lifted and the debris shaken out of it. One of the real problems was finding manpower. To replace thousands of kilometres of fencing, men and fencing equipment are required. What was available to help? There were two main avenues of financial assistance for farmers. The first was a \$1 500 allocation to farmers through the Department of Agriculture and Food to employ a consultant to advise them what they could do in their predicament. In other words, a consultant would tell them that they had no fencing or grass, they had lost their ladybirds and they would have a pretty difficult time in the next few months trying to make ends meet. That was seen by farmers almost as an affront that they would be treated in that way. The package that was in place was so mediocre that it did not provide any assistance at all. There was not even the capacity for a series of \$1 500 allocations to be given to the local shire or the local sporting community so that the local football and hockey clubs could go out as a team and help those farmers replace their fences.

The second avenue of assistance was the four per cent subsidy up to \$100 000 to assist farmers to refinance. If a farmer is on his last legs and needs another \$100 000, I think he would be on the road to bankruptcy anyway. Again, that subsidy was not seen to be of great assistance. They needed physical assistance to address the issues of re-fencing and refinancing, should that be deemed necessary. What did we do? We talked to the council. We had a good meeting with the council. We took on board its concerns. I went home and rang the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure on a Sunday and, to her credit, she answered the phone. I told her that she needed to visit Lake Grace. She said that she was busy and could not do it. I told her that the reason she had to visit Lake Grace was that unless she saw the damage, she would not understand what needed to be done, particularly with the draining of Cemetery Lake and the opening of the access roads to Lake Grace and a series of farms in the area. The minister promised me that she would get a full briefing, and I suggested the kind of briefing it should be. I note that she visited Lake Grace a couple of days later, and I commend the minister for her actions. It certainly would have given the council some heart, because more than 500 kilometres of roads in the shire had been damaged. To give members some idea of the damage, the rain was so heavy that the water that flooded off the bitumen onto the road verges took away the fines between the grains of gravel, so there was nothing for the grader to use to rebuild the shoulders of the road. That kind of damage cannot be restored just by running a grader over the area. The railway line was so badly damaged that for at least two or three kilometres the barrage underneath the railway line had been washed away, the rails were twisted and the sleepers were upside down. It looked like an earthquake had hit the area. It sustained real damage, and, to her credit, the minister visited the area. In the meantime, the member for Roe and I contacted Ian Longson, the Director General of the Department of Agriculture and Food, and he responded very well. I told him that it was important that he send his people to the area and make sure that the \$1 500 was being used productively. The member for Roe can explain to members how many farmers were able to access those funds. It was an insignificant number.

**Mr J.B. D'Orazio:** Two.

**Mr P.D. OMODEI:** Yes, two farmers were able to access those funds. The damage in the area was huge. I am not talking just about an extraordinary rainfall event; I am talking about a natural disaster. The government must have some capacity and goodwill to assist farmers in that situation. I am talking about the life savings of some farmers. Farmers in south Stirling lost significant numbers of stud sheep. Again, that weather event was a one-in-100 or one-in-200-year event. I think the Lake Grace flood was deemed to be a one-in-500-year event. If that is the case, it will not happen very often, although when the Fitzroy River flooded and Camballin was destroyed, it was a one-in-200-year flood and the following year it got a similar flood.

**Mr A.D. McRae:** Four hundred years' worth.

**Mr P.D. OMODEI:** Yes, 400 years' worth in two years. Mother nature certainly acts in vicious ways. The north of the state has experienced a number of cyclones this year. They are extraordinary weather events. My home town of Pemberton and my farm at Eastbrook have had green grass all year round. It is the first time I have seen it in my almost 56 years on this earth. There is no doubt that some climate change may be occurring

as a result of greenhouse gas emissions. However, at the same time, we are dealing with small communities. Farmers are the lifeblood of those communities. When something like this happens, they need to maintain their spirits and they need to know that the government cares about what is happening to them. These types of events are different from a cyclone going through a town in which every householder has an insurance policy. Yes, householders go through hardship when roofs come off and their houses are damaged. However, when a person's livelihood depends on land and that land is dramatically damaged by a fire, the land restores itself. With a good winter, the land will return to the state it was in before the fire. However, floods take so much away. When contour drains are silted and fences disappear under the mud, only two or three people are there to deal with the problems day after day. The state is enjoying fantastic resource growth. As a result of that resource growth, a lot of the work force is moving off the land and into the more lucrative resource jobs. I suspect that when Newmont Australia Ltd starts its new gold mine at Boddington, another large crop of farm workers and farmers' sons will disappear from the land, leaving those properties to be managed by the older generation or, alternatively, a diminished work force, which creates enough problems in the normal day-to-day running of the property without the additional effects of a natural disaster.

The member for Roe is a passionate member of Parliament. I know that the member for Stirling has his heart in the right place and is also representing his constituents. People in my neck of the woods are very fortunate. Apart from cyclone Alby, we have never experienced a major storm or cyclone. They seem to cross the coast in the Pilbara, cut down through the centre of Western Australia and finish up in the great southern and wheatbelt areas. Touch wood, we will not experience that kind of storm event. There are large paddocks and huge catchments in the area, and once the water starts to move, it carries everything away with it. I remind members again that Kulin had nine inches of rain in a 26-hour period. That did massive damage. That damage still has not been repaired and farmers are chipping away, inch by inch, trying to repair the damage. The assistance package that was available to farmers did not help. That is the reason the member for Roe has raised the issue in the Parliament.

I thank the government for agreeing to at least refer the matter to a parliamentary committee, but it should not need to go that far. The government should recognise that Western Australia has experienced a series of major climatic events. The government needs to be seen to be doing something for the agricultural industry of Western Australia, in which farmers are the lifeblood of small towns, and must put in place mechanisms that actually work. The member for Roe is quite right: farmers' eligibility for a lot of these packages falls through the cracks and farmers have to bear the costs. A lot of farmers got four or five inches of rain when that big rain event occurred and it was not a problem. However, those farmers who experienced the massive rainfall event were put under the pump. If a farmer's total property was in that area, he faced the huge problem of having to replace the infrastructure and ensuring that his cattle were okay. He is then faced with paddy melons and other weeds. As such, there is a cost not only for things like blowfly strike and the loss of seed and fertiliser from the paddocks, but also a farmer is then faced with a spraying program that is outside the norm and which causes a further impost on the farm. There may be a specific allocation for the replacement of fencing in a natural disaster scenario. If a farmer does not have that type of funding, there is very little else. There might be a subsidy for chemicals such as Roundup. Roundup is not an expensive chemical these days and farmers may be able to take advantage of that. However, something substantial needs to be put in place rather than just let farmers bear the brunt of the force of nature. We do not want the state to turn a blind eye to suffering that is incurred by those people. The state needs to take some responsibility. People who face duress as a result of an act of God need some assistance from the state.

**MR J.B. D'ORAZIO (Ballajura - Minister for Police and Emergency Services)** [6.01 pm]: I support the amendment moved by the member for Riverton. We have the new emergency legislation in place and local disaster plans are being developed. We need to be careful that the relief arrangements are a support of last resort. They are about looking after people who do not have other arrangements. We should not put in place a system whereby we try to take away responsibility for some farmers to be able to look after their own interests. Some farmers have taken action to look after their interests. Those who fall through the cracks because they do not have support need support. This is an appropriate time to review the guidelines and the assistance package. It is appropriate because of the new process. Interestingly enough, only four people have taken up the interest subsidy. That points to one of two things: the guidelines are too restrictive or the farmers are doing well. I will put it into context. The state government does a huge amount. The Leader of the Opposition indicated that he took the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure to look at the devastated areas. When natural disasters occur, the community pulls together. It is not just the local authorities; it is also the state.

I saw the disaster that nearly occurred in Kalbarri. The whole community got together. The support was there; people were helping each other. They were building levees and doing all sorts of things to make sure that the community pulled together. I attended a conference of emergency ministers in Melbourne at which we discussed a major disaster; namely, one that would need state help. Interestingly, the Queensland minister was present. He had just had to deal with cyclone Larry. His experience was that, although authorities practice and have plans in

place, when an event of that nature occurs, the devastation is far beyond what anyone can imagine. As he put it, the key was for everyone to work together. It is at times like that that the relevant government makes decisions that provide support and infrastructure to help the people involved. Some of the lessons he talked about included the fact that people think they are doing the right thing by setting up forms of help. If it is not the specific help that people need, it is useless. People were sending up washing machines. However, if there is no power, what is the point? Others were setting up food supplies but they could not get through because areas were cut off. Specific events need specific responses. Governments need to look at it on that basis. There needs to be specific responses when there are significant incidents because they all have a different nature; there are different needs. It is important that we look at that process.

Emergency management legislation is currently being looked at by the Community Development and Justice Committee. That is why reference of this matter to the committee is appropriate. The committee is looking at the legislation. It is already dealing with local authorities and looking at local plans to make sure that all the different hierarchies are in place and that there are resources to deal with such events. That is not to say that communities have not been able to do that in the past. Legislation provides a framework for better management of the events of a major nature. Reference to the committee will come up with recommendations. As the minister responsible for emergency services, I will look at any recommendations coming out of the process to see whether we can change the requirements for people to receive grants. Resources other than grants are available through state government authorities, so resources are available for local councils. In addition, resources are made available from the federal government if a national disaster is involved.

It is important that we also understand that the state government cannot be everyone's answer to every problem. If government tried to do that, we would have a major problem. We would become the insurance for all communities. We cannot do that. That is being honest and realistic. However, there is a role for the state government, federal government and local authorities. When natural disasters occur, we need to all pull altogether. There needs to be a hierarchy in place; there needs to be support in place. Sometimes only a very small amount of money is involved, but flexibility is needed to deal with the situation. That makes the outcomes important. Having the whole process looked at by the committee is very wise. It is very appropriate because the committee is already looking at the emergency management legislation and the application of that and the implications for various communities. It is important that we make sure that if one of these events occurs, we are in a position to respond. I welcome the outcome.

It is fantastic to see that this issue cuts across political boundaries. People are people. When they are in these situations, they need support. However, I do not want the government to be the insurance for all communities. There is responsibility on people to make sure that they are protected against some of these events because some events are predictable. I remember when I was involved in market gardening a long time ago that we used to get flooded out. That would be a disaster. However, we are talking about events that are bigger than that. There is some onus on farmers to make some allocation to protect their properties. It is also incumbent on the state to make sure that the community support infrastructure is put back as quickly as possible. When these events happen, which I saw first-hand in Kalbarri, a major problem is created for the community. For example, the fishing fleet could not get into Kalbarri because of the flooding and all the dramas that were occurring. It affects people's livelihoods. We need to be able to deal with such issues when they arise.

I support the referral to the committee and the reporting requirement. We should do whatever we can to make procedures streamlined and more user friendly. We should ensure they are put in place as a meaningful last resort so that they can be accessed with effectiveness. The four applicants who made application under the program will be able to claim up to \$150 000 for a loan. The subsidy equates to about \$40 000 for each applicant over 10 years. That is a substantial contribution. The problem is that a person must meet the criteria. It means that a person could not obtain a loan other than being supported in this fashion. That creates some problems. At the same time we need to understand that we cannot support all applicants forever. People need to make sure that they have insurance and the ability to support some of the outcomes. The community of Western Australia would expect the government to have clear criteria for when this is applicable.

In conclusion, the referral of this issue to a committee is a sensible outcome. I look forward to receiving some of its recommendations and I look forward to working with the Minister for Agriculture and other ministers who are involved in the relief effort when emergencies occur. Now that new legislation is in place, I look forward also to working with communities to implement emergency management plans that will help alleviate some of the problems. We might prevent some disasters from becoming worse than they otherwise could be because of a lack of planning by being prepared and by communities working together and having emergency management plans in place. I thank the members who have participated in this debate. It is important to air these matters. It is a sensible approach to send the issue to the committee and I look forward to the committee's deliberations and recommendations.

Amendment on the amendment put and passed.

*Amendment, as Amended*

Question put and passed.

*Motion, as Amended*

Question put and passed.