

EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES FUNDING

891. Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:

Will the minister please outline the status of applications made to the Australian government for exceptional circumstances funding from Western Australia this year?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm for bringing forward a matter that needs some clarification. It is obviously an area of concern to Western Australian farmers that they effectively missed out in the Prime Minister's latest allocation of \$350 million of exceptional circumstances funding to 18 different areas in Australia, 15 of which are in New South Wales. Neither Western Australia nor South Australia was mentioned. That in itself is a concern. It is not so much that the application Western Australia had before the commonwealth should have been included in the Prime Minister's statement; I can see good reasons it could not be. However, Western Australia's application ought to have been acknowledged in that media statement. That was a major flaw in the process. I was prepared to be over that. I clarified the situation with the commonwealth Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry during the same day and I was satisfied with his answer. However, the whole thing has since gone haywire. I wonder whether this has something to do with the friction between the National Party and the Liberal Party at the commonwealth level. It certainly has nothing to do with any friction between the commonwealth and the state, because my own working relationship with the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry is very good and very constructive. However, yesterday, two Liberal backbenchers, Senator David Johnston and Wilson Tuckey, the member for O'Connor, were reported as having made statements that are bald, blank untruths. They said that Western Australia has failed to make an application for exceptional circumstances funding. Neither of them called me, and obviously neither of them called the federal minister, Peter McGauran, to check the facts. That was bad enough.

However, today, on ABC radio in Condobolin, New South Wales, the Prime Minister actually repeated the lie. He said that if the South Australian and Western Australian state governments are concerned that the federal government has not made an EC decision for those two states, they need to put an application in. Surprise, surprise, honourable members; we have made two applications. One of those applications was made some months ago and was rejected by the commonwealth on the basis that it did not meet the strict criteria for exceptional circumstances funding. That is fine; I will cop that. I would never send an application that I believe does not meet the criteria; however, if in the assessment in Canberra, they think I am wrong, I will cop that. I always have copped it. The other application is still pending; that was made only a month ago today. It is of real concern to me that federal Liberal backbenchers are saying to the press not only that we have not made any applications when in fact we have made two, but also, as Senator David Johnston said yesterday, that my answer that I would make an application only if it met the criteria was a typically bureaucratic answer. I make this quite clear: under the agreement that structures the exceptional circumstances system, I am obliged to not make an application unless I am confident that it meets the criteria. It is quite clearly stated.

Hon Anthony Fels: The criteria are not always correct, especially in Western Australia's situation.

Hon KIM CHANCE: That is a case for altering the criteria. Indeed the minister, Peter McGauran, and I are having discussions on that matter.

Hon Anthony Fels: WA is totally different from the eastern states, especially for how EC operates.

Hon KIM CHANCE: The criteria are the same for all states.

Hon Anthony Fels: The criteria are, but conditions are a lot different in WA.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Maybe they are, but that does not matter. The criteria are the same for all states. It is a requirement for me to ensure that my application meets the criteria, just as it is a requirement for each minister of each state and territory of Australia that is a signatory to the scheme. Senator Johnston actually said that I should have submitted - in fact, he said that I was negligent in not submitting - applications that I know do not meet the criteria. That is what he actually said. I cannot believe this. This year, I made an application that I thought met the standards that was rejected on the basis that it did not meet those standards. Then, a member of the party that made that decision said that I should put in more submissions even though I know that they do not meet the criteria. I do not want to fight with Canberra over this. I have a good relationship with the federal minister, and what the Prime Minister said today on ABC radio is atypical. Normally the Prime Minister is well-informed and, indeed, constructive and extremely helpful on drought matters. He has been an icebreaker on a number of occasions. It is sad that an issue such as this has emerged to create the appearance of friction between the commonwealth and state on this matter. That friction does not exist and has been generated artificially, particularly by Senator David Johnston and Wilson Tuckey. The people who are affected by this are farmers under a great deal of pressure, and I thought Senator Johnston and Wilson Tuckey would have had a higher regard for those farmers. They will not appreciate their members creating a political football over their tragedy.

