

ON-FARM EMERGENCY WATER INFRASTRUCTURE REBATE SCHEME

791. Mr P.J. RUNDLE to the Minister for Water:

I refer to the state government's \$1.2 billion budget surplus and the federal government's recently announced \$50 million boost to the on-farm emergency water infrastructure rebate scheme.

- (1) Will the state government support our \$10 billion agriculture sector and commit to matching funding, as required by the commonwealth government?
- (2) When will the state government reopen the scheme for WA farmers and begin processing previously received applications to allow farmers to implement water-saving measures ahead of summer?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for the question.

- (1)–(2) As the member knows, the federal government had a scheme in place to provide rebates to farmers to do work to encourage water saving on their properties. As the member should know, that scheme was oversubscribed—that is, more farmers applied for it than there was money available. We did not close the scheme; in fact, we continued to receive and process additional applications from farmers. We wrote to the feds and said, “The scheme is clearly in high demand in this state. You should tip more money in.” In March I wrote to the federal minister to that effect, and the response I got back was that no more funds would be made available. We were disappointed with that, but we did not return the applications to farmers. I think the department has some 411 completed applications, and about another 170 applications that are yet to be completed because the farmers have to provide more information.

A couple of days ago—I think it was 2 October—the federal minister, Minister Pitt, quite unexpectedly wrote to us and said, “We’re going to put another \$50 million into that scheme.” However, there were a couple of things in that letter that were a little bit concerning to me. He said that the criteria may need to be revised because there has been rainfall in some parts of Australia. There has not been significant rainfall in Western Australia, but he said that the criteria needed to be revised.

He also referred to farmers needing to be “drought impacted”. Farmers in Western Australia are experiencing a long-term drying pattern because of climate change; it is not the classic drought scenario in which the expectation is that at some point rainfall will return to normal, as it does after a drought. One of the reasons why farmers in WA have missed out on a lot of federal funding is because it is not the classic drought scenario. There were a couple of other things that concerned me about the letter. He also asked for feedback by the end of October, and there was a reference to matching funding, without any details about what that might mean.

I wrote to him and said—I am paraphrasing the letter—“Let’s not mess about. There are 411 farmers who currently have applications that meet the old scheme. Let’s get on and pay them. Allocate \$5 million of the \$50 million to WA as a start and get that money out the door to those farmers who need it. Don’t wait until the end of October; just do it.” We also outlined some funding that we have in the budget to assist farmers with these issues, and we put a proposal that we think should meet the federal government’s requirements.

It is a bit difficult for us. States on the east coast have put off their budgets; our budget, as the member knows, was delivered on 8 October, so by the time we received his letter the budget was locked and loaded.

He probably does not think a lot about WA and was not aware of that, but we think we have put a reasonable proposition to him. I suppose the question for the member for Roe is whether he supports what we have asked that minister to do—that is, to immediately pay those 411 farmers who have put in applications that meet the old criteria under the old scheme. That would be about \$2 million going into farmers’ pockets and into communities that need that cash. Does the member support us saying, “Allocate that money immediately! Let’s not mess around. Let’s not wait until the end of October. Let’s just get the money out the door”? It would be great if the member for Roe and the Nationals WA, instead of having a crack at us, got onto their federal counterparts to get that money out the door to those farmers who need it.