

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

RURAL AND REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA, ASSISTANCE PACKAGE

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mr Riebeling): Today I received a letter from the Leader of the National Party seeking to debate as a matter of public interest the following motion -

That the House calls on the Government to urgently develop an assistance package for rural and regional Western Australia, in particular the wheatbelt, affected by this year's adverse seasonal conditions, which have been exacerbated by last year's poor season

If sufficient members agree to this motion, I will allow it.

[At least five members rose in their places.]

The SPEAKER: The matter shall proceed on the usual basis.

MR TRENORDEN (Avon - Leader of the National Party) [2.40 pm]: I move the motion. Immediate state assistance is required. The Government should develop an assistance package for rural and regional Western Australia, and particularly the wheatbelt region. I made the point clearly at the outset of this debate that we need to talk about state assistance. The federal Government will have a role to play in this issue, but because of the nature of federal assistance, and because it comes at the end of a process in which assessments have to be made and crops have to be harvested, that assistance will not be forthcoming in Western Australia before 2002. The Government must recognise today that the need is immediate; it must be measured from today. The Government must take the lead; it is the responsibility of Western Australians to look after Western Australia.

The assistance calls for recognition of adverse seasonal conditions for the 2001 season. I make it clear that even though it has been effective for past seasons, it is the season that is impacting on us now that is of major concern. The lack of rain is severely impacting upon cropping programs, and because of low rainfall in past years, its impact will be exacerbated. These conditions mean that one of the other alternative incomes for farmers - stock production - will be adversely affected also. Farmers will not have the option of switching from crop to stock because of the low rainfall. This package should address these issues throughout Western Australia, at least in regional areas where agricultural production is the core activity. A vast number of business communities will be affected. We could not even count how many there are but we know that from the 1997-98 statistics, the industry as a whole is a \$4.5 billion industry. It is one of the major economic drivers for this State.

I make the point again that any federal assistance can occur only after the event. The earliest we can expect assistance will be in 2002. In the period running up to the budget in September, we ask the State Government to recognise that they will - it is not just a likelihood - have to access resources for rural communities. This assistance is not just for farmers, and I will run through that in a moment. Spending will spiral downwards in rural WA if it does not rain in the next couple of weeks. This will mean that everyone who lives in country towns and rural WA will be affected. Businesses will not receive the income, sales will not be made, children will be taken out of schools, and services will decline because private enterprise will not be able to provide them. If the worst case scenario happens - I talk in terms of days, not months - and there is no rain in the next couple of weeks, then we can expect these things to occur. Unfortunately for some people out there, today is too late. There will be no crops for a large number of Western Australian farmers. We can only hope that the front coming through this weekend will deliver enough moisture to the wheatbelt for farmers to continue with their activities. Hopefully, then they will receive good following rains and have a reasonable - not excellent and not good, but reasonable - season. That is the best that most farmers can hope for.

We do not need to be told about the economic effects the lack of rain can have on rural WA. It has been spoken about a lot in the last couple of years, and certainly the National Party has referred in the House to this economic downward spiral on many occasions. It is true and it is real. The simple solution is not to deal only with the core people affected, the farmers. We must deal with the whole community. Therefore, government agencies must be aware of what they are in for. Family services, mental health services, education and transport are just a few of a range of Western Australian agencies that should be prepared for what has already happened, and for what may be a disaster.

I have spoken to a lot of people about this. One farm adviser sent me some facts that I will relay to the House. He states that for an area east of Hyden, through Lake King to Esperance, there is the potential for a 100 per cent crop loss if no rain is received in the next fortnight. This will be the third or fourth year, depending on which farmers one is talking about, in which farmers have had a tough year. I table a paper that gives an indication of rain forecasts.

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

[The paper was tabled for the information of members.]

Mr TRENORDEN: Members may be interested in this paper. It points out that no rain is forecast for the rest of winter. I understand that the scale goes from rain to showers and so forth, but rain means heavy rain. No moisture - not even showers of any type - is forecast for the central wheatbelt from 3 July to 21 July. Even though that is the forecast, and we must understand that is just a forecast; I hope it is not correct. If it is, it will be a tragedy, the like of which has never been experienced in our part of the world. Those statistics speak for themselves and are why the National Party has raised this matter of public interest and why we are telling the Government to be prepared for what it will need to deliver. We are not running with a furphy. The adviser has said that rain is required across those agricultural regions within a month for people to have an average season. He also said that farm advisers are telling farmers to sell their stock now because they will get money for them now. He has also advised farmers who have not been able to get the crops into the ground - there are a number of them - to not put their crops in. He has told them not to order fertiliser, but if they have, to leave it in their sheds. He has advised them that if it does not rain in the next fortnight, the Government will need to be ready to roll out immediate assistance, particularly in stock feed and counselling services.

In March this year, when I was concerned about the current budgets on which the farmers are operating, I rang the banks and other financial service suppliers. I was clearly told by bank after bank - which is only four or five if BankWest is included - that many businesses in rural and country WA, and particularly many farmers, had been financed for this year. Last year was such a poor year that the farmers were financed for this year on the expectation that it would be a reasonable year. Part of the heartbreak for many people is that the prices for their produce are fine. It is just that they will not have produce to put on the markets.

Clearly, the Government must start planning for the days ahead. We are putting it on notice. Members who listened to the radio this morning would have heard rural people putting the Government on notice; in fact, there were a couple of emotional calls. There will be a lot of pressure on people in rural WA. Rural women carry the heartbeat of WA. They will be under a lot of pressure managing their husbands and families, and many of the hospital and school boards that they run.

They will need support. This is not just about income for individuals; this is about support across the normal operations of government, across government agencies. The Government will need to stand behind these people.

Finally, I appreciate that the Minister for Agriculture will do a tour through the wheatbelt next week with agriculture leaders and I congratulate him for that. However, I point out clearly that I am not worried about the Minister for Agriculture - I am certain he knows what the problems are; I am worried about his cabinet colleagues who are city people - I do not want to be too blunt about this - and who may not comprehend the depth of the problems we are facing.

MR COWAN (Merredin) [2.50 pm]: I support the Leader of the National Party's motion. At the outset, I express my disappointment that so many members of the Government have decided that this matter is not important enough for them to be present. It is a very serious issue. This Government has spent a large amount of time telling the public of Western Australia that it is here to govern for all Western Australians. However, when at the first opportunity it is challenged to govern for those people in Western Australia who live outside the metropolitan area, its members are found wanting by not being present in the House to listen to the debate on this issue, with which very few of them would be familiar. The issue is significantly important. I want to make sure that I leave enough time for some of my colleagues on this side of the House to speak, so I will deal briefly with some of the matters that have not been covered by my leader.

As the Leader of the National Party said, federal Government support normally comes 12 months after an event. This Government must recognise that fact, take a lead and indicate that it is prepared to offer support now to the people who are suffering the consequences of poor seasonal conditions. I make it clear that we are not talking about just farmers and the farming community. As has always been the case, we are talking about people. With any industry, the critical number of people employed are not employed in the core industry itself but in the services sector. Therefore, one must include not only people who are involved in agriculture as farmers but also those who are involved in agricultural service industries, whether they be truckdrivers, vehicle dealers, service proprietors or any other small business operators that make up the services sector in regional Western Australia. They too will need support because there will be no income for any of those people.

The time has come for this Government to stop playing games with the federal Government. It was one thing to exploit the capacity of the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Warren Truss, to play the devil's advocate, which he does very well, and to be, to a certain extent, somewhat tardy in addressing the needs of the State because he likes to play the role of devil's advocate. However, those days have come to an end. It was not appropriate for the Western Australian Minister for Agriculture to put forward an application in the

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

knowledge that it would fail. He knew that he would be able to apportion the responsibility for that failure because of, the blind following of this Government by the Press, particularly the rural Press. It disappoints me that that has been the case. Knowing that the previous application had already been addressed by the federal Government and that the State had been told that it would not be adequate, the Minister for Agriculture knew that he could put forward the previous application and perhaps tinker with it at the edges. If members want proof that the application was bound to fail, they should ask the seasonal committee. It will tell them that it was not even invited by the Minister for Agriculture in this State to look at the application that was being put forward. The seasonal committee would have been able to give advice, which the Chief Executive Officer of Agriculture Western Australia could not do because his position was under threat, and he was cast in a role of saying "yes, minister", and nothing else. The fact is that that application was bound to fail. The time has now come for an effective application to be made for funds. However, before that, the State Government must be prepared to deliver.

The National Party has been criticised, and it lost government. I cop the fact that it lost government, but at least it put forward programs to the value of about \$30 million in anticipation of a poor season last year. However, that will be minuscule compared with the needs of agriculture, and agriculture-related service industries, in this State if these seasonal circumstances continue. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture will be able to create his own black hole, and he will have to do that; otherwise, the social consequences for this State will be terrible. The Government will have a serious situation, whereby it must provide support for a range of businesses. It will be very much akin to the consequences of the depression years, when people were forced to go elsewhere to earn a living. I do not say that because I want to talk down agriculture - I am still heavily involved in it; I say it because, unfortunately, it is true.

The Government must lead. It must be in a position in which it can provide financial and in-kind support that comes through government agencies such as Family and Children's Services. A whole range of community services must be delivered. Can we alleviate the need to meet the cost of a student's education? It sometimes costs in the vicinity of \$12 000 to \$15 000 to put a student through secondary school. During the years in which compulsory education is taken into account, the only thing that members on the other side think about is that they might have to pay a maximum of \$500 a year in voluntary fees for a senior student. Members should think about to pay something like 20 times that amount to put their children through school if they had no income. They are the important issues. The Government must instil confidence in people living in regional Western Australia, particularly in the wheatbelt and the agricultural areas, and the view that they have not been ignored and that they are considered to be part of the Western Australia that everyone claimed this Government would work for.

At the moment we have had only one signal; that is, has the Minister for Agriculture been playing political games with his federal counterpart, and then seeking to transfer responsibility to the federal Government. That cannot happen. There must be an immediate commitment from this State Government, following which, something must be forthcoming, because without funds, believe me, action does not follow.

I support the motion moved by the Leader of the National Party. It is very important that a clear signal be sent to those people in agriculture that they are not being left on their own and that support is on the way.

MR LOGAN (Cockburn) [2.59 pm]: I speak on this motion in my capacity as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture. I acknowledge and take on board all the issues that have been raised by the Leader of the National Party and the member for Merredin. The intent of the motion moved by the Leader of the National Party could be supported by the Government. I will respond, probably in more detail, to some of the concerns that have been raised by the member for Merredin and the Leader of the House. The circumstances facing rural Western Australia are, if anything, worse than what has already been put on record. The situation is nearly critical for many farmers. As the member for Cockburn, and a city dweller, I do not have experience as a farmer.

Mr Cowan: There are lots of vegetable gardens down there.

Mr LOGAN: Absolutely. My own experience extends only to market gardening.

This matter is of great concern to the agricultural sector, rural communities and the Government. The serious rainfall deficiency through much of the wheatbelt from April to June of this year is likely to have a huge impact on wheatbelt farmers, the non-farm rural business sector, and rural communities as a whole. The failure of rains this year comes on top of a dry season last year, which reduced farm income by approximately \$1.5 billion. Poor seasonal conditions in 2000 had a significant and widespread impact on farm revenues as a result of the driest growing season in many years. In sections of the south coast and the central wheatbelt areas, this dry season was preceded by two consecutive seasons in which frost severely reduced yields. The decline in grain production for 2000 was more than four million tonnes, which is 30 to 40 per cent of the average yield for the previous five years. Combined with losses of livestock, the total income loss for last season was \$1.5 billion. The most

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

seriously affected area was the south eastern wheatbelt, in the areas around Lake Grace, Jerramungup and Ravensthorpe, but there were pockets of seriously affected farms throughout the wheatbelt. In response to that crisis, the previous Government agreed to a \$10.6 million assistance package for eligible farmers. For the first time in Western Australia, the Commonwealth agreed to the exceptional circumstances declaration, which will result in commonwealth support to farmers in the declared areas in the form of interest rate subsidies and welfare totalling \$30 million. The previous Government also provided supplementary funding of \$3.5 million to control plague locusts, which exacerbate the drought situation. Rural communities and small businesses are heavily dependent upon agriculture, and the downturn in income last year has severely affected small businesses and had a major effect on regional economies. The severe erosion of farm equity as a result of negative returns and declining land prices has been widespread, leading to problems with the carry-on of financing, and has exposed many businesses to higher risks than they would normally regard as acceptable, with a second successive bad season looming.

The financial implications for the current year are horrendous, but as the Leader of the National Party pointed out on radio this morning, the impacts are not confined to economic wellbeing. The multiplier effects of declining income also need to be taken into account, in community health and education. The ability of farmers to provide secondary and tertiary education for their children has been severely curtailed. Reduced employment and the permanent loss of small businesses serving rural communities and providing skilled input to farm businesses also impact on community viability. This problem is acknowledged by the Government and is being championed in Cabinet by the Minister for Agriculture.

The 2001 drought is emerging as even more serious and widespread than last year, with Agriculture Western Australia estimating a reduction of at least four million tonnes in grain production over last year. The losses will be potentially greater than last year if rain is not received within two weeks, as the Leader of the National Party has pointed out. The optimum time for sowing seed has passed, and unless rain is received in the next two weeks, the situation for farmers in the eastern and south eastern wheatbelt will be critical. The rainfall during the present period is crucial for sowing crops, but the majority of agricultural areas have had less than 30 per cent of their normal June rainfall. Agriculture Western Australia has done an analysis of available soil moisture, which takes into account rainfall and evaporation conditions over the growing period to date, and it shows an abnormal situation for June, with most of the wheatbelt drying rapidly as a result of the low rainfall. Large areas of the wheatbelt now have very low soil moisture reserves. The wilting point will be reached unless rains come soon. The member for Avon tabled some statistics about rainfall. I seek leave to table a map which highlights the areas affected by low rainfall.

Leave granted. [See paper No 355.]

Mr LOGAN: The map shows plant-available soil moisture as of 24 June 2001. Attached is a Bureau of Meteorology document giving the rainfall percentages for the month of June to date. I have been informed by Agriculture Western Australia that this is the first time on record that the plant-available soil moisture at this time of the year has actually declined. Usually the soil moisture is increasing as a result of rainfall already received. This is a critical condition for rural Western Australia. The most seriously affected areas shown on the map are those shires on the eastern edge of the wheatbelt, from Mullewa to Morawa and Dalwallinu and from Merredin to Lake Grace and Jerramungup.

Large amounts of the planned crop have not been sown in these shires, while the rest of the crop is at severe risk from drought stress. Pasture is virtually nonexistent. Stock has been sold off and remaining stock is being handfed with feed that is becoming increasingly scarce. The outlook is not good, with a high probability of a serious downturn in production potential as weather conditions are not likely to provide relief in the near future. The 10-day weather models indicate that the current dry patterns are likely to continue for the next two to three weeks. National Party members and I have highlighted that if rain is not received in the next two weeks, the situation will go beyond critical and farms will fail. This is a serious problem for Western Australia because of the impact that farm failure and the inability to produce wheat will have on Western Australia's economy. I repeat that the sector last year experienced losses of \$1.5 billion through a downturn in the availability of grain harvesting and livestock losses. This year, five million tonnes of grain could potentially be lost, which is 40 to 50 per cent of the total grain yield. Of a 12-million-tonne yield, five million tonnes could be lost to drought. That would have an impact on this State's economy of between \$2 billion and \$2.5 billion.

The overall prognosis for the weather patterns is a continuation of below-average rainfall in the worst-affected areas in the eastern and central wheatbelt over the remainder of the winter. Rainfall events are likely, but their intensity and duration will not be sufficient to fill dams, promote pasture growth or return normal crop yields.

Mr House: Give us some good news. This is very depressing.

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

Mr LOGAN: It is very depressing, and it is very serious. I am stressing its seriousness to highlight what members have raised; that is, it is not something to joke about. It will have a dramatic effect on rural Western Australia for a long time. I am stressing the issue because, as I said, we acknowledge its serious nature. As the member for Merredin indicated, it is a pity that more people are not in the Chamber to listen to this debate, particularly those from rural areas. They should take notice of the issues. These problems will affect not only current farmers, but also future Western Australians.

Although it is too early to predict yields and the subsequent impact on gross revenue, significant losses have already occurred. I am told that Agriculture Western Australia will assess the future prospects of a representative sample of farm businesses and, when feasible, carry out crop yield predictions on a shire-by-shire basis to determine the expected impact on crop production and revenue. However, the potential impact of the dry season is significantly greater and more widespread than last season.

If that is not depressing enough, the dry seasonal conditions are exacerbating the emerging threat of the Australian plague locusts to broadacre crops and horticulture. The last major outbreak in south western Australia occurred in 2000. Agriculture Western Australia and the Agriculture Protection Board have told me that last year they undertook a major control campaign in 31 shires at an estimated cost of \$9.6 million. A recent survey of 67 shires indicated a strong likelihood of an extensive summer locust outbreak in at least 16 shires.

Mr House: A campaign to eradicate those locusts was funded out of a special cabinet allocation, rather than through the normal budget, and it was very successful. Locusts did almost no damage across the State. Will you commit your Government to the same sort of campaign and to extra funding to meet those costs so that farmers will not be adversely affected?

Mr LOGAN: No, not until Agriculture Western Australia has completed those surveys. I am putting on record what the previous Government did. I am not critical of that; however, I will not go further until Agriculture Western Australia has made those assessments.

Mr House: The point of the motion is for this Government to be prepared to meet the challenges and problems when they arise. That is what people expect. You are saying you will not do that.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Andrews): Members, I am sure there is nothing wrong with the interjection and its response; but I cannot hear them. It might be my advancing years; however, members should direct their comments through the Chair.

Mr LOGAN: The interjection referred to the funding the previous Government provided to control locusts in the south eastern corner of the wheatbelt. I indicated to the interjector that I am not critical of the previous Government's attempts to address the issue. I am unable to say whether those attempts were successful. That funding was made available and, if any remains, continues to be available. However, I cannot give a commitment on behalf of the Government to take the funding issue further until assessments have been done by Agriculture Western Australia. I am addressing the motion before the House, and I will outline the assistance package that will be put in place. In any case, the 2001 outbreak of plague locusts is not likely to be as widespread as the 2000 event. It is predicted the outbreak will be severe in 13 of the shires that have so far been surveyed.

Mr Trenorden: It won't matter if it doesn't rain.

Mr LOGAN: I am sure that after the farmers' remaining crops are eaten by plague locusts, they will be happy to learn of that interjection. Severe but less widespread problems will occur in the north east of the Cunderdin shire and the northern parts of the Kondinin shire. There is also potential for significant crop damage as the late start to the crop-growing season will increase the probability of a late finish. Agriculture Western Australia will assemble a local task force and prepare a detailed management plan to address this year's Australian plague locust outbreak, hence the reason for not giving the commitment for which the member has asked. The preliminary estimated cost of repeating a similar program in 2001 is as much as \$4 million.

The National Party and I have highlighted the impact of the dry weather. While it is too early to estimate the loss of production in both the grain and livestock industries, it will be significant, especially if it does not rain in the next few weeks. At this stage, approximately 1.2 million hectares has received negligible rain. I have indicated that total production in the agricultural area is worth over \$4 billion. Likely loss of grain production at this stage is estimated to be between at least four million or five million tonnes, which is more than last year. It is estimated that total loss in production last year amounted to \$1.5 billion; that will be exceeded this year if good rain is not received in the next few weeks.

Most of Western Australia's rural communities are heavily dependent on the agricultural sector and feel the effects of the downturn in farming income. Small businesses and rural communities are still feeling the effects

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

of last year's loss of income and are not in a position to withstand another adverse season. In terms of the action of the Government, which is the intent of the motion, I refer, first, to the state assistance package. In response to last year's adverse seasonal conditions, the previous Government developed a state assistance package of measures to provide financial support to farmers. In November last year, Cabinet made the decision to contribute \$10.66 million to the assistance package. The Labor Government has continued to provide support under the existing package and will continue that assistance, as drafted by the previous Government's Cabinet. The package has been provided to support livestock management, water cartage and farm business planning. Farmers who have made a loss in two of the past three years are eligible for a grant of up to \$5 000 for any of the purposes outlined. Over 1 400 farmers have applied for assistance under the scheme.

The member for Merredin highlighted the relationship with the federal Government and what is deemed exceptional circumstances funding. On 2 February 2001, the Commonwealth announced that Western Australia's application for exceptional circumstances for the south east wheatbelt was successful. This is the first time that Western Australia has been successful in obtaining an exceptional circumstances declaration. The area included the whole of the shire of Lake Grace and parts of the surrounding shires of Dumbleyung, Gnowangerup, Jerramungup, Kent, Kulin, Ravensthorpe, Narembene and Kondinin. There are approximately 700 eligible farmers in this area. Eligible farmers are entitled to assistance from the Commonwealth Government in two forms: one in the form of a welfare payment similar to New Start and the other in the form of an interest rate subsidy on outstanding debts up to 70 per cent of the interest rate payment. It is estimated that the total benefits that farmers will receive will exceed \$30 million. At the time that the exceptional circumstances declaration was announced, the federal Minister, Hon Warren Truss, advised that he would consider an extension of the exceptional circumstances boundaries. The State Government subsequently submitted a case to include all the shires surrounding the exceptional circumstances area. It would have expanded the number of eligible farmers to 1 500.

Mr Cowan: That is not the case. There were special circumstances.

Mr LOGAN: I will come to that in a minute. The case was rejected by the Commonwealth on advice from the National Rural Advisory Council. I am informed that, in consultation with officials from the National Rural Advisory Council and the state seasonal advisory committee, Agriculture Western Australia has developed another case for the extension of the exceptional circumstances boundaries in four areas. The case has been submitted to the Commonwealth for consideration.

The former Government established the seasonal advisory committee. It was chaired by Eric Charlton and is now chaired by Dexter Davies. It gives advice to the minister on seasonal conditions. The committee comprises representatives of farming organisations, industry and appropriate government departments. The Minister for Agriculture, Hon Kim Chance, has retained the committee and it continues to provide advice to the minister, especially on exceptional circumstances matters. As indicated by the Leader of the National Party, the minister will pay a visit to the drought-affected areas on 5 July. He will be accompanied by the President of the Western Australian Farmers Federation, representatives of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association and the chairman of the seasonal advisory committee, Dexter Davies. The minister hopes to get a hands-on response to this season's drought as it unfolds.

Another element of the state assistance package is the implementation of an election commitment by the Labor Party to multi-peril crop insurance. The election commitment of the Labor Party was to fund a \$2.5 million feasibility study into a multi-peril crop insurance scheme. The commitment is being implemented in consultation with Western Australian farming organisations. If such a scheme is feasible it will allow farmers to insure their crops against climatic factors such as drought or frost. It effectively allows farmers to self-manage the risk to their crops. It is a crucial factor in combating the likely effects of future droughts. Another element of the package is the freight subsidy for grain. Under the previous Government the per tonne cost of transporting grain by rail increased under an agreed formula, due to the lower volumes. This Government has honoured the commitment to subsidise the full cost of the increase of \$8.5 million, which would have been borne by farmers.

Another factor is the interseasonal committee, which is coordinated by Agriculture Western Australia. It ensures that the consequences of adverse seasons are managed in a coordinated manner. The Labor Government has provided increased support for counselling services of \$160 000.

Mr House: All you are doing is outlining the scheme. The Government has done nothing.

Mr LOGAN: I am outlining the package that has been developed, and which will be continued by this Government. The original package has been expanded by this Labor Government.

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

I wanted to talk about the State's relationship with the federal Government, as highlighted by the member for Merredin. The motion before the House does not go to the detail of what needs to be addressed, therefore, I will move an amendment.

Amendment to Motion

Mr LOGAN: I move -

To delete all words after the word "House" and substitute the following -

1. Recognises the seriousness of this year's adverse seasonal conditions, which have been exacerbated by last year's poor season in the wheatbelt and greater agricultural region.
2. Supports the current measures adopted by the Government in response to these adverse seasonal conditions.
3. Supports the Government in its approach to ARMCANZ in order to overcome the existing deficiencies in the exceptional circumstances process.

MR McNEE (Moore) [3.39 pm]: I have spent 20 minutes listening to the greatest diatribe from the Government I have ever heard. All its members did was tell us what a great job this Government has done; and that is not true. It treated the locust problem as if it were not a problem. I support the member for Merredin. Make no mistake about it, the problem of adverse seasonal conditions will affect those members who represent little parishes. They should not say that there is a problem in the bush but that it will not affect them. It will affect them, make no mistake. I cannot support the Government's motion.

The Court Government left rural areas in pretty good shape. The former Minister for Commerce and Trade opened many telecentres throughout the State that bring people closer to communication. I remember going to the opening of the catering section at Wongan Hills District High School; the Government contributed \$1 million to the school. I went to another little school in my electorate that had only 17 students who all used computers. We left those schools in good shape. All your Government can do, Mr Acting Speaker, is reiterate how bad the former Government was. In my 50 years on the land, I have never seen a worse situation.

Point of Order

Mr McRAE: I rise because I understand that the Speaker has an important role in this House. I believe the member, in his enthusiasm, reflected on your position in the Chair. That is improper and the member should not continue to do it.

Mr BARNETT: In no way did the member for Moore reflect on the Chair. He argued with passion for the plight of people in rural Western Australia. He should be commended for doing that, not interrupted in such a corny, political way.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Andrews): There is no point of order.

Debate Resumed

Mr McNEE: I have never seen a worse situation in rural Australia. We have been through bad seasons and good seasons before, but I have never seen one in which farmers have told me that they have had only two millimetres of rain in June. If members assume that the problem is only on the eastern side, they should heed the words of the members for Avon and Cockburn, who said that if it does not rain for two weeks, the effect of the drought will move closer to the metropolitan area.

The day before yesterday I drove to Perth, and I have never seen Toodyay in a worse condition. I have driven up and down the Toodyay to Goomalling road for more years than I care to remember. The further east one goes, the worse it gets. I am not saying that we cannot retrieve the situation, because we have all been at death's door and escaped; I am not saying whether we will escape. However, we are approaching a serious situation.

I strongly support the members for Avon and Merredin in their approach to this issue. It is a great opportunity for them to highlight the problem. We will not be here again for at least a month. If the situation deteriorates, the Premier may have to recall Parliament to discuss the issue. Agriculture is in the worst state that I have ever seen it. It is the culmination of a number of tight seasons and thin margins. In conclusion, I remind the House of the contribution that agriculture makes. It is important to every city member because it will be their constituents who queue up at the doors of Centrelink.

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

MR HOUSE (Stirling) [3.34 pm]: We have heard members of the Government talk about a series of events that took place while we were in government and a series of measures that we put in place. The Government has done nothing to improve the situation; it has sat on its hands. That is symptomatic of what the Government has done in all areas of its responsibility. However, the current situation affects the Government more than it cares to believe. The flow-on effects of this problem in rural Western Australia will be felt quickly in the city, if it has not already been felt.

It is beholden on the Government to provide support to associated industries in rural Western Australia and to women, children, schools, hospitals and all of the people who live and work in those areas. This Government must prepare itself, as did the former Government, and provide a package that can be accessed by rural people. Those people must know now what the Government intends to do because the problem already exists. The problem was exacerbated by a poor season last year. The circumstance in which we find ourselves this year have accumulated from last year.

We rise soon for a break in this Parliament and do not return for a month. It is not good enough that this Government does not address those issues. Although I agree with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, who said that the minister will tour rural Western Australia next week, and I commend that, the minister must take with him a package of support measures he can provide to those areas so that people can plan and prepare for their futures. Some people will have to make tough decisions.

The National Party supports the first part of the amendment.

Amendment on the Amendment

Mr HOUSE: I move -

To amend the amendment as follows -

Paragraph 2: To delete the word “current” and insert before the word “Government” the word “previous”.

Paragraph 3: To insert the word “present” before the word “Government”.

To add the following new paragraph -

Prior to the visit of the Minister for Agriculture to drought affected areas, urges the Government to prepare and lay on the Table of this Parliament the support package it proposes to deliver in agriculture and related service industries.

The second paragraph would then read -

Supports the measures adopted by the previous Government in response to these adverse seasonal conditions;

The third paragraph would then read -

Supports the present Government in its approach to ARMCANZ in order to overcome the existing deficiencies in the exceptional circumstances process.

I cannot emphasise strongly enough how important it is that people in rural areas of the State know as quickly as possible what support they will receive from the State Government. Banks and others will make demands of rural people who cannot quickly meet their commitments. The people need to know how they are able to respond to those problems in order to do simple things, including looking after their employees' welfare, their children's education and their access to health services. Bureaucrats must do some simple things in the areas of health and associated services that will support those people.

MR AINSWORTH (Roe) [3.38 pm]: Yet again, many of the shires mentioned here today that are experiencing severe downturns in seasonal conditions are in my electorate. I drive through those areas and see the despair on those people's faces. When they look out their front doors they see their pastures dying and they wait for the rain to seed the crops in some of their paddocks. The crops that have been seeded are dying before their eyes. They know that they do not have the backup of two or three good years to tide them over. They have had two or three bad years and are faced with very difficult circumstances. On that basis, I strongly support the amendment to the amendment moved by the member for Stirling.

The government amendment goes no way towards addressing the real problems that agricultural and rural communities are facing at the moment. It misses entirely the point that the support measures that need to be put

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in place by this Government must be put in place now. Sorting out exceptional circumstances formulae for the future is fantastic, and I support it 100 per cent, but that will not solve the present problem. It will be too late once the exceptional circumstances guidelines problem is solved.

We need the Government to continue with the seasonal advisory committee and have the Minister for Agriculture commit to the continuation of the seasonal conditions package funded by the State Government. This is currently overspent with a cut-off point at 31 July. The funding needs to be continued further to ensure that rural and regional families have access to family and relationship counselling services - a most important aspect. It must provide the education support we heard outlined earlier today. I applaud the idea of reviewing the exceptional circumstances guidelines and sorting them out.

The Government will be delivering a budget in August or September. Preparation must be made now for the appropriate assistance for the range of areas that we have talked about to be included in the budgetary process, so we are not left with a situation where no money is made available and there is not enough to do what is essential, not only for the regional areas of this State but also for the benefit of Western Australia as a whole.

MR RIPPER (Belmont - Deputy Premier) [3.43 pm]: The Government will not be supporting the amendment to the amendment moved by the National Party. What has been outlined today and what I have heard from Agriculture Western Australia officials during briefing has been very disturbing. No doubt we have a big problem on our hands. The forecast declines in production and loss of income are indeed serious; in fact, they are so serious that one wonders what difference the normal-sized assistance packages that State Governments can provide would make.

The minister will be going out on an inspection with the president of the Farmers Federation, the president of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association, the acting director general of Agriculture Western Australia and someone well known to the National Party, Hon Dexter Davies, who will be reporting to Cabinet. It is a problem that is worthwhile debating in this House. No doubt it has serious social, community and economic consequences.

MR OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood) [3.44 pm]: I support the amendment to the amendment. We have seen today a Government that is inept when it comes to managing agricultural matters. The member for Cockburn lives in Cottesloe and knows nothing about agriculture. He spends all of his time reading notes provided to him, I presume, by the Minister for Primary Industry.

The request is very simple: that the Government table the package that the minister will put to people when he tours country Western Australia. It is not much use the minister going out there espousing platitudes, which is what he does in the timber industry, without the support of the Government. This House is very serious about this matter because it is a very serious matter for Western Australia, and the Government has been found wanting.

Amendment on the amendment put and division take with the following result -

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY - Thursday, 28 June 2001]
p1606c-1615a

Speaker; Mr Max Trenorden; Mr Hendy Cowan; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker; Mr Bill McNee; Mr Tony McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei

Ayes (18)

Mr Ainsworth	Mrs Edwardes	Mr McNee	Ms Sue Walker
Mr Barnett	Mr Edwards	Mr Omodei	Dr Woollard
Mr Board	Mrs Hodson-Thomas	Mr Pendal	Mr Bradshaw (<i>Teller</i>)
Mr Cowan	Mr House	Mr Sullivan	
Mr Day	Mr Johnson	Mr Trenorden	

Noes (25)

Mr Bowler	Mr Kobelke	Ms Martin	Mr Templeman
Mr Carpenter	Mr Kucera	Mr Murray	Mr Watson
Mr Dean	Mr Logan	Mr O’Gorman	Mr Whitely
Mr D’Orazio	Mr McGinty	Mr Quigley	Ms Quirk (<i>Teller</i>)
Ms Guise	Mr McGowan	Ms Radisich	
Mr Hill	Ms McHale	Mr Ripper	
Mr Hyde	Mr McRae	Mrs Roberts	

Pairs

Mr Birney	Mr Marlborough
Mr Sweetman	Ms MacTiernan
Mr Marshall	Dr Gallop
Mr Masters	Mr Brown
Mr Waldron	Dr Edwards

Amendment on the amendment thus negatived.

Amendment put and a division taken with the following result -

Ayes (25)

Mr Bowler	Mr Kobelke	Ms Martin	Mr Templeman
Mr Carpenter	Mr Kucera	Mr Murray	Mr Watson
Mr Dean	Mr Logan	Mr O’Gorman	Mr Whitely
Mr D’Orazio	Mr McGinty	Mr Quigley	Ms Quirk (<i>Teller</i>)
Ms Guise	Mr McGowan	Ms Radisich	
Mr Hill	Ms McHale	Mr Ripper	
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Mr Day	Mr Johnson	Mr Trenorden	

Pairs

Mr Marlborough	Mr Birney
Ms MacTiernan	Mr Sweetman
Dr Gallop	Mr Marshall
Mr Brown	Mr Masters
Dr Edwards	Mr Waldron

Amendment thus passed.

Motion, as Amended

Question put and passed.

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McRae; Mr Colin Barnett; Mr House; Mr House; Mr Ross Ainsworth; Mr Eric Ripper; Mr Paul Omodei
