

GREAT SOUTHERN FLOODS, NATURAL DISASTER RELIEF PROGRAMS

334. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture and Forestry:

I refer to the minister's media release of 5 May, which outlined the Gallop government's position on funding assistance for farmers and other businesses, including horticulturists, who suffered losses in the severe floods of the great southern on 1 April.

- (1) Did the minister know at the time that under Fire and Emergency Services Authority criteria the area was qualified to be declared a natural disaster, which would open up greater opportunities for relief programs?
- (2) What inquiries did the minister make at the time on behalf of the great southern community about the potential for relief under the natural disaster criteria?
- (3) Why was it left to the Premier to advise Parliament only yesterday that the great southern floods had been declared a natural disaster?
- (4) Was the decision to declare the great southern floods a natural disaster taken before or after the Bunbury storms of 15 May?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

Before I answer the question, I must state what seems to be obvious. Although this question is properly directed to me because it asks about my actions in relation to the state-commonwealth scheme for natural disaster relief arrangements, the minister responsible for natural disaster relief arrangements in Western Australia is the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. Having said that, I make it quite clear that the question is properly asked of me in its context, but the FESA scheme itself does not come under any acts within my portfolio.

- (1) No, I did not know at that time because the commonwealth's formal notification was not made until the next day, which was 6 May 2005. Our announcement, as the honourable member indicated, was made on 5 May.
- (2) When I became aware of the commonwealth's notification, I contacted FESA and met with its representatives on 20 May 2005.
- (3) As indicated, I was informed on 20 May that the area may have been eligible. I am seeking urgent advice on the eligibility of farmers in the affected areas to qualify for natural disaster grants. In particular, I wanted clarification on eligibility criteria for FESA assistance before any announcement was made. It seems that an announcement was made outside the process and was not authorised by the government. That is precisely what the government did not want to happen. The government was keen that the eligibility criteria for this assistance be understood and known in a way that could be translated to farmers. The unauthorised release of information has caused FESA's switchboard to be jammed with calls from people wanting to know how things will work. That has been difficult for FESA. We were trying to determine how the application of natural disaster relief assistance could be applied to individual farmers and on what terms and conditions. I have said before in relation to disasters of this kind - that is, floods and fires or non-drought disasters - that it is difficult for a government to step into the shoes of insurance companies in circumstances such as this. Although there may well be cases in which natural disaster relief arrangements provide the capacity for assistance to not only farmers but also private individuals who are caught up in something like this, it is very important to have the eligibility criteria known, understood and properly spelt out. There simply has not been time to do that.
- (4) The Bunbury storms have also been declared a natural disaster. The decision was made before the Bunbury storms because, as I stated, the commonwealth's formal notification was made on 6 May, which was nine days before the Bunbury storms.