

AGRICULTURE, WORKER SHORTAGE

558. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries:

No notice of this question has been given to the minister; however, he will be well aware of it. I note that the minister has allocated \$25 000 to shearing contractors, and I applaud that. However, the minister will be well and truly aware of a shortage of workers in other areas of agriculture.

- (1) Having given that sort of money to agriculture, and in direct contradiction of the minister's announcement, does the minister realise that a multi-combination driver's licence costs people an enormous amount of money?
- (2) Where is the \$25 000 coming from?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

- (1)-(2) I thank Hon Murray Criddle for recognising the initiative that the Department of Agriculture has taken in providing \$25 000 to the WA Shearing Contractors Association to address what is a critical labour shortage in the shearing industry. Members may not be aware, because we tend to think of shearers and shearing shed employees as being young people, but the average age in that industry has now reached 46 years. I can assure members that that is an extremely mature age for shearers. Western Australia is the only State in Australia in which sheep numbers are increasing. After a decade and a half trend of reducing sheep numbers, sheep numbers in Western Australia are now happily beginning to climb, although the climb is modest.

Hon Murray Criddle also makes the very good point that the skilled labour shortage that affects agricultural industries, and indeed mining and transport industries, is far broader than that which exists inside the shearing industry. The \$25 000 from the State Government, allied with cash and in-kind contributions from the private sector to the shearing industry, is only one component of the assistance we are providing. I am working very closely with organisations such as WAFarmers Training towards lifting their capacity to recruit and retain young people in regional industries, including agriculture, transport and mining, although my interest is predominantly in agriculture. We have only just begun to realise the task ahead of us. I am happy to say that the Commonwealth Government also joined us in this endeavour and that, through the auspices of Rural Services Australia, the Commonwealth is also making a significant contribution through its representatives going around areas and introducing young people in senior high schools to career opportunities.

I am happy to speak further with Hon Murray Criddle on the specific issues. I am aware of the challenges that are involved in getting people trained to a multi-combination standard. Often the capacity to train people to that standard does not exist in regional areas. Indeed, not long ago I was speaking with members of the Ord River District Cooperative about exactly that point. I believe we have been able to put something in place in that regard. We have a long way to go on the question of vocational training for rural jobs. I am happy that we have made a start, but I think we have just touched the edge of the need. We need to do a great deal more. I am more than happy to take advice from other members on how we can take it forward.