

FARMERS, SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES ASSISTANCE

23. Hon M.D. NIXON to the Minister for Agriculture:

What is the current situation regarding special circumstances assistance for farmers in areas not approved for exceptional circumstances support to enable those affected by unusual circumstances to plant this season's crop?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I believe the question is directed at determining the position of farmers who are outside both the first and second stage applications for exceptional circumstances; my answer is very little assistance indeed. Some assistance is available to farmers in some circumstances through Centrelink. However, regrettably, one of the real deficiencies of the exceptional circumstances provisions is that unless farmers are within the declared boundaries - there are now two stages of boundaries although I am awaiting confirmation of the second - they are very much left to fend for themselves. That is a tragedy and is a deficiency in the exceptional circumstances provisions that I have opposed for a long time. It is a great tragedy that we have gone from what was a sophisticated farm support mechanism through the former rural adjustment scheme and the Rural Adjustment and Finance Corporation arrangements to a system which takes us back several decades to a situation in which assistance can be provided only when one lives within a particular geographic area.

The question asked by the member is of particular significance to me. I am aware of farmers in the mid-west region who are in every bit as severe circumstances as those in the south-eastern wheatbelt but who are unable to be considered for any real form of assistance. The only option provided under the current arrangements is for special assistance, which can be applied statewide, although I believe there is an alternative which may be available to go to a third level of application for exceptional circumstances whereby isolated pockets may be considered for exceptional circumstances.

The difficulty with that is I am unwilling to proceed - although a case is being prepared for special assistance - to launch a third stage application until the Commonwealth Government confirms that it will undertake a second stage application. It is therefore a complicated matter and a tragic result for Western Australian farmers who are caught in that situation. As the Government, we can simply deal with the tools we have. It has been a frustrating and time-consuming process. The only ray of light I can offer for the longer term is that at the Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand conference in August, the Government will present a case for reform of support mechanisms generally. If possible, we will try to abolish the exceptional circumstances conditions and move to something more akin to that which we had the benefit of some years ago.