

DROUGHT, EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES FUNDING

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

On 9 December 2002, the same day the federal Government announced its \$368 million emergency relief package for drought-affected farmers and small business, the National Party wrote to the Prime Minister requesting that the package be extended to additional Western Australian shires.

- (1) Has the minister formally written to the federal Government and requested the inclusion of 23 Western Australian shires in the federal drought-relief package?
- (2) If not, why not?
- (3) Will the minister make a submission to the federal Government to seek to have these additional shires provided with exceptional circumstances support?
- (4) If so, when will the submission be handed to the federal Government and can the list of shires to be included be tabled?
- (5) If the minister has no intention of lodging new EC applications, why not?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

- (1) Yes.
- (2) Not applicable.
- (3) The federal Government package announced on 9 December is a stand-alone scheme and is not dependent on exceptional circumstances support. The main criterion for the new federal Government package is that a shire may be eligible to be included when more than 25 per cent of its area experienced a one in 20-year rainfall deficiency between 1 March 2002 and 30 November 2002. One criterion for an EC submission is that an area must have a rainfall deficiency of one in 25 years in each of two consecutive years. It is therefore likely that a much smaller area of the Western Australian wheatbelt will meet the EC rainfall criteria. Affected shires have indicated that they are waiting for harvest results before they begin collecting Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd and farmer financial data needed to submit an EC case. The Department of Agriculture is currently working with the shires of Corrigin, Narembeen, Bruce Rock, Kulin, Kondinin and Wickelup to determine whether a case can be developed.
- (4) During March 2003, if a case can be developed at a state level using the Commonwealth's EC criteria.
- (5) As for question (4).

Due to the wonders of modern communications I have been able to access not one but two media releases put out on National Party letterhead by Max Trenorden, MLA Avon and Hon Murray Criddle, MLC Agricultural Region. I want to share with members some of the reasons for farmers and members of the public being confused about the Opposition's position on exceptional circumstances. These two media releases purport to be the same - they have the same date and are issued by the same people and the same party. One states -

At least 18 severely drought-affected shires in WA are in limbo for because the State Government has failed to prepare Exceptional Circumstance applications.

The other media release, issued on the same day, today, states -

At least 20 -

Not 18 -

severely drought-affected shires in WA are in limbo -

I do not know whether it is the same limbo or a different limbo -

because the State Government has failed to prepare Exceptional Circumstance applications

Today's question refers to 23 shires in that bracket. Is it 18, 20 or 23? I inform the House that the answer is 23. It is no wonder people get a bit confused. One of the wonderful statements in one of the media releases is -

"Canberra had no alternative but to put out an incomplete list for WA -

At least we have an admission that Canberra made a mistake of massive proportions -

because our own Agriculture Minister -

Me -

sat on his hands and failed to put up an EC case for additional shires.”

The PRESIDENT: Order! I trust the Leader of the House is being concise in answering the question and is not going on to give a résumé of various press releases which may or may not be relevant to the question.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Part 5 of the question states -

If the minister has no intention of lodging new EC applications, why not?

This goes directly to that question.

The PRESIDENT: I trust we will get to it.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I thank you, Mr President.

We see in this document an admission that a number of shires have not been able to get through the EC barrier for the new innovation by relying on the one in 20 rainfall criterion. The media statement put out by the National Party states that because they could not make it on the one in 20 scale, we should now apply for EC for those areas with two consecutive years of rainfall deficiency of one in 25. They cannot make it on one in 20, so the Gallop Government and I are somehow deficient because we have not put in an application that would immediately be thrown out. The National Party has played disgusting politics with this. Hon Murray Criddle knows that when his party was in government, he could not even get an exceptional circumstances application in until July. It is now December, and Hon Murray Criddle is saying that the Government should make an application that he knows will be thrown out, under the Commonwealth's criteria. He is a disgrace, and his party is a disgrace, to put out statements like this. Then they ask themselves why people are a bit confused about what is going on. The National Party has played political football with this. Hon Murray Criddle knows that what is said in the press release is a disgrace, and it cannot stand up. Hon Murray Criddle can do a lot better, and I am dismayed that he would put his name to this.