

WHEATBELT, DECLARATION OF EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

**44. Hon M.J. CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture:**

- (1) Following the historic success of the previous minister, Hon Monty House, in securing the federal Government's agreement to a declaration of exceptional seasonal circumstances in the wheatbelt in February 2001, will the minister confirm that he -
  - (a) recently pursued an extension to the declared area when he had been told by his Seasonal Advisory Committee on two occasions that this application would not meet National Rural Advisory Council exceptional circumstances criteria because of its ambit nature, and that it was subsequently rejected by the NRAC; and
  - (b) wrote to the federal Minister for Agriculture, Hon Warren Truss MP, on 17 May 2001 asking that he make available for interest rate subsidies for farmers in the area covered by the failed application a sum of \$10 million in commonwealth funds that this minister knew were already fully committed to existing federally-funded agricultural schemes in Western Australia?
- (2) In the light of the federal minister's response, will the minister now reapply in line with the criteria to assist those individual farmers who could qualify outside the area already declared for exceptional circumstances?

**Hon KIM CHANCE replied:**

I thank the member for some notice of this question.

- (1)
  - (a) The case for an extension of the exceptional circumstances boundaries was based on evidence of economic impact on farmers similar to that in the existing exceptional circumstances area. The additional areas included whole shires and had the strong support of local government. My advice from the Seasonal Advisory Committee was that it supported the application for extension of these boundaries.
  - (b) The request to the federal minister was based on a contribution of \$5 million by the State, on the condition that the federal Government provided an additional \$10 million.

Hon M.J. Criddle: Is this the latest?

Hon KIM CHANCE: This is the offer I made to Warren Truss, which I believe the member referred to in his question. It is certainly true that I identified the \$10 million as being available from the Rural Business and Development Corporation's No 2 trust fund account, because the sum of that trust fund does exceed \$10 million. However, it requires the authority of the federal minister to release that money. The fact is that there are some commitments to that fund. However, those commitments are fully topped up by the Commonwealth under arrangements.

- (2) I have formally requested that the federal minister provide clear evidence of where the application failed to meet exceptional circumstances requirements and have indicated that, on receipt of such advice, I will adjust the State's request for an extension of the exceptional circumstances boundaries. The federal minister has made it clear in discussions about the limitations of the existing exceptional circumstances program that he sees the process as a partnership, which includes an open and full sharing of information.

It is unfortunate that the member used a term that I concede was used by the federal minister in the description of the State's second claim for exceptional circumstances when the member used the adjective "ambit". Lest people be misinformed by the nature of the second assistance claim, it is, as my answer made quite clear, a claim that was endorsed by the adverse seasonal conditions committee; that is, it was endorsed by and not set aside by the committee. Lest people feel that they have been misled in this matter, to be within the boundaries that are determined for exceptional circumstances brings no privilege to any farmer save the privilege of being able to prove his case that he meets the guidelines. It does not bring any benefit to anybody unless they can prove that they meet the exceptional circumstances guidelines, which are, in shorthand, two negative years income out of three. For members to say that this is an ambit claim, and in particular for the member's colleague, the member for Merredin, to describe it as an ambit claim -

The PRESIDENT: Order! I am sure the Leader of the House is addressing precisely the question rather than other matters.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Indeed I am, and it is a very important issue. To describe this in any way as an ambit claim is to ignore the reality that being within the boundary brings only the benefit of being able to prove that one qualifies under the provisions. It is a disgrace.

Hon M.J. Criddle: You don't mean the guidelines.

Hon KIM CHANCE: It is a disgrace for the member for Merredin to have said, as he did about people in his own electorate, that they should not have the opportunity to prove that they qualify. It is a disgrace and I hope that the member for Merredin regrets saying that.