

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, MERREDIN, STAFFING AND FUNDING

735. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture:

I refer to the statement of 12 March 2003 that staff changes will be made at the Esperance Downs Research Station, and I also mention rumours that changes are planned across the Department of Agriculture's work force.

- (1) How many people does the Department of Agriculture currently employ in Merredin?
- (2) Are funding cuts planned for the Merredin Drylands Research Institute?
- (3) If so, are these cuts as a result of the Functional Review Taskforce?
- (4) Will the minister provide job certainty for staff at Merredin and quell their fears of having to search for new employment?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank Hon Murray Criddle for giving notice of the question yesterday. I have not heard rumours of this nature, except from the member.

- (1) There are 43 people employed at the Department of Agriculture at Merredin. Funding of staff is provided by the following sources: the State, 30 positions; the grain industry, 11; and the Commonwealth, two.
- (2) No specific funding cuts are planned for the Merredin Drylands Research Institute. The Government does not have control of the funding levels available from either commonwealth or industry sources; these include the National Heritage Trust, the Grains Research and Development Corporation and the skeleton weed trust fund. The Department of Agriculture pursues all opportunities to gain additional funding from all such sources in order to deliver outcomes in all regions. The Government must adjust staffing in all locations according to funding levels, and reductions or increases in staffing at Merredin cannot be ruled out - nor can the department rule out staff transfers to or from Merredin for the purposes of optimising staffing allocations and services across its diverse range of responsibilities.
- (3) Consolidated fund allocations to the Department of Agriculture are determined through the Government's normal budget process, not by the functional review. The department's budget allocations to programs and regions are determined according to its detailed industry and region-based priorities set in process, and its industry consultation.
- (4) The Department of Agriculture is committed to honouring the terms of employees' contracts, and, where further funding is available, to reassign contract staff to those projects. For permanent staff, the redundancy and redeployment provisions of the Public Sector Management Act 1994, part 6, apply. These are longstanding arrangements with which all departmental employees, whether permanent or contract, are familiar.