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Government probed on cyclone recovery funding spend

Farm Weekly, Perth

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Government probed on

By BREE SWIFT

THE State Opposition has criticised Emergency Services Minister Stephen Dawson for providing "potentially inaccurate and misleading information" in parliament in regards to the amount of funds spent under the joint State and Commonwealth Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA) for ex-Tropical Cyclone Seroja.

On November 17 The Nationals WA spokesperson for emergency services Martin Aldridge (pictured) asked the minister to confirm the accuracy of the answer provided in parliament on October 26 that "\$25.42 million of the \$104.5m DRFA package has been expended to date", to which Mr Dawson said the answer was correct.

However when asked by Mr Aldridge, "who advised the minister that \$25.42m of the DRFA package had been expended to date", Mr Dawson replied "no one has ever stated that \$25.42m of DRFA funding has been expended".

When asked the

same question by *Farm Weekly* earlier this week, Mr Dawson said \$11.7m of funds had been spent under the DRFA.

Mr Aldridge recently requested that the statement made by the minister in parliament be referred to the Procedure and Privileges Committee due to it containing "potentially inaccurate and misleading information".

"We've been following the DRFA funding as frequently as we can since it was first announced and we know the government has struggled to get money out the door," Mr Aldridge said.

"When we last looked at it, which was around the budget, the number we had was just over \$7m and all of a sudden the answer we got was a jump to \$25.42m.

"If you look at the breakdown of funding, they've included over \$8m from the Lord Mayors Distress Relief Fund – but that's charitable people, businesses and organisations that have contributed that money, not the government.

"It's really poor form, not to just mislead the parliament but to mislead the people who have been impacted by this disaster – by presenting those figures in a way that makes it look like they are doing a better job than they are."

Now more than 18 months since the natural disaster

devastated the Mid West region, Mr Aldridge criticised the government over its "inaction and inability" to progress the region's recovery, despite the initial fanfare around the DRFA being the largest recovery package ever announced in Western Australia.

With the temporary workers accommodation in Kalbarri still yet to be provided more than 18 months on from Seroja, Mr Aldridge said the government had missed many opportunities.

"They've gone down the path of new construction, but they are making no progress," he said.

"There were a plethora of motel and accommodation units, some of which were significantly impacted by the cyclone, and I would have prioritised one of them to be fixed up and made that a temporary worker base while they reconstructed."

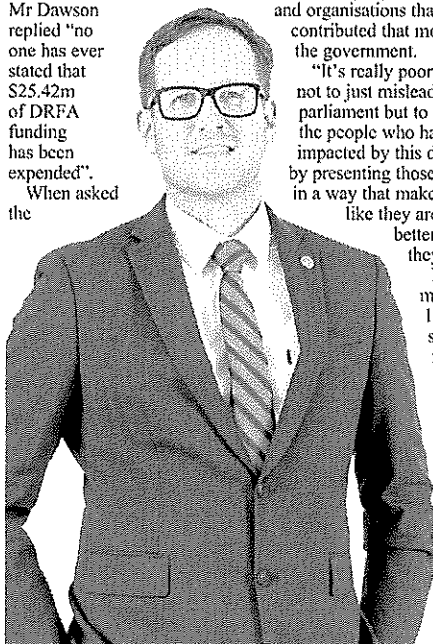
Petra Westkey Modular Housing was named as the preferred proponent to construct and operate a multi-user workforce accommodation facility in Kalbarri in August.

The successful submission proposed the construction of a 44 dwelling, 56-person capacity accommodation facility which will consist of prefabricated modular dwellings constructed in Wangara and transported to Kalbarri.

Given WA's overheated building and construction market, Mr Aldridge said the government should incentivise and de-risk building companies to help prioritise the area impacted by Seroja.

"It's all good for people in Perth to complain about how long it takes to build a house, but if you go up to the Mid West these people are contemplating a third winter with a leaking or no roof, so getting their problem fixed is a higher priority than renovating my bathroom," he said.

"If you were able to provide





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accommodation, maybe some meals and support for travel and actually make it attractive for building companies they might opt to decamp and spend some time in the Mid West to get it done."

However Mr Dawson said the DRFA guidelines determined the allocated Commonwealth and State funds must be used for "like-for like recovery works" through a reimbursement model following a natural disaster.

"The DRFA is not designed to provide incentives or economic stimulus following a disaster event," Mr Dawson said.

❑ Slow update of reimbursement grants

The minister confirmed that a total of 764 grant applications had been submitted across the four recovery grant programs; Recovery and Resilience Grant, Small Business Recovery Grant, Primary Producer Recovery Grant and the Cultural and Heritage Asset Clean-up and Repair Grant.

"As of 28 November 2022,

\$3,313,862.22 has been distributed to 176 applicants who have completed eligible clean-up, repairs, or resilience works and submitted their receipts," Mr Dawson said.

"Many grant applicants are still undergoing the repair works or waiting for the eligible building works to commence.

"Some are still in negotiation with their insurance companies."

In October the government announced that residents and communities impacted by Seroja would have an extra year to complete eligible restoration, repair and resilience works under the grant programs.

The 12 month extension means grant applicants now have until June 30, 2023, to submit an initial grant application and until June 30, 2024, to have eligible works completed.

As part of the same announcement, the government altered the process for the Recovery and Resilience Grant so that applicants could

have the reimbursement grant paid directly to their builder or supplier on completion of works, so the applicants would no longer be out of pocket.

While Mr Aldridge gave credit to the government for this change in process, he said the restrictive application process, as well as the fact that the other grants were reimbursement grants, had contributed to a reduced uptake.

"The government says you pay for it and we'll pay you back, or we might pay you back if your grant gets accepted, but some of these people aren't that financially secure to be able to manage that," Mr Aldridge said.

"The things you have to go through for the primary producer grant is worse than dealing with a tax audit."

When questioned about the restrictive nature of the grants process, Mr Dawson said the State government had "raised issues about the grants process with the Commonwealth" and the Federal government was "looking at making changes".

"Recovering from a natural disaster is a challenging, complex and slow process and progress for some people has been hindered by factors outside of their control, such as finding tradespeople and accessing building supplies," Mr Dawson said.

"Through community welfare and outreach support the Red Cross has contacted over 4100 individuals since the cyclone, and over 7000 people have accessed emergency recovery assistance.

"We are doing what we can to support these people, including regularly bringing specialists from different industries, such as insurance, building, legal, heritage, and small business to the impacted towns to meet personally with individuals and provide customised support and advice."

According to the Insurance Council of Australia's website, as of October 2022, there had been about \$400m worth of claims incurred from Seroja, with 88.7 per cent of 9900 claims now closed.