



# ***AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE***

**Members present:**

Mr GJ Butcher MP (Chair)  
Mr SA Bennett MP  
Mrs J Gilbert MP  
Mr R Katter MP  
Mr J Pearce MP  
Mr EJ Sorensen MP

**Staff present:**

Mr R Hansen (Research Director)  
Mr P Douglas (Principal Research Officer)

## **PUBLIC HEARING—REVIEW OF THE DROUGHT RELIEF ASSISTANCE SCHEME**

### **TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**FRIDAY, 18 MARCH 2016**

**Brisbane**

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### **Committee met at 9.27 am**

**CHAIR:** Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Before we start, I ask all phones to be turned off or switched to silent mode. I declare this meeting of the Agriculture and Environment Committee open. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this meeting is taking place today. I am Glenn Butcher, the member for Gladstone and chair of the committee. The other members with me are: Stephen Bennett, the member for Burnett and deputy chair; Julieanne Gilbert, the member for Mackay, who will be here shortly; Robbie Katter, the member for Mount Isa; and Ted Sorensen, the member for Hervey Bay.

We are meeting today to hold hearings for our review of the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme. The committee is conducting this review in accordance with our public accounts responsibilities as specified in section 94 of the Parliament of Queensland Act 2001. The hearing will finish at approximately 12 noon.

This hearing is a formal proceeding of the parliament and subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. The committee will not require evidence to be given under oath, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. The meeting today is being transcribed by our parliamentary reporters and broadcast live on the Parliament of Queensland's website. We welcome all of those who are watching.

### **LEAHY, Ms Ann, Member for Warrego, Queensland Parliament**

**CHAIR:** I now welcome our first witness today: Ann Leahy MP, the member for Warrego. Would you care to make a brief opening statement?

**Ms Leahy:** Firstly, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear today. I would also like to thank those members of the committee who came to my electorate on that rather hot day and also to the electorate of Gregory to hear and see firsthand the impacts of the ongoing drought.

As I said in my submission to the committee, I have a philosophy that all levels of government should work towards supporting agricultural industries to help them become more profitable. Governments do have a role in reducing the administrative burden on industry and providing well-targeted assistance in circumstances that are beyond the normal management cycles such as a drought or when there is a hostile situation—for instance, vegetation management restrictions or the closure of something like the live cattle export trade.

There are a number of issues that I have outlined in my submission, but there are some recommendations that will not cost the taxpayer anything or very, very little. For instance, having smaller declaration areas rather than working with the large amalgamated council areas—the Maranoa Regional Council was an amalgamation of five councils into one—may in fact reduce the number of claims and target the assistance better. Another recommendation is for the department to pay the emergency water infrastructure rebate for eligible applicants directly to the supplier. In a drought situation people are cash flow poor. If the department can pay that subsidy for eligible applicants directly to the supplier, there would be no additional cost to the taxpayer but it would help those drought affected primary producers.

There are a lot of certification tools currently being used, particularly in my area. It might be certified land management. It might be best practice. Those people already have very good mechanisms for demonstrating their animal welfare and how they deal with the seasonal variability. I do not think it is right for them to have to be put through providing another ream of paperwork. If their certification could somehow be used as a prequalification, that assistance would be an incentive to those people and it would be an incentive to others to improve their practices as well.

One of the things I found interesting was when I was writing this submission I did a Google search. My electorate is fairly close to the New South Wales border at Cunnamulla. On the New South Wales side of the border they can desilt their dams under exactly the same program; in Queensland they cannot. I did a Google search and found that. I find that quite extraordinary that a state boundary determines the difference. The New South Wales government made a commitment—I found this on

ABC Rural—of \$20 million to help farmers desilting dams. That would not be \$20 million used up-front. That would be used when the conditions are appropriate. Across my electorate now, because we have had some run-off rain, it is not possible to do that. You can only do that in very severe situations. I might leave it at that. I am happy to take questions from committee members.

**CHAIR:** I am a bit of a city slicker and I have not been involved in the original part of this inquiry. Can you explain desilting for me? What is involved with it? How do they do it? What are the benefits of it?

**Ms Leahy:** You are from Gladstone, so you are familiar with our climate. My electorate has a very dry climate, so we have a high evaporation rate. The deeper you can make the water storage the longer that water storage will work because you reduce the surface area. When you have a drought situation, there is silt that constantly goes into dams. In a drought situation that dam has naturally emptied and you can remove that silt and increase the depth of the water storage, therefore reducing the amount of evaporation. It is environmentally sensible to do that. The only time you can do it is in a severe drought when the dam is empty. You can do that with bulldozers and excavators—earth-moving equipment.

**Mr BENNETT:** It also allows that farmer to be more resilient in the next event whenever that tragedy may happen.

**CHAIR:** There is more opportunity for storage.

**Mr BENNETT:** Animal welfare issues are protected and their capacity to continue to operate effectively are lengthened.

**Ms Leahy:** One of the other important things, too, is that a lot of these dams are in black soil. Cattle and sheep tend to bog when they are going in. If you do not keep the edges of those dams and those approaches where they go into water desilted, they will tend to bog. The last thing you want is your animals dying around a dam because that can sometimes be the only water facility for them and then they pollute that whole water facility. It is actually an animal welfare issue to desilt your dams when you have the opportunity.

**Mr BENNETT:** For the benefit of the committee, could you explain the paperwork issues that your constituents are bringing to you about the capacity to fill out the forms to be eligible for DRAS assistance?

**Ms Leahy:** I thank the member for Burnett for the question. I have seen some of the paperwork that goes in for some of these claims working at the front line. I had an instance where one particular receipt was photocopied so the whole claim was refused and the lady had to come back and find the original receipt to have the claim processed.

The other issue is that not everyone has good internet access. The feed suppliers often cannot keep up with the paperwork when we are in a drought situation because feed is being sourced from all over. I know people at Mitchell source from as far away as South Australia, from Adelaide. They cannot keep up with the paperwork. There is a time frame of six months when you have to that paperwork in. Sometimes there is a lag of possibly three months before people can get the relevant invoices and receipts they need from their supplier because they are just so busy.

You have to send your originals in. There can be a wad of receipts that people have to find. If you have one missing or one photocopied, you have to go back and find that one before the claim is processed. It is very resource intensive for the department.

**Mr BENNETT:** For the benefit of committee members who have not seen an application I assume, how many pages are involved, for example, to claim a water subsidy? How many pages would a person have to fill out to be considered for a claim on the costs of fodder or transport?

**Ms Leahy:** In relation to the water subsidy, you actually have to have a water management plan as well. There is quite a lot of detail that you have to do. That could easily be a duplication of your existing water management plan as well. It is disappointing that we cannot consolidate all of that paperwork and say, 'If you have an existing water management plan'—which many people do—'that would suffice.' You do not do a water management plan just for the sake of doing it; you do it for the longevity of your business. I have seen claims for freight that involve 30 pages of different receipts that people have had to collate and put in. I had one claim that the department refused and this wad of information came back because they did not look up the lines on the map correctly—he was eligible when he was deemed ineligible. You have to send in the originals of those receipts as well.

**Mr KATTER:** That is very good and consistent with what I observe in relation to desilting and the replication of paperwork and the burden of some of those forms. To put it into context for others here, not so much for yourself, one of the comments made to me was, 'We cannot afford the extra ringer around the place'—or farmhand or whatever you like to call them—'I'm the cook. I'm my Brisbane

husband's offside. I'm doing the cattle work. I'm doing the school work for the kids. Then I have to come home at seven or eight o'clock at night and feed the family and help my husband fill out the paperwork.' I think that is important to acknowledge because people would say, 'The forms are fairly basic. Have a look at them.' It needs to be put in context.

I want to ask you about drought concessional loans. I forget the two fields but one of those fields was 265 in Queensland. I think that two were processed in my electorate. The dynamics obviously play a big part. They do not work in my area evidently. I wanted some feedback on the drought concessional loans. Have you found that they have been effective? Has there been a big take-up? Have you had much feedback about those?

**Ms Leahy:** I thank the member for Mount Isa for the question. The last thing that anyone wants to do in a drought when you do not know when it is going to end is to take on more debt. It is as simple as that. We do not know when that season will change and we do not have the accurate predictors of that. You really do not want to take on more debt in that situation. It is very difficult. People do not do it for that very reason: you do not know how you can meet the terms and conditions.

**Mr KATTER:** Moving forward, presumably there has been a diminution in stock numbers with the drought, so people have to restock. A lot of their finances are depleted from paying for fodder and transport and whatever else over the last few years. Do you see that as a problem going forward now as well in terms of the drought scheme? Do you think there is enough assistance in place to handle the size of the problem?

**Ms Leahy:** I do not think there is enough in place. For the benefit of the committee, I have the largest cattle selling centre in the Southern Hemisphere in my electorate where I am based at Roma. We constantly talk about the price and the supply that is coming through of cattle. I think we are in uncharted territory in relation to recovery for people. Let's cross our fingers that those cattle prices do stay up at a very good level. We do not want to see those come down because people need the opportunity to recover and they need those prices to help them recover. However, 30 per cent of the cattle from the gulf came down through the Roma sale. That oversupplied the market and it depressed the prices. It was then dry at the same time, so there was a double whammy effect on those producers. We are in uncharted territory. I think I have said this before. We need to look at more innovative ways to help those people back into production. Their debt levels have gone up. Their equity has gone down. They cannot afford to get back in there, but they are very good farmers, they are very good producers and they are very good at looking after their stock.

**Mrs GILBERT:** You were talking before about the receipts and the forms. I know that some of those issues came up on our tour. What have you heard back from farmers about how they would like to see that process of filling in forms? We cannot just have open slather. We have to be accountable for the money that is going to individual farmers for the claims that they are making. What are they saying to you about how they could cover accountability but cut the red tape?

**Ms Leahy:** I thank the member for Mackay for the question and I think it is a very interesting question. One of the things that has been said to me—and I have raised this in my submission—is about those primary producers who agist breeding stock. At the moment the emergency water infrastructure rebate is coupled with a drought declaration. There may be—and this has been raised with me—benefit in uncoupling that emergency water rebate and using that rebate as a drought preparedness scheme before you get to a drought situation because that is when you have a bit more time to do some of that work and you can actually get supply of the materials as well. It would be more a drought preparedness scheme that runs the whole time rather than just in a drought. That has been raised with me, that we should uncouple that particular form of assistance from drought declarations. At the moment, if there are no drought declarations, you cannot access that assistance. It could be a capped amount that government provides every year for people as an incentive for farmers and landholders to upgrade their water facilities when they are not in a drought. It might be fencing. It might be pipelines. It will also help them control their grazing pressures if they can control their watering points.

Unless we can actually increase the coverage of telecommunications—I do have some landholders who have rung me and said, 'I am 80 years old. I am still running the place'—I know some ladies who are doing that—'We don't have a computer. We don't do business online.' They still do their business with a chequebook. There is still a lot of paperwork. There needs to be some way that this can be seen as a preparedness scheme rather than a reactive scheme. There needs to be some accountability mechanisms. Let us not put that pressure on them when they are busy from dawn to dusk trying to keep their stock alive and we are asking them to do all of this paperwork.

**Mr SORENSEN:** You mentioned that they want the original documents. Can you put that on the internet and flick it through or do they have to send the original documents through? What is the depreciation of water infrastructure these days? I have lost track of those sorts of things.

**Ms Leahy:** I am not an accountant so I am not going to answer the questions on depreciation.

**Mr SORENSEN:** Normally they have a three-year or five-year depreciation period. If you could get that depreciation a lot sooner at least it would come off your tax. That is for another day.

**Ms Leahy:** I am not an accountant, so I will not going to make any comment on that. That is probably a good question for AgForce or somebody like that. The claims that I have actually seen you cannot jump on the internet and lodge those. It would be a good question to the department. Is there some way that you can actually upload that information direct to their website so they have it there.

**CHAIR:** I am mindful of the time and mindful that you have to catch a plane. Thank you for assisting us today. Thank you for your submission.

**Ms Leahy:** I thank the committee for the opportunity.

**LEWIS, Ms Helen, Chair, AgForce Drought and Climate Risk Policy Committee, AgForce Queensland Industrial Union of Employers**

**MILLER, Dr Dale, Senior Policy Adviser, AgForce Queensland Industrial Union of Employers**

**CHAIR:** Thank you for coming today. Thank for submitting a detailed submission to our review. Would you care to make a brief opening statement?

**Dr Miller:** We would. I would like to thank the chair and the committee for the opportunity to present to you today. AgForce is the peak body that represents the broadacre sheep, grains and beef industries within the state. We are focused on supporting the viability, competitiveness and growth of those industries. That viability and competitiveness has been sorely tested by the drought conditions that have been going on in some areas since February 2011. They have provided quite significant pressures from a financial, social and environmental perspective on our members.

AgForce is not opposed to the reform of drought assistance and supports better risk management, preparedness for drought and the building of industry resilience. Helen will touch on that element in her comments. Preparedness and resilience takes time and favourable seasons to be achieved. The policy has to be practical, meet producers' needs and account for severe droughts that can overwhelm reasonable efforts to be prepared.

The government has committed to continuing existing assistance until 2018, and that is welcome. Any changes to policy must include a suitable transition period and time to recover from the current drought and build reserves going forward.

In terms of addressing the committee's review focus in relation to the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme, I will touch on a couple of key points. The subsidies provided, while not keeping pace with inflation since its introduction, are a help towards the total cost of managing drought. The eligibility criteria are complicated and continue to get more complicated as time goes on with the program. Further simplification and providing greater flexibility to include a wider range of activities selected by the applicant as part of an endorsed drought plan could enable available assistance to flow more freely. That could include proactively destocking, assistance for cropping operations, help towards education costs et cetera. Members have also raised since our submission has gone in consideration of enabling partial revocation of declarations in the future on a property-by-property basis and also looking at enabling heavier animals within the system to be replaced by a similar or smaller number of lighter animals so that the stocking pressure in that situation is not increased.

The emergency water infrastructure rebate has been very well received by our members and does go towards supporting long-term resilience, which is the positive outcome we are all trying to achieve. We have previously approached the government about the eligibility for long-term agistment enterprises and the inclusion of dam desilting, as was included by New South Wales and South Australia through the federal system, at a time when the available financial reserves of producers are reduced. The member for Warrego touched on those points before. AgForce has supported recent further funding of the rural financial counselling service, particularly given the financial and debt pressures currently being experienced, and increasing resilience which is associated with good business and risk management skills.

The terms of reference of the committee include an interest in revenue-neutral options that would make a difference. We have provided quite a range of suggestions within our submission, but in terms of trying to focus some attention on what might be done at no or minimal cost we have suggested: simplifying and adding flexibility to the DRAS program coverage; working with the federal government on the structuring of the \$2½ billion in drought loans nationally over the next 10 years, which will be delivered through QRAA; recovery support, such as an initial repayment holiday while stock numbers and cash flows are being restored; longer loan terms and interest costs in line with other natural disaster programs and the inclusion of future preparedness activities in that list; working with the federal government on lifting asset tests and the restriction on access to the farm household allowance and extending it to include farm workers so that we retain people in those affected communities; working with industry to create a cost of production or multiperil insurance marketplace; working to establish a commercial market for overabundant macropod species during drought and ongoing; improving access to existing health services, including reducing mental stress by refocussing education expenditure temporarily to drought affected areas—we note you have ICPA on the agenda and we would certainly support the ideas that they are putting forward around trying to provide people with some additional assistance in meeting education costs at a time when their incomes are severely reduced; and, finally, extending any unused funds towards recovery programs after drought.

I will hand over to Helen to talk a bit further about some thinking that AgForce is investigating.

**Ms Lewis:** Thank you very much for the opportunity. As the drought committee for AgForce we have been focusing on the bigger picture and looking at proactive processes so that we can avoid the catch-up that we tend to get caught up in and the reactive drought policy—suddenly it is a drought and let us suddenly do something about it. That is incorrect because drought does not happen overnight; it actually happens over time. We need to be much better at early monitoring and much better at preparing for that.

It is a continuum that people are faced with. In various places throughout the state at any one time people can be experiencing certain periods of dry and yet other places will not be. It is about flexibility. It is about being prepared and dealing with the root cause. It is also about the flexibility and availability of funding for a continuum. It has to be available all the time so that people can access it all the time. Everyone will be going through different phases all the time.

One of the big things we have been working on is the continuum and being proactive about it. We have come up with a business continuum. Rather than a drought policy, so to speak, it is a business continuum. It is acknowledging that we have four phases ultimately. We have a normal phase of business development, we have a drying phase, we have a dry phase and we have a recovery phase.

We have created a model. Within that we have three elements. Throughout the whole process and business continuum within a farming operation we have social, economic and environmental issues. Each of these lines on the continuum is social, economic and environmental issues. We want producers to be proactive and own their own drought. This is where it has come unstuck and caused a 'rescue me' mentality rather than an 'I'm in control' mentality. We need to restore that 'I'm in control' because I have actually taken some action to be as in control as I can. We cannot control the weather, but we can control what is happening to our soil and our grass. Let us manage what we can control.

In the normal phase we have social, economic and environmental issues that should be addressed and people can choose what they do. They tick the boxes. There might be 12 or 20 options within those areas that they can do to demonstrate that they have been doing what they should be doing in a normal season—debt reduction, infrastructure or whatever. As the member for Warrego said, maybe there is desilting that can be done or water infrastructure and other infrastructure developments that could be happening in the normal phase so that people are prepared.

The whole idea of this process is for individual producers to put their own hand up and say, 'I actually know I am drying now.' It could be, 'We have missed out on the summer rain. It is now the next summer and we still have not had that rain. I know I am definitely drying. I have gone through a dry winter. There may have been a few showers, but I am drying.' They need to say, 'I am drying and this is why I know. I have done soil monitoring.' This is where, for example, departmental people could verify that. They demonstrate what they have done in the normal phase to be the best they possibly can be and then they will be eligible for programs within the drying phase. Then in the drying phase there are certain social, economic and environmental issues that they need to do to be eligible for when they are in the dry phase. It continues through the continuum.

There is ownership of that choice—'I am now dry.' They own their situation and they own the decision they are making. They are not then told they are in drought. Some people were in drought six months earlier, but we were apparently not. This is where individual producers need to be able to put their hand up and verify that through their actions.

What the ultimate outcome will be, we believe, is people will be building resilience in their business and becoming more and more prepared because they are taking steps every time they move through the continuum. They might stop at the drying phase and it might go back to the normal phase. People can reverse out of it as well.

If you have gone through the whole continuum and you are in the recovery phase, you will be going through it again but your normal will be much longer because you have actually built some resilience in your business. Then you should come out of drought much earlier ultimately because you have capacity on your soil to actually make the most of the rain that you are getting. It is actually about trying to go into drought later and come out sooner.

We should see an actual improvement in terms of people's ability to manage drought. It is time we were proactive and actually started dealing with the root cause which is a lack of ground cover. We need to source that. Why do we have droughts? The committee really explored that notion of what causes a drought. Yes, it is a lack of rain, but where is it felt? It is actually the lack of effectiveness on the soil because of too much evaporation, which is caused by no ground cover.

There is a real essence of dealing with the root cause of the situation. As the program is quite old—it has not really been updated for some time—

**Dr Miller:** DRAS.

**Ms Lewis:** Yes, DRAS. We would like to see some updated understanding by the department and the actual policy to take into consideration some new management processes that actually exist like the fact that there are people who are plan grazing. Overstocking and overgrazing has always been based on too many animals. In actual fact, the result of overgrazing is because of too much time.

I know I am getting into some detail here. For the benefit of committee members who may not be on rural areas, I point out that the management practices have ultimately changed. Some people are set stocking which means that they have multiple herds over an area in two or three paddocks and they have different herds in each paddock.

Some people are plan grazing. That means that they have one mob and they are moving one mob throughout the whole property. With that one mob you are enabling a far higher recovery period of the grasses. You do not come to that first paddock you were in until the grass is fully recovered. What that is doing for the environment is of enormous benefit. It is cycling carbon. It is actually ensuring full recovery. It is getting roots down deep. It is doing a lot of good things, yet that is not considered.

If someone came out and had a look at someone who is plan grazing they would think that they are overstocked. You might see 500 head in one mob and they have dry standing feed or whatever. They might say they are overstocked because they have too many animals in one area. It is not that there are too many animals, it is about how long they are on that piece of ground. They will move onto fresh pasture. It is about understanding that.

Something that is becoming more and more relevant now is that people are into agistment businesses. People's business is agistment. They sell grass. They do not sell cattle; they sell grass. That is another area that AgForce has identified as an area that needs to be eligible. If they do not have grass then they do not have an income. They are in the same situation as an owner-operator with cattle. If they have sold their cattle and they have no income then the same situation applies.

It needs to be broader. This whole DRAS needs to be broader. It needs to be more flexible and there needs to be a deeper understanding of new management practices that are occurring and have been occurring for the past 10 or 15 years that the department simply has not kept up with. That is where we would like to see some effort put in in regard to this—some updating of understanding within the department and the definitions and the way in which management takes place out in the bush.

The methodology that we are trying to encourage and develop is about that root cause. It is also about ensuring that the ownership is on the producer to say that they own the decision. The committee believes that, ultimately, that will bring about a completely different attitude in the community about drought, because people will be completely buying into what they are doing about it.

Finally, in terms of the transition to the new policy, it has to be over time. We cannot just throw out what we have and bring in something completely new. We have to do a transition. However, if we can do that over six to 10 years and make that transition happen, then we believe that there will be a genuine improvement in the way in which we manage drought.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. By your comments, you are very passionate about this issue. You answered part of my question. You were very proactive with this program. Is it going to be hard for those cattle producers to transition, as you just talked about passionately, or are there certain elements who now rely on this sort of funding and help going into the future rather than being proactive themselves?

**Dr Miller:** We did survey our members two years ago and it indicated that about 93 per cent of them had made efforts to prepare through their programs in quite a range of things—improving waters, managing grazing, building financial reserves. So it is not that producers are not preparing; it is about ensuring that the framework of policy acknowledges that and can incorporate those sorts of efforts into the sorts of assistance that government is also looking to provide so that, ultimately, we do not have a situation where we hit a dry period, there is a big demand on the government's budget. It is trying to move the existing amount of funding forward and into the recovery period so that we can get some better outcomes.



**Ms Lewis:** I think that just highlights the need for that flexibility and availability all the time. Even the fact of how do we determine what a drought is—when is a drought a drought? That process itself is a bit archaic in the sense that you had Boulia in drought but, because their rain gauge was not registered, they were not apparently in drought. Yet they were for three months prior recognised as being in drought. That is unacceptable. If you had individual producers being able to put up their hand and engage in this process, they would have been coming to you three or four months earlier, and some of the more proactive ones would have been coming even before that.

So you have this much more even process of people accessing it when required rather than this urgency, because they are desperate. It is much better to make decisions when you are in a little bit of control and you can foresee what is happening in your business and you can make decisions a little bit of ahead of time. There is not so much panic; you can think clearly and you do not have depression. All of these things are of benefit. Just being more proactive in regard to having availability all the time enables that to happen, but at the moment there is no capacity for that to happen.

**Dr Miller:** Could I just add to that? I think the role of the local drought committees in the process is quite important, because they are on the ground. They quite often have businesses similarly affected. They understand the local landscape and management that is appropriate for those areas, so having that local knowledge and experience and feeding that into engagement with the department and then through to the government in terms of drought policy and assistance is pretty important and goes to what Helen was saying.

**CHAIR:** Good answer. Thank you.

**Mr BENNETT:** Good morning. I am in a sugar cane area but I know that the grazing best management practice exists. Is that only in reef catchments, though, that the BMPs exist? I was wondering with the modules that exist under the BMP whether drought preparedness should be part of best management practice as opposed to sitting somewhere else? The way that you have described it to me tells me that it should be happening. Could you comment on whether what you are proposing should be included under best management practice for grazing areas?

**Ms Lewis:** I think elements of best management practice include some of this thinking and some of that policy preparedness and asking, 'What do you do in drought?' and those sorts of things. They are making people think about that. It is not just in the reef catchments; it is everywhere. There is other training that also includes those sorts of things as well. There is various training out there for land management, pastoral and cropping.

Unfortunately, we do not have Farmbis. We do not have those things that make training capacity. I think there has been a marked reduction in people accessing training because it is price prohibitive, when they probably need it the most. So to reinstate some sort of farming training package would be of great value, I think, and also really assist with that preparedness.

**Mr BENNETT:** But if we had a voluntary take-up of BMPs, I am wondering about the eligibility criteria for when they make an application. It seems to have a nice fit to me. At least they are demonstrating best management practice when you want to make those applications.

**Ms Lewis:** That would be included in what we would consider a normal activity and also a drying activity. Training is one of the critical things that we put into the continuum as an activity that you do continuously. It is like mental health: there is a continuum right the way through. Training and access to new information are ultimately boxes they can tick at every stage.

**Mr SORENSEN:** How do you manage the crisis situation when they stop the live cattle export? All of those cattle came down to Roma. How did you manage that type of situation?

**Dr Miller:** Ideally, avoid putting that situation in place in the first instance.

**Ms Lewis:** I honestly think there are some learnings that have come from that. I think there are bigger industry policies at play in regard to Northern Australia and processing facilities and better access to alternative markets just in case—a little bit of risk management, because all of the eggs were in one basket. I think that is also an individual producer and operation learning as well. They have now identified that they have to make sure that they have plan B. We do not know what other countries are going to do tomorrow or their attitude towards us, or whatever.

I think that is a bigger thing. You are absolutely correct. I think that has added to this particular dry period. I know that there has been a lot of Alice Springs cattle coming to Queensland as well and northern cattle. It is everywhere. Queensland has borne the brunt of that. However, that has also highlighted to industry the need for alternative marketing.

**Mr KATTER:** I have two questions. Firstly, there are two tiers to drought concession. One of them is the main one. It is the pillar of the DRAS scheme—the biggest amount of money goes into drought concession loans. The Mount Isa electorate covers a third of Queensland—570,000 square kilometres. It is arguably one of the worst hit places. Out of 265 applications, two of them for that area were approved, which to me is strong evidence of a failed policy, for that region at least. I honestly do not have a clear answer for why it is ineffective. I have some ideas about why it is ineffective, but have you a clear picture of why it was taken up so much in areas like the Southern Downs region but not up in the Mount Isa region?

**Dr Miller:** We had figures provided by QRAA last year—they are not up to date—but that indicated quite a significant geographical difference in the uptake of those loans. For the areas in the north, there were quite a number of shires that did not have any successful applicants. I think around Roma there was quite a good success rate. It did point to some structural issue with the way the loans were set up, which meant that it was not evenly provided across the state.

It is a federal program. There is potentially \$1 million within the drought concessional loans and potentially \$1 million within the drought recovery loan component. Under the concessional loan element, that \$1 million may or may not be sufficient to deal with the issues in some of those larger pastoral areas and the size of operations that are occurring there. I think that has been a factor towards it. Some of the viability assessment might also have acted against individual producers going through successfully in terms of the financial implications of some decisions, like live export suspensions. People are not in a good circumstance and if the period of assessment around viability is too short, that will count against them. We have encouraged the government to look at some of those elements.

There could also potentially be differences between banks in terms of their support or otherwise for encouraging their clients to go down that pathway as well. That comes down to region by region, manager by manager. Certainly, at head office they are quite supportive of the program, but that may not necessarily translate effectively all the way through to the local branch manager.

I think there is a range of reasons potentially. I do not have a clear answer as to what might be behind it, but I think there are a few factors. We are certainly engaging with the federal government around how they structure that program and that, as they look to roll out this next series of loans from the middle of this year, they engage strongly with the banks, they engage strongly with primary producers, they look at settings around what is included, for example, the terms of the loan and what sort of interest differential is there. Some people might see a saving of \$20,000 or \$30,000 as not sufficient to risk the relationship that they have currently with their bank.

**Mr KATTER:** That is an excellent answer. That is my understanding of things. I appreciate that. I agree that the water take-up is a much smaller part of the package, but it seems to be one of the most well received in terms of its effectiveness. I think that is great, because it builds productivity and improves the efficiency of the operation. I am just interested to see if this has come on to your radar with the water scheme so well regarded. There is this great impetus for renewable energy. Solar has such a great application in rural areas. Sixty per cent of these pastoral activities are off the grid. They are not connected to the grid. I am told that, in relation to the solar units, a grazier in my area said, 'Once I replace it with a solar one, I do not need to fill up the diesel and check the oil; I hardly even slow down the Toyota to go down to it, because it never breaks down. It keeps working. I do not have to fill up with diesel. They are brilliant.' Imagine the cost saving on that and multiply it over 20 years for a \$10,000 or \$15,000 investment in your bores and your waters. I just flag that. Has that come on your radar? I think there are some terrific opportunities there to bolt that on to the water subsidy scheme.

**Dr Miller:** Not specifically in relation to the emergency water infrastructure rebate. I cannot say that that has been raised with me. I agree: I think water and energy is pretty intrinsically linked. Cane was mentioned before. A whole raft of primary-producing enterprises are really dependent on access to affordable energy to be able to manage irrigation schemes and the use of water and broadacre agriculture is no different.

In touching on that, the issue around isolation and access to energy is also core at the broader level. We would certainly be encouraging the government to look at incorporating that sort of technology into it and also taking that forward through to maybe further investments in communications technology around telemetry and the capacity to have remote monitoring. So he does not even need to drive his Toyota past the bore, because he can monitor it from the homestead or wherever else they are working.

**CHAIR:** I am just mindful of time. Thank you very much for your time today. There were some very good answers there and a good opening statement, too. Thank you very much for your time.

**Dr Miller:** I thank the committee for the opportunity and I am more than happy to take further questions after the session.

**HENRY, Mr Ross, Project Manager, Natural Disasters, Queensland Farmers' Federation**

**PERKINS, Mr Peter, Project Officer, Education and Training, Queensland Farmers' Federation**

**CHAIR:** Good morning, gentlemen. Would one or both of you like to make an opening statement? Just be mindful of the word 'brief' if we can.

**Mr Perkins:** Thank you very much. We appreciate the opportunity. As you are aware, we have made a written submission. We are here today literally to answer any questions. We really have nothing more to say other than it is possibly rare, but we are fully supportive of AgForce's position on DRAS. We think, in the absence of anything else, DRAS is a necessary instrument of government for Queensland conditions. Given that we have not really got on the table any alternative policy, we think it would be a miscarriage of justice really to withdraw DRAS from the system. It is necessary and we want the committee to be clear that we are at one on this. I could draw attention to some quotes through our submission and AgForce's submission, but it is on the public record already and I think that is sufficient. That is why we are here today.

**CHAIR:** Wonderful.

**Mrs GILBERT:** I was very interested in what the last witnesses were talking about in terms of the structure of the whole program. If I was understanding it correctly, it should be something that is looked at. The big circle chart—I do not know whether you have seen it before—was quite interesting with planning so that it is something that is continual. Do you support that type of view—that the structure needs to start? The spending is not happening and the money is rolling out during drought time. There should be more programs during the good times. As Ms Leahy said, farmers do not want more debt during drought, because that is quite a frightening time. They do not know when the drought is going to end. Do you believe that we need to look at the whole structure of the funding that is there and have it rolled out in a different way?

**Mr Henry:** Yes, essentially we do. I think there is a pretty good evidence to suggest that resilience and preplanning is a good precursor for a natural disaster or drought in any event, with the idea being that you invest before and get people ready. That is definitely something that we strongly support. If through this process there can be a policy change that really sets up that preparedness aspect of drought recovery, we would definitely support that in line with what AgForce has put forward.

**Mrs GILBERT:** If it were restructured, do you see that the same amount of money that is in the program would be needed but just rolled out differently, or do you see that it needs a top-up as well?

**Mr Henry:** Preparedness and resilience works to a certain extent and we definitely think there needs to be more investment in that. Whether that can account for severe drought or a severe dry period and cover everything that is needed, especially with animal health issues and those kind of community based things that the community needs to continue to roll out, we probably cannot say exactly. The resilience works to a certain point but then a natural disaster or a drought can definitely take it further than any resilience that can be prebuilt into a system, so it is really hard to say.

**CHAIR:** In your view, is the drought relief assistance scheme well designed and meeting the needs of drought affected landholders, farmers and communities? What do you think the scheme's strength and/or weaknesses are? Is it a good scheme at the moment? Is it working or does it really need—

**Mr Henry:** In general I would say yes. I definitely think there is an element where preparedness and resilience can be improved. For us in the intensive agricultural industry, there are definitely things—and the member for Mount Isa mentioned them before—like electricity costs associated with irrigation. That is definitely a concern for our farmers, considering that the vast majority of them are irrigators. In times of drought, obviously, you irrigate more, the prices go up and with prices so expensive at the moment that creates an extra pressure. In general, yes, we think the drought assistance system is good for Queensland. It suits Queensland conditions.

We would also like to mention that we think it is a bit of an early indicator and precursor to the national system. It comes into effect generally before that, which is probably suited to Queensland conditions. It is important for Queensland.

**CHAIR:** Is the relationship between the federal funding and the state easy to work through with your people?

**Mr Perkins:** I would love to be able to say that it is and, I think to be honest, the member for Mount Isa's questions really relate to part of the problem. We have a state system that is not aligned exactly with the federal system. When you get out into the farmland, the farmers get confused. We have to live with it. It is what it is. It is two levels of government. All I can say is that in our submission we made it very clear that we want the Queensland policies to align with the national policies. DRAS does insofar as it is the early kick-in, but I think we have made it very clear here today that it really should be more than just freight subsidies; it should be preparedness. We want to work with the department to make sure that more effort goes into the preparedness side than the reactionary side.

In terms of the dollars for budgeting, there is not much that we can say about that from a government point of view, because it is demand driven. The amount of money that the government spends on DRAS is really how many people line up with receipts to claim. That will be the same with infrastructure. As far as I read the regulations, that is how it would work. It could become a bottomless pit, but I do not think so, because the farming community is all about the continuity issue that you were asking about before. Most farmers are in business to stay in business. They work hard to make sure that they deal with disruptions. We just want to help them.

**Mr BENNETT:** Good morning and thanks for your time. It is an exciting development that we are talking about—preparedness and resilience. I also notice in your submission you talk about mitigation. Without making it too longwinded, could you give practical examples of those areas for the committee's benefit? They are wonderful words, but maybe you could give us some practical examples where you would see better preparedness and resilience and, of course, your emphasis on mitigation as well?

**Mr Perkins:** The short answer would be that we are trying to roll out best management practice modules across all industries. We have the support of AgForce in this. We are at one on it. It is going to take time, but that whole-farm approach to whole-farm planning then becomes specific to each individual production system. It seems to be a robust model that works. That is the methodology that we would be using for mitigation.

I should remind the committee, though, that we are coming up to the 10th anniversary of Cyclone Larry. It is quite instructive to remember that we recovered from Cyclone Larry quite remarkably quickly. There is in-built resilience within the system, but we just need to have more investment in making sure that it is across the whole state.

**Mr BENNETT:** For those members of the committee who might not understand the BMPs, there are five modules in the grazing best management practice?

**Mr Perkins:** Yes, and in some others there are eight. It depends on the production system. The scientists tell us that the five and the eight could easily be expanded to 10 and 12.

**Mr BENNETT:** Then they would not be voluntary and they would not do it, probably?

**Mr Perkins:** They are businessmen. I am not so sure about that. If there is money in it, they will do it.

**Mr BENNETT:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** The best management practice, what would be the percentages of farmers—

**Mr BENNETT:** Eighty per cent?

**Mr Perkins:** It would probably be that a quarter by now would have an element of a BMP underway. It varies across industries. AgForce has just told us recently that they have just gone past 1,000. In the cane industry, I think they have just gone past 500. In the dairy industry, it is higher—more like 50 per cent or above.

**Mr Henry:** And cotton, which is probably the precursor—I think they started in the early 1990s—they are probably leading the way with the amount of industry involvement.

**CHAIR:** So it is just a program—

**Mr BENNETT:** Modules.

**CHAIR:**—that you develop and people come on board.

**Mr BENNETT:** It could be workplace health and safety.

**Mr Henry:** Yes, with water management, grazing management.

**CHAIR:** Different modules and it is led by—

**Mr Henry:** Industry.

**Mr Perkins:** It is actually led by science, to be honest. It is all driven by what the scientists tell us. The RD&E industry is heavily engaged in it and then you roll it out to a practical—

**Mr BENNETT:** It was voluntary. With the change of government you guys have had more of an enforcement to try to fast-track some of the uptake.

**Mr Perkins:** It is very voluntary, but because it is good people do line up to do it.

**CHAIR:** How do you know who is doing it and who is not? Is there a system in place?

**Mr BENNETT:** Extension officers exist within the peak bodies.

**Mr Henry:** Yes, industry generally has a good database of what is going down in those areas. That database is starting to be used in the delivery of projects so that you can highlight areas that need improvement and so forth. You can pinpoint activity.

**CHAIR:** Should the scheme provide money up-front? Has that been raised with QFF?

**Mr BENNETT:** That came out of Tambo from that community meeting out there. There were a lot of people talking to us about trying to get better access to the money as opposed to doing the work and getting the receipt and then going cap in hand. I think that is where that came from.

**Mr Henry:** From the feedback that we have had from our members at the moment, I cannot say that I have heard that. You would have to talk to, I think, specific industry members to get that kind of on-the-ground responses, but, from my point of view, it is unknown to me at the moment.

**Mr Perkins:** In this day and age, virtually every farmer has GST, has to pay his BAS. Despite the reality, some people still do not have computers. The bottom line is that what people are asking for is probably stretching the envelope a bit. If you are going to have a preparedness program and invest in the long-term productivity of your farm, you should spend the money and then ask for a rebate. But there would be circumstances—and I have seen one or two on the website—where people, for instance, are using their own machinery in an ongoing way. I do not see why you cannot pro rata a cost. It would then be tested against others. There is plenty of benchmark evidence around. We all know what the cost of a fence is. We all know what it costs to put a bulldozer in to clean up a dam. There is no secret. It is a pretty transparent market. That comes back to flexibility within the department, to be honest.

**CHAIR:** I guess the issue would be that, if you give the money up-front, what happens if you pull up short, or what happens if you pull up over?

**Mr Perkins:** We had that with Cyclone Larry. There was a situation where people were getting their grants up-front and then there was a bit of a problem with how you prove that they actually did spend it. Yes, we live in a less than perfect world.

**CHAIR:** Very good. As there are no more questions, thank you very much for your time today and putting in your submission and answering questions very thoroughly.

**Mr Perkins:** Thank you, Mr Chair.

**MARTIN, Mrs Louise, Vice President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc.**

**OSTWALD, Mrs Kelly, Member, ICPA State Council, Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc.**

**CHAIR:** Welcome, ladies. I understand, Louise, that many of our members have met you before in Tambo. Thank you for travelling down to Brisbane for this hearing. Would you care to make a brief opening statement?

**Mrs Martin:** Sure. For those who are not too sure who the ICPA is, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association advocates for equitable access to quality educational opportunities for children in rural and remote areas. We represent 46 branches comprising over 1,200 families throughout rural Queensland. We are a voluntary parent organisation and we are the only community based parent group with interests in all sectors and levels of education: state, independent, church or boarding schools; early education and care through to tertiary education and all methods used to facilitate access to that education.

We thank you for the opportunity to make our submission to this task force. We believe that the financial disadvantages faced by rural and remote families attempting to educate their children has a significant financial impact on community sustainability, especially in times of drought.

**CHAIR:** In your submission you mention that six shires of the state have no schooling beyond year 6 other than distance education and a further three shires have no schooling beyond year 10.

**Mrs Martin:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Can you please identify for the committee which shires and how many families we are talking about?

**Mrs Martin:** I know which shires they are, but exactly how many families I could not answer. There are eight shires: Diamantina, Croydon, Barcoo, Bulloo, Burke, Boulia, McKinlay, Etheridge, and the ones with just P to 10 are Quilpie, Richmond and Carpentaria. All those areas are drought declared at the moment.

**Mr BENNETT:** Over a number of years we have had conversations about this very serious issue. For the benefit of the committee, can we talk about other funding sources that might be available to rural families, particularly around educational provision?

**Mrs Martin:** Currently we have the Living Away from Home Allowance, which is a state based tuition allowance, and there is the federal allowance, which is the AIC, Assistance for Isolated Children. For going away from home, the average boarding cost is \$17,836. Boarding and tuition are all in the one package, so to make it clear you have to combine them. The AIC federal funding is \$8,015, which is a shortfall of \$9,821 for boarding fees. The average tuition is \$11,793, of which the Living Away from Home Allowance, the state based allowance, is \$5,217, so there is a shortfall of \$6,576. Basically, parents are out of pocket per child \$16,000-plus. That is not including travel, uniforms, any extra curricula, text books, excursions, music, et cetera. That is just the basic education costs. I guess our point is that, because of the vagaries of our seasons, for some farmers there is no income and to find that extra cash per child is significant.

**Mr BENNETT:** Has there been any increase in those allowances?

**Mrs Martin:** The Living Away from Home Allowance has had an increase of 6.51 per cent, and we appreciate the increase.

**Mr BENNETT:** When was that, Louise?

**Mrs Martin:** From this state government, starting in January this year, we received a five per cent increase, which is on top of the seven per cent increase from the previous government the previous year. While we appreciate that, there is still a significant shortfall. We are not asking for this forever. It is just to tide people over.

**Mr BENNETT:** We are just trying to establish things for committee members that might not have met you in Tambo. I have heard those tragic figures before.

**Mrs Martin:** It is not tragic; it is just a fact.

**Mr BENNETT:** Droughts are tragic.

**Mrs Martin:** The DRAS is great, but those families who live in town and are contractors are also reliant on income from farms. They still have to educate their children, too. They are leaving. The rural population has decreased 60 per cent in the past 25 years. My mother was very involved with the isolated children group. She has a sheet of paper from 1977 saying that there was 6,000 recipients of Assistance for Isolated Children and now there is 1,300, roughly.

**Mr BENNETT:** Turning to other jurisdictions such as New South Wales and South Australia, have we ever looked at a comparison with what Queensland students are receiving, compared to other jurisdictions?

**Mrs Martin:** I cannot answer that specifically.

**Mr BENNETT:** I am just curious about benchmarking.

**Mrs Martin:** All their programs are very different, I believe. The only thing that is the same across the board is the AIC, the Assistance for Isolated Children, and each state is very variable in their state based allowance. I cannot answer that. I would have to get back to you on what their programs are.

**Mr BENNETT:** We can probably look at that as part of our investigations. Thank you, Louise.

**CHAIR:** Do you have any understanding of the numbers of kids and the time frames, when it gets too much for the parents and they just drop out of school? My dad left school when he was 14, because he was on a farm as well and his parents said, 'There's no more school for you. You're going to come and work here.'

**Mrs Martin:** I do not have statistics on that. The retention rate in the senior years is much higher these days, because families realise that you cannot get on in life without a senior education. In our small communities, the families have a vested interest in their children's education, but once they get to the end of school availability they just leave. For example, in Tambo we lost a family of four this year because their eldest child had finished year 10 and that is as far as Tambo school goes. They have gone and they will never be back.

**Mrs GILBERT:** Education is very important to children. Now that the world is changing and even within schools there are opportunities for different types of delivery of lessons, would families want to keep their children at home longer if there was a better setup with the School of the Air? Now that you can do that face to face across the internet in places where there is the internet—

**Mrs Martin:** Therein lies a major problem. Our technology is terrible.

**Mrs GILBERT:** So if the technology was improved, would families keep their children at home?

**Mrs Martin:** I think that would be a more viable option, but at the moment it is not really an option. It is not the first choice. For parents, their children's education is paramount. At the moment, distance education in the senior years, especially with poor internet, is just not adequate.

**Mrs GILBERT:** So it is not the program; it is the technology?

**Mrs Martin:** It is not the program; it is the ability to accept the program that is the problem. Maybe things will change with the new Sky Muster satellite. We all remain sceptical, but hopefully it will solve many problems. Of course, if you cannot afford it—you want the best educational outcomes for your children, but sitting at home doing distance ed. on their own is still not as great as being in a mainstream school with contemporaries. I realise that DRAS is an unusual avenue to come down, but we have found no other avenue to help education. Families pay for education in times of drought.

**Mr SORENSEN:** Can you give us an idea of the assistance compared to other states?

**Mrs Martin:** I cannot, at the moment. I would have to get back to you on that. I could find that out and get back to you.

**CHAIR:** We will investigate that through our committee. You do not have to worry about that one, but if you do come across any information, by all means share it with the secretariat.

**Mrs Martin:** I absolutely will do.

**Mr KATTER:** I am sorry that I missed the presentation. I will lead with a statement and, Louise, you may want to respond. I get the most number of distressed phone calls, more than on any other issue, from mothers under the pressures of drought talking about education issues. That is probably the largest volume of calls from distressed people to my office that I have engaged with. Their comments are, 'We chose the lifestyle and we are willing to tough it out and not pay ourselves a wage for a year or two, but we want our children to have the opportunity to be able to get out of this if they can.' That is the source of their distress, because they say, 'We can't afford to keep them at school and we are bringing them home,' which is a deep concern at the core of what you are trying to represent. To turn that into a question, the drought may be alleviated. We have had some rain and the word 'drought' may fall out of the equation, but there is still hardship or rural crisis.

**Mrs Martin:** That is right.



**Mr KATTER:** Is that addressed in your dialogue with the government? Do you think that is effectively acknowledged here with your dealings, that beyond the drought itself there will still be hardship and the same issues will still be there?

**Mrs Martin:** That is right, through the recovery period until people start making money again. Mothers are leaving the farm to move to town so that their kids can go to a state school and they are leaving the fathers at home on their own. Mental health issues continue to increase. Even if distance ed. was an option, if you are the mother and the teacher and you are doing everything else, there are only so many hours in a day that you can be doing absolutely everything. That has a huge impact on families.

**Mrs GILBERT:** I was only raising distance ed. because I know that it was very difficult for parents when, back in the old days, you just got the packages.

**Mrs Martin:** That is what I did when I was a kid.

**Mrs GILBERT:** You had to work through them. It would drive you nuts. If the technology was there students could have the normal lesson that they would expect to have in a classroom, such as Education Queensland has tried to roll out in small schools with language lessons, for instance, and that type of thing. I understand what you are saying: the technology is not there.

**Mrs Martin:** There is huge potential there and whenever we do get great technology, I think it will be embraced.

**Mrs GILBERT:** Because that would give families choice, then.

**Mrs Martin:** Yes. At the moment it is not really a viable option.

**Mr PEARCE:** I am sorry I have not been here all the time. The pathway for subsidies or fee assistance; is that easy?

**Mrs Martin:** Not really.

**Mr PEARCE:** Can we make it better?

**Mrs Martin:** Actually, currently we are working with DEP to streamline and make clearer the flowchart of how you can access LAFHA, the Living Away from Home Allowance. They have done a lot of work on that and it is looking really promising. They have given it to me to look at. I can understand it, so if I can understand it pretty much everyone else should be able to, too.

**Mr PEARCE:** That is important.

**Mrs Martin:** I have never seen a flowchart before, so I think that is a really great development. We really appreciate that.

**Mr PEARCE:** You are really happy with that; that is great. Children with special needs: can you tell us about the issues there?

**Mrs Martin:** It is a growing concern. We get more and more families with concerns about special needs. That is not my particular area. We have been working with the Department of Health to try to get face-to-face sessions, as you were saying, Julieanne, with speechies and those sorts of things. It is a big problem.

We have been trying to get more leniency with the Living Away from Home Allowance. Even if you have access to a mainstream school, if you have a child with special needs or a child who is gifted or talented or an exceptional athlete there should be an avenue for you to access the Living Away from Home Allowance so they can go away to school to better their education.

**Mr PEARCE:** You mentioned mental health a few minutes ago. This is one of the issues that I like to focus on. I know that there are a lot of people in rural Queensland taking their lives, whether they are mine workers or farm workers. Do you feel as though your access to services is sufficient enough? Do you have any ideas how services could be provided differently?

**Mrs Martin:** I cannot really answer that.

**CHAIR:** You do not have to answer it.

**Mr BENNETT:** In preparing our committee report our scope is the DRAS and its suitability. Have you articulated what you would like the committee to consider in drafting a report to government from the isolated schools perspective?

**Mrs Martin:** There is always the ideal. We would like—

**Mr BENNETT:** Has that been articulated in your submission?

**Mrs Martin:** No, not in our submission.

**Mr BENNETT:** We will identify problems with the DRAS and the effectiveness of the DRAS in preparing our report. I would encourage you to think about helping the committee in terms of drafting our report—it may or may not include these issues unless we hear what your position is. Is that all right?

**Mrs Martin:** Yes.

**CHAIR:** Is that a question on notice?

**Mr BENNETT:** I am just giving Louise an option to consider helping the committee. We have to make recommendations in our report.

**Mrs Martin:** We need to—

**Mr BENNETT:** If you would like to.

**Mrs Martin:**—tell you what we want or how we would like it to happen?

**Mr BENNETT:** To cut to the chase, yes.

**Mrs Martin:** Right here, right now?

**Mr BENNETT:** Yes, then it is on the public record.

**Mrs Martin:** For the period of the drought and for the recovery period afterwards we would ideally like to see the shortfall in the Living Away from Home Allowance paid directly to schools for existing recipients of the Living Away from Home Allowance. You would not want to go outside that sphere otherwise it could get too complicated. That is what we would ideally like.

**Mr BENNETT:** So while there is a drought declaration we would pick up that shortfall?

**Mrs Martin:** Yes. DRAS is traditionally for people on the land with water, freight et cetera. We would like to see that expanded to include families in town who are equally impacted.

**CHAIR:** Do the boarding schools that these children go to give any sort of subsidies or lower rates for regional children coming from long distances?

**Mrs Martin:** They still have to cover their costs. Some of them have been pretty good about doing payment plans and that sort of thing. They raise their fees by the bare minimum. You cannot expect them to be doing that willy-nilly either. They are running their own business and have to remain viable as well.

**CHAIR:** I guess that is on the back of the fact that the government cannot just go handing things out willy-nilly either?

**Mrs Martin:** I realise that, but if you do not you will end up with little ghetto communities out west with no vision and invigoration because whoever is left is not well educated. Anyone who wanted to educate their kids will have left. You are left with the unemployed and no employees. That is the option.

**CHAIR:** I guess with the way technology is moving in your communities, as well as in our regional communities, we need these kids to have the latest ideas and technology for tracking cattle and for filling out forms.

**Mrs Martin:** There are a lot of innovative young people out there who are hampered by poor technology. They are wanting to embrace futuristic innovation, but they are really hamstrung.

**CHAIR:** There being no further questions, I thank you very much for coming to Brisbane and making the effort to talk to us.

**Mrs Martin:** Thank you for listening to us.

**CHAIR:** Trust me, you did very well.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.49 am to 11.15 am**

**MAGIN, Mr Matthew, Chief Executive Officer, Burdekin Shire Council, via teleconference**

**CHAIR:** Good morning, Matthew. My name is Glenn Butcher, I am the chairman of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. With me here on the committee this morning I have Ted Sorensen, member for Hervey Bay; Julieanne Gilbert, member for Mackay; and Jim Pearce, member for Mirani. Hansard will be recording the conversation this morning.

**Mr Magin:** Good morning everybody.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make a brief opening statement for us this morning?

**Mr Magin:** Yes. Firstly, thank you, on behalf of Burdekin Shire Council and the Burdekin community, for the opportunity to appear before the committee. The council has made a submission and also that submission has gone through the LGAQ state conference late last year. We are trying to progress this as much as we can for the benefit of our drought affected community.

**CHAIR:** I note that the Burdekin Shire Council is not in drought, but we would still like to explore with you the point you made in your submission about direct payments to local authorities to cover annual property rates for landowners. I refer in particular to funding programs and a need for consideration in supporting the direct payment to local authorities for annual property rates on lands under drought recognition. Can you please explain to the committee what happens when landowners stop paying rates and how the loss of rates revenue impacts on the services they provide? Thirdly, what steps do councils take to recover unpaid rates?

**Mr Magin:** Just so you are aware, Burdekin Shire Council was drought declared. It has been drought declared now. Where we were encouraging individual farmers to apply for individual drought relief arrangements, the whole shire was covered under a drought declaration. In terms of council, obviously councils have a responsibility to ratepayers to ensure the financial sustainability of the local authority, and part of that is obviously to collect rates as levied from all landholders within our boundaries. We take that responsibility very seriously and we pursue outstanding rates as any other authority does. We try to enter into payment arrangements with drought affected property owners and, indeed, any landholder and after a defined period of time we then go through the normal process of trying to secure some sort of payment arrangement with those landholders. If that cannot be effected then we go through the process of selling the property for unpaid rates.

**CHAIR:** Are there many defaulters in your local council that you are aware of?

**Mr Magin:** No. We are quite fortunate in that regard. The Burdekin, as you would be aware, has been a very resilient area for many years and has had access to irrigation water so farmers have been able to sell a crop and meet their commitments. However, late last year and earlier this year the water resources in the area were quite challenged and farmers were certainly heavily impacted, especially the grazing sector.

**CHAIR:** You have never had to sell any property previously?

**Mr Magin:** Yes, we have.

**CHAIR:** Why in particular do you advocate direct payment to local authorities?

**Mr Magin:** Obviously there are a number of reasons. Primarily, direct payment to the council therefore then keeps the money in the local area and it allows us to continue to provide and maintain services to affected landholders and also the broader community. Also, it then takes the pressure off the farmers having to meet that commitment of finding rates and it frees them up to use their resources for other things such as fertiliser, fodder, tanking in water—a whole range of things. Of course, when they are purchasing in the local community that helps to maintain security and employment within the local community because those services are normally provided through local suppliers.

**Mr SORENSEN:** Matthew, you sound as though you have had experience in other western councils. When I was a young kid trotting around, the government would support projects within the councils to keep the people who live in the townships employed during the drought and to keep them in those places. Do you think there is any benefit in those sorts of schemes as well?

**Mr Magin:** I think there is always merit in supporting councils to provide services and projects in their local communities because councils have a very strong vested interest in their local communities about maintaining levels of service, maintaining levels of community livability, if you like, and those things get lost on government.

**Mr PEARCE:** When you ask for government to pay direct payments to local authorities, isn't that a bit tough on the landowner because they would be dependent on that money as well? What you are virtually suggesting is that you take all of the drought relief or any payments that they are getting. It is meant to help them and you are suggesting that it might go to local government.

**Mr Magin:** Nowhere in our submission does it say we expect that we would get all their funding. We are just saying it is another component that could be considered—that under drought relief arrangements funding of rates could go to the local authority. We are not suggesting that that would be the be-all and end-all.

**Mr PEARCE:** I am only a sit-in this morning so I have not had the opportunity to read your submission, but that is fair enough. How many ratepayers do you have?

**Mr Magin:** That is one I had not prepared for. Can I take that on notice and come back to you?

**Mr PEARCE:** You can. I just want to get a little bit of an understanding of what percentage of those ratepayers are struggling and need help.

**Mr Magin:** Sure. I will provide that to Robert Hansen and he can pass it on to the committee.

**CHAIR:** You say you are drought declared now. Are you aware of any people using the DRAS in your electorate?

**Mr Magin:** None have certainly acknowledged that to council at this point.

**CHAIR:** Have you been under drought before and had to utilise this system in your electorate?

**Mr Magin:** Certainly not in the Burdekin. We have not been in this situation before at all. Council introduced water restrictions late last year and that was the first time in 30-odd years.

**Mr PEARCE:** Do you have a drought support worker in your area?

**Mr Magin:** No, we do not.

**Mr PEARCE:** Have you ever had one?

**Mr Magin:** No, because there has not been a need up to this point.

**Mr PEARCE:** You have not actually attempted to get one on board?

**Mr Magin:** No. We would access it through Townsville, if there is one attached to the department there.

**Mr PEARCE:** They certainly play a good role in areas such as yours.

**Mr Magin:** I totally agree.

**Mr PEARCE:** As you know, landowners, when having discussions about their finances, want to be confident with the person they are dealing with.

**Mr Magin:** Absolutely, and not over a website or a phone—face to face.

**Mr PEARCE:** When they come into the area it takes about five or six weeks before people actually feel comfortable with them. That gets around through word-of-mouth—landowners talking to one another about the type of person they are dealing with. I think that is important as well.

**Mr Magin:** Yes, 100 per cent right.

**CHAIR:** There being no further questions, we thank you very much for your time and thank you for taking our questions. We will see you at another stage maybe down the track.

**Mr Magin:** Thank you to the committee for the opportunity.

**CRICHTON, Mrs Jenny, Private capacity, via teleconference**

**CRICHTON, Mr Robert, Private capacity, via teleconference**

**CHAIR:** Good morning, Robert. My name is Glenn Butcher. I am the chair of the committee. I have with me today Mr Ted Sorensen, the member for Hervey Bay; Ms Julieanne Gilbert, the member for Mackay; and also Mr Jim Pearce, the member for Mirani. Can I get you to make a brief opening statement?

**Mr Crichton:** Firstly, I welcome the opportunity to address the review committee, especially the new members and the committee as a whole who are reviewing DRAS, especially the emergency water infrastructure rebate. I understand also that AgForce is making a submission and is covering the same topic in its submission.

**CHAIR:** We heard from them this morning.

**Mr Crichton:** We supported our submission with seven points which covered fairly clearly the situation we are in in relation to EWIR. The current EWIR scheme is available to landholders with eligibility governed by DRAS eligibility conditions and these eligibility criteria excluded agistment operations. We have operated an agistment operation for nearly 15 years now, in that time having no livestock of our own on the property at all. Our income over that whole period has been 100 per cent from agistment earnings. Currently we have breeders on the property which have been here for about five years. I also emphasise that over that period of time all the livestock on the property have been breeding livestock cattle.

The animal welfare needs came up when we had a water problem in 2014 when eight or 12 dams were completely dry, leaving large areas of the property beyond a reasonable distance for animals to access water. One of the main criteria for eligibility for EWIR is that there is an animal welfare need. As operators of a long-term agistment business providing feed and water for animals permanently domiciled on the property, we feel that we have a case to put before the committee reviewing EWIR and DRAS eligibility.

Under these long-term agistment arrangements where we have a drought declared property we have total control of livestock rates and movements thereby, ensuring sustainable resource management. In other words, we do not eat out all the grass, find that we have a shortage of feed and come running for help. Current livestock numbers are around 300. We would normally be expecting to run 750 to 800 were we having a normal season.

Under agistment arrangements we are property owners and responsible for providing sufficient feed and quality water to agisted cattle. We are also responsible for maintaining water infrastructure in adequate conditions so as to provide this water to the animals. None of these points are taken into consideration when eligibility of an agistment breeder operation is being assessed.

We have operated this style of operation for 15 years and for particular reasons choose to run an agistment operation instead of a lease arrangement. Had we operated a lease arrangement, we would have been eligible for the rebate. We therefore appeal to the committee in reviewing DRAS, and particularly EWIR, to give us some consideration.

In being deemed ineligible on the application form, we have to address the question: are there any stock on agistment on the property? If we do so declare, as this is a business arrangement we choose to operate under, this deems us ineligible. Attached to my submission is a table which clearly shows the position we are placed in by operating under this particular arrangement. We feel that we are being unfairly treated through this arrangement as we, as previously stated, declare that we run breeding stock under long-term arrangements. We ask for consideration of retrospective rebate to offset some of the costs we incurred in 2014-15 when we had a water shortage. During that period we expended some \$60,000 to provide water for livestock and have spent sums of money since then. At that time, had the rebate been available to us we would have achieved a 50 per cent rebate from the state and 25 per cent from the Commonwealth, making a total of 75 per cent or \$45,000 available to us.

Agistment arrangements could be arranged to be deemed eligible if there was a method of assessment. I suggest that this could be done by a statutory declaration and supplying figures from accounts to show that the only income the business achieved was from agistment livestock. Desilting of dams is also a problem and should be considered. This would address some of the needs of livestock.

It is my opinion that not many operators run a business along the style that we do and there would not be many in this situation. Subsequently, it would not be a particularly big drain on the DRAS budget or their budget allocations. I thank you for the opportunity to put our submission to you and welcome any questions from your committee.

**CHAIR:** Do you have an understanding of why you have been exempt from this in the past? Why is your situation different from others? Has anything been said to you previously?

**Mr Crichton:** My understanding is that the word 'agistment' is used to define a particular situation which we operate under. The word 'agistment' appears on the application form, and I declare that we have agistment stock on the property because that is the operation that we operate. In doing so, we are immediately ruled ineligible.

**CHAIR:** Do you know why you would be exempt, though?

**Mr Crichton:** To go back a long time when DRAS was introduced, it was introduced possibly 30 years or more ago and these eligibility criteria were drawn up then. The particular reason why agistment was a problem was where people ran their own stock and took on agistment stock as well, and did opportunity earning. Immediately the capacity to run that stock was diminished. They removed agistment stock and then they were in the situation of not having sufficient resources to feed their own stock and possible were in a position to claim drought assistance through the DRAS.

We are not in that position because we do not own any stock of our own. All the stock on the property are on agistment, and it is in our best interests to operate a system of grazing the property so that we have sufficient feed to do it sustainably on a long-term basis. Otherwise we would be in the same position of being out of feed and in a difficult situation to provide any further agistment. We chose to operate an agistment system because under a lease arrangement we hand over the responsibility for our asset—the maintenance and repair of it—to the person who takes up the lease. By agisting the place, we retain total control over stock numbers, where that stock runs on the property, fencing maintenance, water maintenance, provision of water and all the other things that go along with those headings.

**CHAIR:** If this was introduced to cover situations like yours with agistment, do you think that others may change their model and become agisters as well?

**Mr Crichton:** I do not think there would be very many. We had particular reasons for doing it 15 years ago. I am going to divulge something here: I am nearly 74 years of age, and at that time I was considering my future ability to run the property and manage the livestock. I decided that, rather than employ someone and do it myself, I would be better off agisting the place and maintaining the improvements and letting someone else do the livestock work—in other words the mustering and handling. We still assist with it to some extent, but I am not responsible for doing any of the livestock management in terms of handling. That was the arrangement we chose to operate under 15 years ago. In those 15 years we have continued with that model. In that time the property has never claimed any form of DRAS assistance at all because the livestock were not ours, but that opportunity was available to the livestock owners.

It was not until the emergency water infrastructure rebate became available to properties under drought conditions that we suffered an unfair disadvantage. We could not claim the water infrastructure rebate because of the eligibility criteria which was applied to EWIR from DRAS, and that ruled us ineligible. Since then we have had a continual problem about being able to apply for it and do not receive the same rebate as our fellow property owners within a reasonable distance from us.

**CHAIR:** Let me put this scenario to you. Say I have 200 head of cattle on your property. Can I, as the owner of the cattle, claim this assistance?

**Mr Crichton:** Can you as the owner of the cattle claim assistance through EWIR; is that your question?

**CHAIR:** Yes, or any other subsidies from the Drought Relief Assistance Scheme.

**Mr Crichton:** I am not sure because I have not applied for the DRAS component. For anyone moving cattle on to our place and back home again, the freight component would be available to them if they were eligible. We do not have anything to do with that because we do not pay the freight on the animals. We are looking purely at the water problem where we are obligated to provide water for the animals. In 2014 we had an emergency water availability problem. In that period quite a number of cattle were removed from the property because we could not provide water. Well, we could have done it but we were unable to through expenditure. We finally spent \$60,000 and got nothing back for trying to provide help to animals.

**CHAIR:** Thank you for those answers. I will hand over to other committee members.

**Mr SORENSEN:** Can you claim the money that you have spent on building water infrastructure and other fodder for agistment stock as a tax deduction?

**Mr Crichton:** If there was a rebate to us, it would only be the difference that would be available to us, but that same claim would be available to any other person who was eligible.

**Mr SORENSEN:** You are in drought conditions now and the waterholes are dry. If you want to desilt them, can you claim any drought assistance for that?

**Mr Crichton:** Currently desilting is not available for claiming. That is another question that has been raised in this debate. I think it would have been brought up by AgForce this morning. I have noted it here that desilting would be another avenue of assistance to people. The amount available as a tax deduction would only be the difference between the cost and the rebate—the same as if I did not have a problem.

**Mrs GILBERT:** Robert, I met you and Jenny at Roma and saw the photographs of your property. At the moment you are not eligible for DRAS. How could the scheme be rewritten so that your property could be included? You run a business; you are not just suddenly taking cattle on during times of drought. Can you tell us how you think the eligibility for the scheme could be changed so we do not have people suddenly having cattle on their property and claiming all the rebates to get dams on their property but they are not actually—

**Mr Crichton:** Thank you for the question. The problem we have is that on the form I have to fill in to make the claim it asks: 'Are there livestock on agistment on the property?' and I have to tick that. As soon as I tick that, I am ruled ineligible. That is on the water availability statement and also on the general claim for DRAS assistance. We have livestock that have been permanently residing on the property for years and years and years. We run a business where our total income comes from those cattle residing on our property and grazing on our grass. There is a difference between animals that have been there on a long-term basis from ones that come and go just for opportunity grazing, where somebody has had a break, suddenly takes on some cattle, gets the money for it, sends the cattle away and they have had some revenue short term. Then their own livestock situation deteriorates and their own livestock are in difficulty because they have sold their grass to somebody else. We do not do that. We are looking at having available pasture for animals in the long term, so we regulate the stock that are on the property considering the fact that we have to have them there all the time not just for the short term.

**Mrs GILBERT:** Robert, it does not recognise that you have a long-term business model for the way that you do business. Is that something you would like the committee to look at?

**Mr Crichton:** If I have understood your question correctly, the possibility of developing a process of application for people in the situation that we are in—and I do not think there are very many. From the inquiries I have made of how many people might be in the situation that we are in, the number of people running a total agistment operation against people who have some of their own livestock and opportunity agistment is very few. I am quite sure there is a method of arriving at a process which can determine how these few people such as us can apply by making an application and supplying information that justifies that that is the operation that they work under.

**Mr PEARCE:** How many cattle producers take advantage of the model that you run? Is there a demand for the way that you do business?

**Mr Crichton:** How many actually operate under our model I could not say. The little bit of information that I have is that it is very small. I know of two others—one at Roma and one at Cunnamulla. If you spread that over the whole state, it might eventually come to 10 or a dozen at the most. The other thing that we want to make very clear is that we run breeders. We do not take on people's cattle who are just growing them and moving them on quickly. We have had breeders on all the time, so we are complying with one of the objectives of DRAS to preserve breeding livestock. Your question had a second part to it. Could you repeat that please?

**Mr PEARCE:** What is the demand on the service that you provide?

**Mr Crichton:** In 15 years we have always been able to access operators who are looking for what we provide. I will give a couple of instances. We had livestock from New South Wales where they were drought stricken down there. They came up to us on a long-term basis. At other times it has been purely by word of mouth. I think in the 15 years we have had to advertise about three times to access people who were interested in taking up what we had to offer.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Robert and Jenny, for your time this morning, for your opening statement and for taking our questions.

**Mr Crichton:** Thank you very much for the opportunity to present to the committee.



**BURNETT, Mrs Valmai, Private capacity**

**Mr Hansen:** Valmai, it is Rob Hansen. I have the committee on the line.

**Mrs Burnett:** Rob, I am very sorry. I faxed you the information that I was going to talk to the committee about this morning at eight o'clock and I have just found out there was a power failure and I have just faxed you another copy of it. We will be talking at cross-purposes. I will do my best without the committee having that available. You should have it now, I hope. I did not realise there was a power failure this morning.

**CHAIR:** Good morning, Valmai. My name is Glenn Butcher. I am the chair of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. There is nothing worse than losing power, particularly on a Friday.

**Mrs Burnett:** There is nothing worse than being 88 and finding that all your best laid plans have gone astray with the power failure. You do not have the information that I was going to talk to you about. It will come afterwards. I hope that will explain the position.

**CHAIR:** That is okay, Valmai. We have your initial submission here which I am sure the committee has read. I am intrigued to see that it looks like you do all your work by typewriter; is that correct?

**Mrs Burnett:** That is right—by portable typewriter.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mrs Burnett:** I am the trustee of the estate of my late husband, who has been dead for many years. The Commonwealth *Agricultural competitiveness* green paper overview on page IX states—

We must take advantage of our capacity for both robust and environmentally sustainable development; and need to ensure environmental regulations and processes affecting new development are based on science and not emotion.

My proposal to the committee is that sustainable land management conditions should be applied to drought assistance and they should be based on science proven by CSIRO, to which we abide on Rathburnie Estate. I sent you details of the tenancy agreement of the Brangus stud breeder who leases our property now, and they included land use and management. The tenant, in carrying out their permitted use of the land, should do all of these things that may be reasonably necessary. I listed five sources and sent you a copy of that lease—all of which are based on science. We found that it proved so much better in maintaining the land base.

I said to you in the letter that to protect the future sustainability of the National Estate, the land of Australia, it is suggested that the committee recommend that similar land use management covenants and conditions be applied to drought assistance to both leasehold and freehold landowners. These covenants are also contained in the Nature Refuge Conservation Agreement, dated 24 October 2007, between the State of Queensland and the Estate of Graham Campbell Burnett for the establishment of the Nature Refuge on the Title of this 1,700-acre Estate.

I have suggested to the committee that those particular covenants from the lease that applies to Rathburnie could be included as a condition of any drought aid. I am sorry that you did not get this information. It was in the fax this morning but the power failure has meant that I have had to resend it. You will get a copy of that lease and the covenants on that lease to which I refer. You will also get a copy of the scientific data that applies to it and also our 2007 submission to the NRM Management Review—how to bring about the remedy for the rangelands. I am sorry you did not get that information, because I am talking to you from knowledge of those and you are talking to me from being in a vacuum until you get that. You can ask me any questions. I will try to answer them. When you get the copies, it will make it clearer.

**CHAIR:** That is fantastic, Val. I think Rob is chasing up that information now for the committee.

**Mrs Burnett:** I am so frustrated. We have had that trouble before—I do not know what power failure means—in the country, because we are not on the internet, we rely on the Mount Stanley exchange to fax on information, and power may fail there. It would happen just now. When I came in to answer your call, I saw this report that said that the power failure had failed to get it to you. Do you think it would be better to proceed after you have received it?

**CHAIR:** They are chasing it up. It could be quite a while. This committee hearing is only until 12 o'clock.

**Mrs Burnett:** Ask me any questions and I will try to answer them. I think you will find all of the answers in the information that Rob is chasing up. One thing I did not include is that, because the wet season spelling of CSIRO depends on subdivisions sometimes of land, I also suggested that the NRM cluster money that they are providing—I sent you a copy of that article. Apparently the NRM are making millions of dollars available for cluster fencing for wild dogs control. I have also suggested that that work be in conjunction with the drought relief and the wet season spelling.

Wet season spelling is the basis of the whole thing. When we were in South Africa in 1979, we went to the Bloemfontein Research Station. They were doing tests then to find out which was the best season in which to spell pastures to get the maximum production. They came up with wet season spelling, which the CSIRO repeated in an 'Ecograzed' project in 1990—I am not quite sure of the date. They produced this brochure—and I have sent Mr Hansen a copy of it—to explain to any layman exactly what it involves. With that, CSIRO proved that you could increase your carrying capacity in simple terms whilst also improving the environment and the state of the pastures. That was the first thing that I suggested, that that be the main covenant of drought relief.

It has never been publicised to a great extent. Most people do not understand what it means, even just saying 'wet season spelling'. This two-page brochure sets it out clearly. It is so important that it be adopted because it not only gives you increased carrying capacity but also protects the pastures. It recovers native tussocks and perennial grasses in the pasture even during drought years. The long-term sustainability of those pastures is the only thing that we can fight drought with. It has so many benefits. The surplus pasture, manure and litter will mulch the soil further, therefore minimising evaporation, erosion and excessive run-off while feeding the soil capacity and penetration of the surplus water to the aquifer to feed the groundwater and increase the carbon levels in the soil. It has everything going for it.

Some people do what their father and grandfather did; others will not listen. It really is the only thing that we have found in South Africa and in Australia that works. We have proved it on Rathburnie. I would love to see that being the most effective way to recover the land condition and as a covenant or a condition of drought relief. Money is not the answer; we have to change our whole thinking. It is so important. Once you get this information it will explain it much better than I could in a hurry.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Val. I might pull you up there. I think you have answered most of the questions the committee had. That is fantastic.

**Mrs GILBERT:** Mrs Burnett, thank you for sending in all of this information. We look forward to reading it more thoroughly.

**Mrs Burnett:** I keep my arthritic fingers going. That is why I like to type rather than talk.

**Mrs GILBERT:** We look forward to getting your faxes through.

**Mrs Burnett:** I am so sorry it is not there. I set it all out very clearly. I have no hesitation in suggesting that you could use it without any worries.

**Mrs GILBERT:** We have had other submissions this morning around education for farmers, so this fits in with the theme of what is coming through from some of our other submissions.

**Mrs Burnett:** Sorry, could you speak a little louder? I am on a speaker phone and it is not coming through very clearly.

**CHAIR:** I will try to make this clear to you. I will portray what Julieanne said. She thanked you for the fax you sent through this morning. We will get that and review it in detail.

**Mrs Burnett:** I would really rather you do that than listen to me talking.

**CHAIR:** That is fine. Thank you very much for your time this morning, Valmai. What you have said in your submission and what you have talked about this morning is similar to what we have heard from other submitters this morning. I really do thank you for your time. Thank you for taking our questions.

**Mrs Burnett:** Thank you for considering it. My late husband would have been delighted to know that at last somebody is listening.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs Burnett. We might see you in the future at some stage.

**Mrs Burnett:** I hope you will come and see us at the head of the Brisbane River. You are most welcome.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your time. That brings the time available for our hearing to an end. I thank all witnesses. We will make the proof transcript of the hearing today available on our website as soon as it is available. The next stage for us is to seek advice from the department. We are aiming to finish the review and report in April. I now declare this hearing closed.

**Committee adjourned at 12.02 pm**