

Hon Shelley Payne; Hon Colin De Grussa; Hon Alannah MacTiernan; Hon Dr Brian Walker; Hon Darren West;  
Hon Steve Martin; Hon Jackie Jarvis; Hon Neil Thomson

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## AGRICULTURE — INDUSTRIES AND WORKERS

### *Motion*

**HON SHELLEY PAYNE (Agricultural)** [1.05 pm]: I move —

That this house acknowledges the contribution to the state of Western Australia by our agricultural industries and their workers, acknowledges the contributions of those who have built these industries and commends the McGowan government for its investment in their future.

The Western Australian agriculture and food sector continues to be the lifeblood of rural and regional communities. My community of Esperance was built on servicing the surrounding farming community. It is also the bigger hub for all the smaller agricultural towns up to 200 kilometres from Esperance. They are close-knit communities that band together, whether it be for support and community wellbeing—pitching in to build community sporting and recreational facilities—or community emergency response. Esperance is just one of the many regional hubs servicing our agricultural industry, which spans over 40 per cent of the state and occupies over one million square kilometres. Much of that activity is grazing of native vegetation, but Western Australia also supports a broad range of cropping industries from rain-fed winter cereals through to irrigated horticultural crops, spanning from our tropical north to our temperate south. As well as being the nation's largest grain-producing region, Western Australia is a significant producer of Australia's meat and livestock, and dairy, wool, horticultural and honey products. We have recently had our first asparagus crop in Broome and works are underway to hopefully have our first grape producers move up to, and make significant investment in, the Carnarvon food bowl.

It has also been great to see firsthand the progress with Indigenous farming, with farms leased by Aboriginal corporations from the Indigenous land council, such as the Noongar-owned Dowrene Farm in Cranbrook—which is Australia's first Indigenous growers' group—owing to the hard work of Maude, Dudley and son Rhys Bonshore breeding up very fine woolled merino sheep and harvesting wattle seed for sale to local food and beverage markets. Or there is the work done by Badgebup Aboriginal Corporation in Katanning, with its emerging farm focused on seed collection and propagation. It is also bringing together the four Indigenous groups across the heart of the great southern, focusing on training and jobs for Indigenous youth, and building a better future for those in regional WA, all with a base in the agricultural industry. Julie Hayden from Badgebup is a truly inspiring woman, driving this collaborative work with Johnny Rodd.

Agricultural production in WA is a major contributor to state and national economies. The annual gross value of agricultural production in Western Australia is nearly \$11 billion, which is about 18 per cent of the total gross value of agricultural production in Australia. Western Australia has approximately 10 per cent of all farm businesses in Australia, yet we create 18 per cent of the total gross value of agricultural production, so we are doing pretty well.

We all know Western Australia has an export-oriented economy and the agriculture industry is no different, with the sector placing high value on overseas markets. The agriculture industry is the fourth largest exporter by value behind iron ore, petroleum and natural gas, and gold. Agriculture and food provide economic diversity to the WA economy. Our state exports around 80 per cent of its agricultural production. Members may recall the community concern in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic that we would run out of not only toilet paper but also food. That was until we could communicate that Western Australia produces way more food than we could ever eat. However, I have to say, I was glad to finally see the return to the shelves of Japanese sushi rice and Indian pappadums. We do import a portion of our food, too, but imports represent only about 14 per cent of the value of our exports.

For the past decade, about 70 per cent of our agrifood exports have been destined for Asia. With growing demand for premium products, especially in Asia, Western Australia is in a good position to build on its reputation as a reliable supplier of clean, safe and high-quality food to overseas markets. However, in the scheme of things, globally WA is a small supplier to a large and growing market. Globally, we are competitive, but WA food manufacturing costs are expected to remain high. WA producers will continue to face increased competition, and this past year has taught us a lot about the need to diversify our markets.

We heard Hon Alannah MacTiernan, Minister for Agriculture and Food, talk recently about how grains are the iron ore of the agriculture industry. Grains are worth \$8 billion of the \$11 billion in agriculture production. The state's grain production area, known as the wheatbelt, covers nearly 10 million hectares across the south west of the state. WA exports roughly 60 per cent of Australia's canola and 52 per cent of Australia's wheat—so, again, 10 per cent of the farming businesses, yet over half the country's exports of oilseeds and wheat. We are really cranking.

Grain production is seasonal and largely determined by the overall weather conditions, both timing and amount of rainfall. Production is highest when there is sufficient well-timed growing season rainfall between March and November. We started this season with sky-high confidence throughout the industry, with good rainfall giving grain

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farmers the best start to the season in decades. With the very large total area sown this year, WA is predicted to have a record total tonnage of close to 20 million tonnes. However, in some areas, there now may be too much rain, and waterlogging now looks set to be a major crop yield limiter for farmers in the lower great southern. The whole season causes stress to farmers as it is reliant on weather, something none of us can control, and they cannot rest easy until the crop is out. If Australian agriculture history tells us anything, we know that just around the corner lurks another economic shock, a drought, a natural disaster, or some other challenge that farmers have to face. But our farmers are known for their hard work and innovation. Resilience is built on the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, underpinned by having a viable business with a capacity to generate income and manage risk, and good decision-making. Our farmers are resilient.

The difficulties some of our farmers have faced over the past few years with our drying climate have helped to raise the issue of mental health for our farmers. Unfortunately, the wheatbelt area of the state has the least number of mental health services, although this is recognised in our mental health strategy, and works are underway to improve that.

Climate change, including a drying climate in parts of the state, will continue to affect production conditions, but, based on past practice, the sector has the skills required to innovate and adapt. It is currently estimated that climate change is costing farmers on average \$30 000 each per year. The government's priority is on continuing the dialogue about the role of agriculture as a climate change solution. It is probably fair to say that many farmers across WA are struggling to keep up with the rate of movement in the carbon farming sector and how best to engage with this emerging industry. The last 12 months have seen an unprecedented flurry of activity and an increasing recognition that carbon farming should not just be a standalone activity, locking up areas of land exclusively for carbon benefits, but can instead be integrated with land management goals to enhance agricultural businesses by, for example, building soil productivity, providing shelter and shade, reducing soil erosion, and improving water permeation.

Last year, Meat and Livestock Australia set the ambitious target to be carbon neutral by 2030, committing that Australian beef, lamb and goat production would have no net release of greenhouse gases by that time. Following on from this is the ambitious plan by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development to make WA's premier sheep research facility in Katanning carbon neutral by 2030. This will involve a stock restructure and paddock renovations. Agriculture can be at the forefront of solving climate change.

The agriculture industry is a significant source of employment. The agriculture industry provides over 30 000 direct jobs, and with the inclusion of the food, value-added and service sectors and related dependent industries down the supply chain, it employs over 155 000 Western Australians in rural, regional and metropolitan areas. The agriculture industry is on the cutting edge of technology. There is a range of career opportunities in the food and fibre supply chain, from producing crops and farming animals to manufacturing and processing, right through to marketing, trade and media. The career opportunities are endless.

The average age of farmers in Australia is 58 years, so industry needs to work to connect with young people and ensure that there are plenty of long-term opportunities to enable them to flourish. In conjunction with the Department of Education and Training and Muresk, DPIRD is supporting initiatives to promote agriculture and food curriculum and careers to high school students.

One of the larger concerns of late has been the shortage of unskilled and semiskilled labour that has occurred as a consequence of the coronavirus-related restrictions on foreign workers entering Australia, such as backpackers and skilled workers. This has put added pressure on those in the agriculture industry. The WA government has provided resources to aid primary industries to access the federal Seasonal Worker Programme and the Pacific Labour Scheme and bring unskilled and semiskilled workers to WA from the Pacific Islands. A new agricultural worker visa was announced in June for South-East Asian workers, which is set to mirror the Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme, and there are hopes this will be in place for the upcoming harvest season.

There is currently concern within the grain industry, with an expected record 20 million tonne bumper crop after such a good start to the season, about not only our ability to move that much product, but also the availability of workers. Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd alone hires on average 1 800 seasonal harvest workers over six weeks for receipt and storage over 100 bins across WA. There are then all the other on-farm needs for harvest and transport requirements.

Another blow to our regional agricultural communities with the coronavirus pandemic has been the financial impact on regional agricultural societies due to the cancellation of the regional agricultural shows last year. These regional agricultural shows are the community event of the year in a lot of our regional agricultural towns. For some of these towns, it was the first time a show had not been held in over 100 years. Lotterywest has been providing support to regional agricultural societies both through the modified coronavirus relief grants last year, and more recently as we have reverted to the regular Lotterywest grant program, to help ensure that the shows will continue this year. I was fortunate to recently present a Lotterywest grant to the Narrogin Agricultural Society to help towards its upcoming show. So wander out yonder and support the upcoming shows around our state and learn a bit about our important

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agriculture industry. We have the upcoming Dowerin field days, Chapman Valley Show, Wagin Woolorama, the Newdegate field days, and Toodyay, Narrogin, Katanning, Esperance, York, Northampton and Mingenew—the list goes on.

Farmers across WA are making a difference to their local communities by digging deep and giving time and money to causes in an increasing movement towards philanthropy. In my community of Esperance, farmer Chris Reichstein, whose family has farmed in the region for 55 years, is leading the way. Six years ago, Chris was unexpectedly diagnosed with stomach cancer. Sadly, he passed away last month. With no natural successors to take over his farm, Chris thought long and hard about how his decades of hard work could benefit the community instead. Chris had talked about the enormous wealth in the farming community around Esperance and wanted to return some of his good fortune to his community. He also wanted to encourage others who have prospered in the region to do likewise.

Chris first created the Mt Burdett Foundation, a charitable project he established in the hopes of building resilience and leadership in rural Western Australia through community grants. The Mt Burdett Foundation has supported many worthy causes in Esperance, including funding the Esperance Ocean Safety and Support group's shark attack trauma kit project, which helps to save lives after a shark attack. Chris then went one step further and handed over his farm for the community's benefit. Leaving the farm to an organisation to run will ensure that it benefits agriculture in the Esperance region, providing opportunities to trial innovations and to work onsite with research organisations such as the CSIRO, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, the Grains Research and Development Corporation, and local grower groups. An ongoing operating surplus from the farm will be used by the Mt Burdett Foundation to increase capacity in regional communities.

This generosity is happening right across our Agricultural Region. Wyalkatchem farmer Quentin Davies and his friends have raised almost \$200 000 for breast cancer research. The loss of local Liz Roberts to breast cancer was the inspiration behind the annual Pink Day shearing fundraiser. He said that contributing to his local community in any way, shape or form not only ensured its future, but was also very rewarding.

The community of Grass Patch, which is located 75 kilometres north of Esperance, recently made the top 10 list of postcodes in Australia with the highest average individual annual income, but money is not everything. At the end of 2015, the local primary school closed down, one year before its fiftieth anniversary. The pub has closed. The community now consists of a grain bin, a few houses and an outdated community centre, which is the hub for the surrounding farming area, and a lovingly community restored heritage homestead that serves as the ad hoc local post office serviced by volunteers selling yummy locally made jam and the best pickled onions.

This story is not unique to Grass Patch. This decline of our small regional communities is happening right across our state, with larger farms, more technology, fewer people, and children needing to travel further to school. Grass Patch was also the last community in WA, along with Salmon Gums, which is 25 kilometres north, to have its water deficiency declaration revoked late last month after being declared water deficient at the end of 2019. During these most recent drought declarations, the state government has spent \$3.7 million on direct water carting to central locations to support emergency livestock needs. In February this year, the state government announced a \$7.3 million program to upgrade and refurbish 70 community dams in order to provide vital non-potable water supplies to farmers during dry years. I sometimes wonder what level of economic development we could have in our regions if we just had more access to water.

Farmers do it tough working in remote locations well away from the city and without many of the services that people living in the city enjoy, and their small local communities are so important to their social and emotional wellbeing. Farmers also face an ongoing battle to win the hearts and minds of the modern-day consumer, who is more and more interested in how the food is produced. Many people are doing their part to promote the agricultural industry here in WA, like Mandy Matthews, a WA sheep farmer who has over 16 000 followers on Instagram and 220 000 followers on TikTok. Her goal is to provide a clear depiction of livestock practices to help educate the general public on what farmers do. She plans to continue to advocate for the agricultural industry through her social media accounts to improve the connection between the general public and the agricultural industry.

The WA government is also doing a lot to support our agricultural industry. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development is working with the state government on major initiatives to help protect and grow Western Australia's primary industries and regional communities, including the agriculture and food sector. The agribusiness, food and trade area works in partnership with government, industry and business to enable growth in the value, competitiveness and diversification of WA's agrifood sector through facilitation of value-adding, investment and export. The department also underpins the majority of the state's grains research, development and extension activities. Each year, the department coordinates and delivers on more than \$20 million of grains research, development and extension projects ranging in scope from molecular genetics to large-scale economy trials and export market intelligence.

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Given the importance of the agricultural and food industry to Western Australia's continued economic prosperity and diversity, the WA government has supported a number of initiatives. To help drive productivity in the agricultural sector, \$22 million will contribute to upgrading four priority tier 1 and 2 freight rail projects in Moora, Brookton, Broomehill and Cranbrook. These priority projects were identified in the *Revitalising agricultural region freight strategy* and are anticipated to generate more than 1 000 jobs through construction. Once completed, these rail lines will assist in lowering the cost of the freight task and allowing grain to be moved to port more quickly and efficiently in order to be shipped in a higher price window before northern hemisphere grain is harvested. Rail is 17 times more energy efficient than road transport per tonne, with far less carbon pollution, and lowers community impact by reducing the number of trucks on our roads.

To assist in combating climate change and being part of the solution to it, the government has committed to two initiatives. The first is the \$15 million agriculture climate resilience fund, which will support farmers to build soil carbon and to rehydrate landscapes, helping to keep farms productive while reducing the carbon footprint of agriculture. The second is the \$15 million carbon farming and land restoration program, which aims to realise agriculture's potential to sequester carbon in the landscape. Expressions of interest are now open until 20 August.

The WA government is also involved in a number of industry growth partnerships, from the wine industry to processed oats, food innovation and regional digital connectivity. Those projects total over \$50 million. The WA government is doing a lot to support and grow our agricultural industry here in WA.

I would like to thank our Minister for Agriculture and Food, Hon Alannah MacTiernan, for her efforts over the last term of government towards supporting, strengthening and growing the Western Australian agricultural industry. I ask the house to support this motion, which acknowledges the contribution to the state of Western Australia by our agricultural industry and its workers and also commends the work of the McGowan government for its investment in the industry's future.

**HON COLIN de GRUSSA (Agricultural — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [1.24 pm]: I rise on behalf of the opposition to make some remarks on this motion as moved by Hon Shelley Payne and in particular on the acknowledgement of the contribution to the state of Western Australia by our agricultural industries and their workers.

As many of us will know, agriculture is indeed a key industry for this state. As Hon Shelley Payne outlined, it is in the order of an \$11 billion industry. It is a significant contributor to the state's overall economy, and, indeed, to employment right across the state. Agriculture and related industries are the backbone of so many of our regional communities; indeed, those communities very often were built on the back of agriculture—on the sheep's back, as it were—all those years ago, through the blood, sweat and tears of many hardworking, tireless Western Australians who went on to build not only a business and a life for their families, but also entire communities, and, in many cases, continued to support their community throughout the years as it grew.

It is important to recognise that pioneering spirit that so many of our early agricultural settlers had, and the fact that they were not afraid of hard work out there in the heat and the dust, the rain and the cold, clearing and preparing their farms for the future. Indeed, my own family moved from my grandfather's farm in Ballidu down to Esperance in the 1950s. I think dad was 10 years old at the time. At the tender age of 10, he was responsible for driving some of the equipment all the way from Ballidu via Coolgardie to Esperance. Obviously, he did not have a licence at 10 years old, but that was the way things were done. We just had to get the job done. It was that kind of hard work and effort put in by those people all those years ago that built this industry up and ensured that those regional communities benefited as well.

Of course, in acknowledging agriculture, we cannot just talk about the farmers. We have to talk about the entire supply chain, and that is a very, very complex web, whether it be transport and logistics; the supply companies that provide the fertilisers, herbicides, pipe fittings and all the various components that we use on our farms; the machinery dealers, who provide employment and training for many people in our regional communities as well; or those little local manufacturing hubs. We all talk about how important manufacturing is in an Australian context; indeed, it is very important in a rural context. Quite often, those machines are somewhat bespoke and need a specialist to repair them. The best ideas are often thought of by those who use the equipment on their farms, and so they will come up with a design for a seeder or some other piece of equipment and end up setting up a manufacturing business to provide that equipment to the rest of the industry. There are great little stories about many different businesses that have evolved across our state and our nation as a result of the agricultural industry.

There are also our grower groups. I know that the minister is a big fan of grower groups, as indeed am I, having been involved for many years with grower groups as both a member and a user of the information they provide and share. Research that is done at that local level on a farm directly benefits our farmers very, very much. In my view, that direct research actually has the most benefit for agriculture, because they are looking at research applied directly on a farm. They can see the results almost immediately. Whether it is done by that local group or just a bunch

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of farmers who quite often trial new technology and things like that, that research has a direct benefit. Farmers can see that benefit on their farms straightaway and can go out and adopt or make changes to those different practices that they are researching.

Of course, agriculture in Western Australia is known for being the most innovative agricultural industry in the country. We are not afraid to adopt new technologies and to adapt them to the various jobs we have on our farms. In fact, although we see great stories about how innovative our mining industry is in respect of automation and driverless vehicles and so on—and it is absolutely doing wonderful things in that space—if we go back to the 90s in agriculture, that was when we really pioneered things like GPS guidance systems and auto-steering systems on our farm equipment. Why did we do that? We did that because it was a step change in efficiency for farmers. It meant that they could carry out their business far more efficiently—saving on costs, obviously, but also much more accurately managing the crops in their paddocks and gaining efficiencies from products such as auto-steer systems. Many farmers, of course, work long hours and there are not many people to help them do their job. Those systems made incredible differences to levels of fatigue and to management of farm operations.

That, of course, is in-the-field technology; in addition, many farmers innovated and developed systems to capture data on their businesses. A good friend of mine, Mic Fels, developed apps to predict yield and capture data. My family did our own data capture back in about 1983 or 1984, when we first got what was called a Bondwell-2 portable computer. Dad and I would sit up at night writing programs on dBase to capture data from the farm and look at our yields, climate and rainfall data—all those sorts of statistics. That was common; it was not unique to us. Many, many farmers were doing that and groups of farmers in our area would attend computer courses at the local TAFE and learn how to write dBase programs and use that technology to capture the data they needed to improve their businesses and manage what they did. That sort of innovation and technology has been a feature of Western Australian agriculture for a very long time, and it is a very important feature.

That, in itself, leads to another feature of Western Australian agriculture: the drive to learn and to understand what others do and what is out there in the agriculture space, whether at a local, national or global level. Our agriculture industry in Western Australia is in my view at the forefront of adopting and adapting those kinds of new practices to its operations.

I want to talk about Nuffield Australia; members may have heard me speak in this place before about Nuffield, which sponsors farmers to travel around the world, researching particular topics and gaining an understanding of how things are done in other parts of the world so that we can bring those technologies back here to adapt and adopt them and, of course, promote what we do in this state. I listened with interest to Hon Shelley Payne when she talked about a good friend of mine, Chris Reichstein. Chris, Bob Nixon, Nick Gillett and I were 2014 Nuffield scholars and we had the privilege of travelling together around many parts of the world—New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico, the US and the UK—researching our particular topics. That was a really good opportunity not only to see what was going on around the world but also to learn from each other.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** What was your topic?

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** My topic was around how agriculture can reconnect with the community; about social licence, minister. The minister should read the report!

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** I read Bob Nixon's one!

**Hon COLIN de GRUSSA:** It was a very interesting time. In particular, I would like to pay my respects to Chris, who was a good friend of mine and a fantastic bloke. I distinctly remember going up to his farm. As was mentioned at his service in Esperance recently, you would go out there with Chris and he would be out in the paddock, full of beans. He would dig up a handful of dirt and sit there and smell it and say, "Can you smell how good that is?" I remember that distinctly—the beautiful smell of that fresh earth, full of nutrition and earthworms and things. He was very passionate about farming and also about community. That is another thing that our agriculture industry is widely known for: that passion for supporting local communities. Chris, in particular, set up the Mt Burdett Foundation and left his farm to that organisation to benefit the Esperance community.

I think that level of commitment to community is absolutely commendable, but it is not necessarily that unusual in agriculture across the state. We know there are many, many community farms. There are football clubs that lease a paddock and use the proceeds from it to benefit their club, their people and their local community. That sort of spirit of cooperation in regional areas is a hallmark of Western Australia, largely because of the isolation. Our regional communities out there thrive on that need to work together, and agriculture has been a very important part of that.

Along with the research and community groups that farmers are involved with, they are also very much involved with land care. Land care is a very important aspect of what farmers do; it certainly was for me in our part of the world. There was always a very strong commitment from local farmers to do what they could as stewards of the land

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to look after the land for the future. That is another aspect of the agriculture industry that is not often talked about, but there is a strong commitment to help improve the environment they live and work in, for the benefit of everyone else. That is also very important.

That is, of course, very topical at the moment, with climate change. We talk about agriculture's contribution to carbon emissions and so on. I am not going to go into that now; that is a whole debate in its own right, but our farmers in general are very accepting of the fact that they are part of the solution. In fact, many of the practices they have adopted over the years, from the early 1980s when we first started direct drilling, which morphed into no-till farming, have actually helped look after the soil and improve carbon retention. All those practices have been adopted and adapted by our agriculture industry because it is important. It is not just because it is good for farmers, but because it is good for ensuring that the industry is sustainable. We need to recognise that agriculture makes a contribution in that space.

As I said, so many other industries in the supply chain, including transport and logistics and the live export industry, lead the world in the way in which they do their business. I know that the live export industry is not a popular topic for some, but if Western Australia were not involved in that industry, the outcomes for animal welfare would be much worse. It would be devastating for animal welfare because the other nations involved do not have the standards we have. I believe that is important. It is like the reason that many of us become involved in politics: because it is better to be in the tent, trying to make a difference, than to stand aside and not participate. I think that industry does a great job. People like Holly Ludeman promote our agriculture industry as well as the live export industry, and show how good we are at what we do, and that is incredibly important. It is increasingly important for those people to try to rebuild that connection with our community, and it is something that we, as representatives of the industry, need to support.

In the remaining few minutes I have I want to talk about some of the challenges facing agriculture. Our farmers are very hardworking and innovative, and will find ways to make things work. That is what they do; they are independently minded and very much used to having to deal with various issues on their own. There are challenges, despite the wonderful season we have seen so far—albeit a little wet in some places. I am sure Hon Steve Martin will know all about that; it is a little wet in his part of the world, although it is better to be too wet than too dry. The challenge with that potential record crop of 20 million tonnes—depending on the estimates that we hear—is getting that crop harvested and to market. I was very proud to be a member of one of our great grower groups, the South East Premium Wheat Growers Association. When Nigel Metz was with SEPWA, he said that every day a crop stays unharvested is a huge impact on the value, quality and actual yield of that crop. Much work has been done in that space, so it all becomes about timing. It is an incredibly busy time of year. As many members will know, harvesting is an intense operation that takes much effort and time, and, of course, it requires staff. One of the greatest challenges facing our industry at the moment is that we just cannot get the staff.

Mic Fels was on 6PR this morning—the minister will know Mic well! Mic Fels, who is president of the Western Australian Farmers Federation Grains Council and another good friend of mine, said that it is going to be very tough if the sector cannot find enough workers. WAFarmers estimates that the sector is probably 4 000 to 6 000 workers short for the coming grain harvest. That is a huge number. There are plenty of jobs out there, of course, if anyone wants one; but a range of skills are required in those jobs. Certainly, some of those operators are very skilled. In the past we, as an industry, have tended to employ people from North America, Europe or the UK, because they come from farms. Their harvesting season is at the opposite time to ours, so it works well. Those people can step off their farms and machines and come down here and drive our equipment with a level of skill. The issue is that finding those skilled workers in a COVID environment is very challenging. This is an issue that, collectively, our governments at the state and federal level and even members on this side need to find a way through. I believe that there are solutions. It will require a level of cooperation from the various levels of government across the country. I think the willingness is there. We saw how well national cabinet worked earlier while dealing with COVID. Maybe it is time to put things aside and let us see whether we can find a way to at least get some skilled workers in and, as the honourable member mentioned, identify some unskilled workers—for example, Pacific labour. For some of the work, that would absolutely be an option. But for some of those skilled jobs, we need to find a way to get people in from countries where those skills are available. Time is critical. We are very quickly running out of time before the grain harvest occurs. I would really like to see everyone putting their heads together and trying to find a solution to that challenge.

I will draw my remarks to a close shortly; I think there are other members who want to speak on this motion. We need to deal with a couple of critically urgent issues and some challenges facing agriculture. I am very confident that the industry is up to those challenges. The industry has met challenges head-on for as long as it has existed. It has adapted, changed and innovated, and it has driven some of the great technology adoption that we have seen across other industries, largely because of the need in agriculture to be efficient. This is a great industry. It is one that we in Western Australia should be very proud of and one that makes a tremendous contribution to our

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community and society in general. I encourage members to acknowledge the wonderful work of our farmers and entire agricultural supply chain.

I will end with a quote that I read in my inaugural speech in this place. In the words of John F. Kennedy —

... our farmers deserve praise, not condemnation; and their efficiency should be a cause for gratitude, not something for which they are penalized.

It is a very important and appropriate remark given the challenges facing agriculture, not just this year, but in terms of social licence and other things as well. What the agriculture sector does is of benefit to us and is certainly an industry that we can be proud of.

**HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Agriculture and Food)** [1.44 pm]: I thank Hon Shelley Payne for bringing forward this motion and allowing us the opportunity to both celebrate the people who work in the agricultural sector and to reflect on some of the challenges and how we propose to deal with them. A number of very interesting issues have been raised. Some of the issues that we are discussing today were very much at the fore of the agricultural table at the skills summit that was convened by the Premier and Hon Sue Ellery last week. It was a deeply engaging forum. We sat down and focused on the issues of the development of skills and the shortcomings that we have in this state across a whole sector.

I was convening a table of, largely, agricultural industry people. We shared information and there were a great many insights and there was some really good direction on what we need to do to go forward. One of the things that we need to understand—Hon Colin de Grussa talked about it—is: what are agricultural workers? More people are engaged in the agricultural sector than can be identified in information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We have some problems with the way the Australian Bureau of Statistics collects its data, particularly for this sector, because it underplays the actual number of workers. One issue that we all know about, and has been discussed here today, is that farming has become increasingly technology driven with very large, complex, sophisticated and huge machinery that, in many instances, replaces the workforce on the farm. We know that in all those agricultural machinery dealerships, and in some of the manufacturing plants, there are many, many more workers, but they are not included in the agricultural sector; they are included in the machinery sector. Therefore, if we rely on just the Australian Bureau of Statistics, we do not get a reliable picture.

One sector that Hon Colin de Grussa did not talk about, which I think is really important, particularly if we are talking about agricultural workers who can build a population, is the meat works. There are huge numbers of people working for our meat processors. V and V Walsh in Bunbury has 1 500 workers. The largest employer in Katanning is the Western Australian Meat Marketing Co-operative Limited. I must say that I find it a little bit curious that when we are focusing on discussing agricultural labour, we do not hear from the other side that this huge employer, somehow or other, falls through the gaps. We look at Fletcher International Abattoir, its facility at Narrikup and the number of people it employs from the great southern region—in excess of 1 000 people. This is a real driver of people. Meat works are very, very significant in creating jobs that are based in the region. I know that the member is a great supporter of live export but it is also really important for us to focus on that extraordinary multiplier that we get from local processing, because people are based in the regions doing that work.

As Hon Colin de Grussa mentioned—this is interesting and we find this in a number of different sectors—it is not just the direct jobs but the other things that are created. Himac Attachments in Albany is an extraordinary company that started developing agricultural machinery. It has now become a very sophisticated company and it is constantly expanding, supported in some instances by our fabulous regional economic development grants. It has produced a rock picker that is being exported around the world. Here we have a company that was set up to service Western Australian agriculture that has developed to become a manufacturer and is selling its products overseas. It is servicing our agriculture sector. There are quite a few examples along those lines; that is, pioneering by not only our farmers, but also the people who supply to farmers. Farming in regional areas can be deeply linked to the development of the manufacturing sector. A couple of years ago—this is something I would really like to see—some local people developed a very high-tech mobile abattoir. We are very interested to see whether that project can be taken further in Western Australia.

The skills summit very much focused on what we need to improve to attract more people into agriculture. One of the really important insights is that our TAFE programs need to be much more finely targeted towards industry needs; indeed, this insight came out of much of the skills summit. We also have to make sure when we offer training in the agricultural sector that it is with contemporary technology. We can only do that if we are working in close partnership with providers of equipment. There are a number of examples of good relationships. Some years ago, Hon Darren West attended AFGRI Equipment in Moora, which is a major dealership. We worked in close collaboration with AFGRI to ensure that we were producing people with farm machinery maintenance capability, who would work on machinery and make sure that it was constantly updated. That has been a very successful example and we need to replicate that.

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Another insight that came from the summit is that we need more layered training. Agricultural science programs are offered at universities and some very good work is being done at Muresk Institute with a lot of short courses, as well as agribusiness programs, but we need a better layering of programs on offer, including agricultural apprenticeships. We have agricultural machinery apprenticeships but we do not have agricultural apprenticeships or diploma qualifications.

**Hon Neil Thomson:** You're in government—you need these things.

**Hon ALANNAH MacTIERNAN:** That is right. The skills summit allowed us to sit down with everyone to get some insight. We spent our first four years fixing the God-awful mess of contraction in the agriculture portfolio after the former Liberal–National government decided to get out of research and development. We have spent a lot of time fixing that mess. We are now talking to the industry about how we go forward. That is a sensible thing to do. That was a completely ridiculous comment by Hon Neil Thomson. We had an important and useful contribution from Hon Colin De Grussa, but I do not know whether we need comments from the peanut gallery. Intelligent, thoughtful and entertaining interjections are always welcome, but not those that are completely ridiculous.

We need to determine whether we have the right suite of things to encourage people into agriculture as a career. This is a big issue because traditionally we have relied on what my father-in-law once very unkindly called “the bedroom accidents of farmers” for agricultural labour and management. We need to attract into the industry people who will not inherit farms, and ensure that we can provide them with a career structure. That means we need to be thinking that not all people, not even the bulk, working in agriculture in the future will be those who have not “inherited” into the industry; rather, they will be people who sit outside it. I have spoken with Minister Ellery and we want to do some work over the next six months to distil some of those ideas of what that might look like. If members on the other side of the house have some ideas, we would be absolutely happy to have them involved. That is really important.

There is always the question of whether farmers are offering a decent wage to keep good people in the industry. Since about the 1890s, agriculture has always competed with the mining sector. It is inevitable that that will continue to be the case. We have to focus on what we need to do and what we have to offer that the mining industry does not offer. There has to be a base pay. Farmers have noticed that this time around, some people are resistant to fly-in fly-out work because it is problematic to the lifestyle they want to lead with their families. Farmers at the table told us that they are offering good wages—in excess of \$100 000—plus a package of free accommodation and free food in some cases. Many enlightened farmers understand that farm values have increased. There have been good returns for many farmers and if we want to keep the show on the road, we have to look at increasing the competitiveness of what we have on offer. At our end, we have to do more to make sure that the training we offer is contemporary and relevant and that we offer a more layered training system that will encourage more people into the industry. We also need clearly defined qualifications that will allow pathways to migration. Often the problem is that young people come to Western Australia with perhaps a farming background but our migration list includes sheep farmer, cattle farmer and grain farmer. There is very little provision for skilled agricultural workers. That is in part because agricultural workers do not have formal qualifications. If we were able to develop this layer, we would be able to offer a skilled migration pathway for people to come here to either study or work.

I note that we absolutely appreciate—I think Hon Shelley Payne talked about this—that a bumper harvest is coming up this year. We are doing our best within the limits imposed by a global pandemic to help our farmers. When the federal government announced the restart of the Pacific seasonal worker program, we absolutely jumped on board. A whole team has been working since last year to bring in those people, and a dedicated quarantine hotel has been stood up for those seasonal workers. By the end of this week, we will have more than 1 400 seasonal workers in Western Australia. We accept that not a great deal of broadacre farming takes place in Tonga or Vanuatu. I understand from horticulturists that although quite a few of them have good machinery operating skills, very few of them are harvester operators. But we are encouraging grain farmers to look at how they could use that labour. I think last weekend a program was run with the Moora citrus seasonal workers to introduce them to the opportunities in the grain sector.

We have put a proposition to the federal government, but I have to say that the response was a bit disappointing. I am very much a fan of bringing Bridget McKenzie back into the agriculture portfolio at a federal level because she is someone we could work with. But we have put forward a proposition to the federal government that says that we will do all the organising work, as we do with the seasonal workers—recruiting them, chartering the plane and all of that stuff that we do with seasonal workers—but we are at our hotel quarantine limit. We cannot put people from Europe into our hotel quarantine system because of the Delta strain of the coronavirus. We have only three hotels that we can effectively staff and that have sufficient levels of ventilation for housing people coming from jurisdictions with the Delta strain of the virus. We have asked Minister Littleproud to work with us to develop the facility on Christmas Island or to look at utilising some other commonwealth facility. We probably need to utilise it for only a month or six weeks, because we need to get those workers in for only the three-month harvest period. It is not a big ask. It would be for a finite time. We hope that by harvest next year a specialised quarantine facility will finally be built, but we need something to start with by next month. Clearly, the best place is a commonwealth



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facility that is already in existence. We stand ready to work with the commonwealth government and our farmers to help to deliver that.

**HON DR BRIAN WALKER (East Metropolitan)** [2.04 pm]: I would like to, first of all, thank Hon Shelley Payne for bringing forward this motion. I also acknowledge the contributions of Hon Colin de Grussa and our revered Minister for Agriculture and Food. I do hope I am not speaking from the peanut gallery.

Several members interjected.

**Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER:** I can see the comments coming.

If anyone looked at my hands, they would know that I am not an agricultural worker. I have, however, spent most of my clinical life in rural and agricultural areas. In fact, I was brought up in the back of beyond in Malaysia because my father was working in the rubber, copra and palm oil industries. The issues that we face in producing in any one of the three main areas of society—that is, of course, health, education and agriculture—are well known to me. My most recent foray into such an area has been, of course, during my time in Kununoppin in the wheatbelt. I can say with absolute certainty that I believe the quality of our farmers in Western Australia is second to none, so all respect to those who are farming currently or have been farming or indeed will be farming under very difficult conditions.

From the medical point of view, one area that I was most concerned about was how to maintain the health of those who work in a remote and rural environment and who are deprived very often of what we take for granted in a metropolitan area when it comes to managing wellness. I have to confess that I have said to many a farmer that they are cantankerous sods who refuse to look after their health because they are too busy looking after their soil. Indeed, one of my best friends, John Shadbolt of Mukinbudin, at whose farm I stayed in 1966 when I was given some time off boarding school, introduced me to the pleasures of ringing and tailing lambs and looking after the wheat silos. However, I have also seen the despair on the faces of farmers who have found themselves in marginal areas, struggling to make ends meet and struggling to bring a profit from a harvest that has failed due to climate change or due to the fact that it is so very difficult when their business is dependent upon expanding farms at the pleasure of the banks, and who suddenly find themselves deprived of their resources and have to give up farming and abandon their farms. I was most shocked to hear that when a farmer retires he might expect only two years of retirement because leaving the land breaks their hearts.

With that in mind, it is important to consider that taking northern European broadacre farming into the Western Australian semi-arid conditions, with its salinity, salt lakes and the reduction in yield, makes life difficult for farmers, even if they have sheep to balance the wheat, as is commonly found. I had the great pleasure last week to take a trip to Denmark and Margaret River where I was especially concerned to find an alternative source that could promise a great benefit to our farmers. Our farmers are highly scientific. They are soil scientists and biochemists. As Hon Colin de Grussa said, they are able to adapt and find ways of using apps. I cannot believe that they were using apps in 1984 and writing their own programs. How very innovative and enterprising. These same innovative and enterprising farmers are now discovering that hemp can provide a fantastic resource. I must point out that most members are probably thinking that hemp is something that you grow to smoke. That is absolutely not the case. I am told that it is something that can produce about 20 000 different products—for example, things like bedding for hamsters and guinea-pigs, which I believe is worth \$1.2 billion annually in Australia alone. It is an industry that is currently forbidden or at least very difficult because of restrictions at government level. On the one hand, we have enterprising farmers and, on the other, we have very keen political input for making this happen because it is a fantastic fortune—a windfall—that is due to all of us in Australia. But somehow, as anyone familiar with the television series *Yes Minister* would know, behind the scenes, prevention of innovation is renowned in political circles. I fear that is what is happening here. I bring this to members' attention because it is depriving our nation, and indeed our state, of billions of dollars of taxable income that could provide any number of hospitals, support services or facilities, which we are lacking just now. Put in the hands of our innovative, enterprising and hardworking farmers, this could drive change in our society. What kind of product am I talking about? Apart from, of course, animal feed, it is also capable of producing human feed, including omega-3 oils and hemp seed, which could provide a wonderful source of protein with absolutely fantastic capabilities for enhancing our wellness. Think about how our Olympic athletes would benefit from this source of nutrition. Think about our export facility to nations that lack adequate or well-balanced nutrition; we could become a major exporting force helping other nations. Think about aid to foreign countries; our farmers could help to change the world.

On my trip down south, I was amazed at how well people are coping with the difficulties of navigating the impossible terrain of our legislation. If we were permitted to open up this innovative agricultural industry, I foresee that we could build any number of bushfire-safe properties. Indeed, people could make bushfire-safe refuges with hempcrete. If a fire were to overtake people defending their homes, there would be a place they could survive inside that could withstand the fire. It would be perfectly safe. We could make that. We could provide that. Another idea is that we could provide this type of accommodation to our Indigenous population. They could create accommodation suitable

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for their needs—not the four-by-two in Perth that we think is appropriate, but something more appropriate to the cultural needs of the First Peoples of this nation. It could be made of a sustainable substance that they could grow themselves. They could create profit for themselves and it could enhance the living conditions of those who are currently so very oppressed. We could even make plastics from hemp to use to make car chassis or, my personal preference, boat hulls for those of us who feel tired of current society and who may decide to set sail into the future.

Once again, I would like to thank Hon Shelley Payne for introducing this motion of thankfulness for the producers—the agricultural workers. I note the kind words of our minister in support of that and pay homage to all those working in this area.

**HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary)** [2.13 pm]: The Acting President (Hon Dr Sally Talbot) knows my passion for agriculture and my love of politics. I am very enthusiastic when both subjects come together and I really thank the Acting President for the opportunity to address this excellent motion put forward by Hon Shelley Payne. What a great start to the member's parliamentary career—a motion on a subject that we are all involved in one way or another, mostly as consumers. Everything we eat and most of what we wear comes from the agricultural industry, our industry. I am very enthusiastic about the industry. There has never been a better time to be involved in agriculture and I am really pleased to hear the gratitude that this house is showing towards our industry.

I have a vested interest. I operate a farm. My son has decided to come home and make a career in farming. That makes me very happy. I also work in partnership with my mother and my wife and our long-time, very valuable employee Mark. We have a good team. At different times of the year we will get casual staff to come and help us with the hay and the harvest. We value all our workers, and I particularly acknowledge that part of the motion today. Our workers have never been more valued. As I said in my inaugural speech a few years ago, workers power our nation. That is very evident today. All of a sudden, when there is a shortage of workers—not enough to go around—we value them the most. I do not know why it needs to be that way, but it is. There are about 30 000 direct agricultural workers and about 150 000 support workers in our industry and they do an amazing job. They are highly skilled and meet the challenges of today, and train themselves and set themselves up for the challenges of tomorrow. We must never undervalue our workforce. If we do, it will be at our peril.

I note that at about this time last year people were asking, “How are we going to get the sheep shorn? How are we going to get the crop off? How is it all going to work?” We managed. We should never underestimate our Western Australian workforce because we love a challenge. I have said many times that we do adversity particularly well in Western Australia; we just need to get a bit better at prosperity. When times are tough, that is when we dig in and make the most of it. The crop last year was over 16 million tonnes. In one day, without all our overseas workers, we still managed to break a daily receival record at Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd. I think that is a great testament to what the Western Australian workforce is capable of. I am sure that we will meet the challenges this year, but, of course, the more hands on deck, the lighter the workload will be. We are looking at a 20 million tonne crop this year. That will be the largest ever on record. Barring frost events or problems with the weather from now until harvest time, we can expect a bonanza in the agricultural sector. There are high prices for all grains and good prices for livestock and wool. I think the need around the world for horticultural products means there are good days ahead.

When considering bringing in workers, the most important thing we have done as a government is to keep Western Australians safe, and that has kept our economy strong. That will continue throughout this harvest. Yes, we acknowledge that we can bring in workers, and we should bring in workers, especially in the horticultural sector, but the number one priority is the safety of Western Australians. Our thoughts are with those in the eastern states who are going through particularly tough times at the moment in lockdown and particularly the damaging effects that has on the economies of the eastern seaboard. I do not think we should go down that path. I think we should keep Western Australians safe. We should try to get everybody vaccinated and then reset again. Therefore, we are going to have to work harder this harvest than we have ever worked before, but I think we are up to it.

I acknowledge the history of those who forged our industry from very humble beginnings way back in the 1830s through to the mid-1900s. The 1960s and 1970s saw massive changes in the agricultural sector, with the introduction of big tractors. We had our first one million tonne crop in 1970. Members, that was not that long ago. We are now eyeing off a 20 million tonne crop. I think that shows the willingness of our agricultural sector to adopt new technology. As I mentioned earlier, it also creates a lot of jobs. I had a quick run-through of the equipment on our farm. We have a sprayer that is made in Beverley, our spreader is made in Harvey, and our Ausplow seeder—the envy-of-the-world, the Rolls-Royce of seeders—is made in Jandakot. A lot of manufacturing jobs come out of the agricultural sectors as well.

There are a lot of opportunities for people to get involved and have a touch and feel of the agricultural sector at the Perth Royal Show—which hopefully is going ahead this year—all our agricultural shows and of course our

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field days. The Dowerin GWN7 Machinery Field Days are coming up in a few weeks. The Mingenew Midwest Expo is on in a couple of weeks as well, and also the Newdegate Machinery Field Days. Members who have the opportunity should go down and have a look at the latest innovation and technology and immerse themselves in our agricultural sector.

I am really pleased that WA Labor is now the party of regional Western Australia and the party of agriculture. We can remember when our opponents were in government a very short time ago and they gutted the former Department of Agriculture and Food, closed our railway lines and let the road network run to ruin.

I am pleased that there are some strong agricultural connections in our government. That includes the Premier, son of a wool classer; Minister Saffioti, daughter of a Roleystone orchardist; Minister Papalia, son of a Harvey dairy farmer; Hon Shelley Payne, with her connections to the fishing industry; and Hon Jackie Jarvis, a winemaker—a very important profession. We have deep-rooted agricultural connections in our party. That makes us a party in government that is stronger and more appreciative of agriculture. That has certainly been the case. Minister MacTiernan has been a revelation in turning around and rebuilding the former department of agriculture and getting agricultural research back, and also for having the good fight with the Grains Research and Development Corporation about getting greater investment back into Western Australia from our levies. It is great that the oat breeding program has been brought back to Western Australia. That is another opportunity for young agricultural scientists to get into that in-the-ground research, if you like.

There are some great stories to tell from our government. We have made strong road, rail and supply chain investments. I was particularly pleased to go to Merredin last week and talk to a group of agriculture industry people and farmers about how they would like us to invest, whether it be into the road network or perhaps even to reopen some of the closed railway lines in the eastern wheatbelt. The feedback was extremely positive. Muresk Institute is back. Muresk was closed under the previous government. We are investing \$8 million in Muresk to train all our young and up-and-coming mechanics. Our ag colleges are full, with waiting lists. It is a tremendous sign for the future, and very exciting, that young people are choosing a career in agriculture over other professions. People from the city, and people who do not come from a traditional farming background, are seeing opportunities in agriculture that have never been available before.

I think Minister MacTiernan is the best agriculture minister we have ever had. That is a big call, because Hon Kim Chance was a fine one. Minister MacTiernan is looking at the endless possibilities that are ahead of us, whether it be in hemp production, regenerative agriculture or carbon farming. All of the above is on the table. We have a minister who is prepared to look at new ideas and consider them.

We know that we had animal welfare issues in the live export trade. But the minister is right; we can process the stock here and provide thousands of local jobs in our own communities. Why would we not want to do that? We have an opposition that is hell-bent on supporting an industry that has had significant challenges, does not have a strong public and social licence, and was almost completely trashed by Barnaby Joyce when he was Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources, because he provided no oversight, and we saw the result. I think the livestock sector can do better than that, and our customers are demanding better than that. Into the future, as we move forward, we need to respond to those challenges and meet the social licence that our customers demand. We can do it. We can do anything. We have the best agricultural sector in the world. I am biased, but I believe that is the case.

I thank Hon Shelley Payne for the motion that has come forward. I acknowledge the contributions of the other speakers. I note that there are more people who wish to speak in the time remaining, so I will wind up my remarks, but I reiterate that there has never been a better time to be involved in agriculture.

**HON STEVE MARTIN (Agricultural)** [2.22 pm]: I also congratulate Hon Shelley Payne on this excellent motion, and I rise to make a contribution on behalf of the opposition. I share Hon Darren West's enthusiasm for the agricultural sector. There is never a bad time to talk about farming in this place, so I certainly welcome that opportunity today.

We have heard from various speakers about the raw numbers—the billions and billions of dollars that are generated by this sector, and the tens of thousands of people who are employed in this sector across this great state—so I will not go into that too much. What I would like to do today is give members some more personal stories about some of the things that are happening in this sector and try to put a face to some of those stories, as a quite recent farmer myself.

Some of the most extraordinary changes in this sector in the past 30 years have been around the grains sector. Hon Shelley Payne is right; we are in the middle of a very wet winter, with record rainfall in a lot of the state. I am in the central great southern, and if people head all the way south to Frankland, it is very, very wet. I was on the farm on the weekend talking to my father, who has been farming since he was 14, and he is 84. He has never seen our place wetter than it is at the moment. Most of the great southern is under water. Thirty years ago, that would have been a complete disaster. Farmers would not have got a crop. In fact, he reminisced about a crop that he grew

**Extract from *Hansard***

[COUNCIL — Wednesday, 4 August 2021]

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in the 1960s, when after several wet years he got a bag and a half an acre, which is how that was measured in those days. That is a couple of hundred kilos a hectare—300 kilos a hectare. That was not much fun. The crop we have at the moment will have significant waterlogging damage, but it will still be a very good crop. The changes that we have seen in the past 30 years are responsible for that excellent crop. I am not going to put a number on it. As a very recent farmer, I hate it when people start talking in July about bumper crops, because there is a long way to go until December, but it will be a very good result.

In talking about some of the changes that have allowed us to grow that outstanding crop in this trying and very wet season, I acknowledge that Hon Colin de Grussa's district was at the forefront of changing from ploughing to minimum tillage. My father and his generation of farmers would have waited until the middle of May when it rained, and they would have taken the plough out of the shed, ploughed the soil, and let the weeds germinate. They would then have come back 10 days later and worked it back, and then waited another 10 days to seed it. We are talking the middle of June. It would have been very wet and soggy. The wheat would have come up at about the same time as the weeds, and the weeds would have grown better than the wheat, so not much wheat would have grown. He told me that at one stage, he was turning over the capeweed with the plough, and it would start growing again straightaway.

Growers now start seeding by the calendar, not the rain. If they are fortunate to live in a part of the world like Esperance or the northern wheatbelt, in the middle of April—when 15 April comes along—they will start seeding, whether it is dry, wet or indifferent; they will just start. That enables the crop to get established on that first rain. This year, that will be worth billions of dollars of export income to this state, simply because we can do that, with minimum tillage, and with very useful chemicals and herbicides that we can use. That includes, might I add, some GM canola, which the previous government introduced, despite being trashed by some of the speakers today for its efforts in recent years. GM canola is now available. That is a very useful tool to Western Australian growers. It is not grown widely, but it is a very useful weed control. It is used widely in parts of the wheatbelt and great southern. We have access to that technology. That will enable us to get a really strong crop this year, in what would otherwise have been difficult circumstances.

I will mention some of the other changes. In the old days, the wheatbelt was a very defined part of the state to the north of me. Now just out of Porongurup and Frankland River, farmers are growing barley, lupins, wheat and canola. The wheatbelt goes from south of Cranbrook to north of Yuna. It is a battle for hectares. The grain industry has overtaken the livestock industry. That has been simply a risk-and-reward decision that growers and farmers have made. The grains sector in Western Australia has grown, as we heard from Hon Darren West, from one million tonnes in 1970 to approximately 17 million tonnes or 20 million tonnes this year. That is simply a shift of hectares out of livestock and into grain.

We have also had access to some remarkable inventions from Western Australian growers. Weed control is important in members' gardens and in my wheat crop. One thing that has happened recently is that a gentleman at Darkan, Mr Harrington, has invented two fine hammermills that sit on the back of a harvester and smash up the wheat seeds. The wheat seeds are normally picked up during the harvest and go through the header. The wheat goes in the box, and the seeds go out the back, and normally they grow the following year. His machine smashes those seeds to bits, and that makes for a cleaner crop next year when he puts those wheat seeds back in. Those sorts of innovations and inventions are some of the reasons that the Western Australian grains sector has thrived. We need to be very grateful for that level of innovation, all the way back from the Smart family, which was growing wheat and lupin on rotation in the northern wheatbelt, to people like Ray Harrington.

I would also like to talk a bit about another topic that was mentioned by Hon Colin de Grussa, and that is the grower group model. For those members who are not aware, dotted across the agricultural sector are small grower-led organisations that initially were focused on research and have now morphed into community building. They are what the Country Women's Association, the footy club, the bowls club, the Rotary Club and the Lions Club used to be. Those grower groups include the Facey Group, which I have been a member of since it started. Hon Colin de Grussa was a member of the South East Premium Wheat Growers Association. There is also the Mingenew–Irwin Group and Liebe Group Inc. There are a number of them. They are doing the on-the-ground research that has been really useful for innovation in agriculture. I will give members a quick example of some of that innovation and research. As has been mentioned once or twice, frost is a significant risk for grain growers in the southern half of the state. If a farmer's wheat crop in Williams is powering along nicely in September, but on 15 September the temperature drops to minus two, the wheat crop dies. In my property at Wickepin, I will have a frost every single year. It might be two per cent damage or it could be 72 per cent damage, depending on how cold, for how long and how many frosts. That is a significant risk factor for grain growers. The Facey Group, as I said, is run by a small group of local growers. One of its members had land that had experienced a fire in the summer, and he was harvesting across some burnt stubble and some fully grown stubble in the following year's wheat crop. Farmers have a yield monitor and a harvester that tells them the yield of the grain. His yield monitor flicked from three tonnes to one tonne straightaway. As soon as he moved out of the burnt patch into the standing stubble, it moved. He thought: "That's odd; the yield monitor's stuffed." He gave it

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a tap, turned around at the end of the paddock, came back in and it did it again; the monitor moved from three tonnes to one tonne as soon as he moved out of the burnt stubble. We thought that there was a target for some research here. The burnt stubble, which was black, was letting the sunlight into the crop, which was making the crop more frost resistant, in effect. The sun was getting in, warming up the soil early in the morning, and therefore the crop was able to handle colder temperatures. That is the sort of very useful research that those grower group alliances are doing.

I have a couple of other quick points. The model that Hon Darren West mentioned about his family farm set-up is still the model used across the vast bulk of the agricultural sector. It makes the headlines when a Chinese organisation or a Canadian super fund rushes in and buys some hectares somewhere. If we asked, most people would assume that corporate agriculture has taken hold in Western Australia. That is far and away not true. The family farm is still the strongest model across our state. There are corporate hectares, but the family farm still rules the agriculture sector in Western Australia, and I think that is a great strength of our sector. That keeps our regional communities alive, because those families are invested in their towns. As we have heard from a few members, those families fundraise for the football club, the school and for their communities through volunteer harvesting because the family farm model is strong in our communities.

Another topic I would like to talk about quickly is the link between metropolitan Perth and regional Western Australia. There are fewer of us out there than there has ever been in comparison with the metropolitan population, so those links have broken down. Everyone had an uncle George who had a block in Burracoppin or Darkan or somewhere. Those links are gone, or are fewer than they were. I want to talk about a program that one of our major banks runs with a group of graduate schoolteachers every year. It gets together 20 or 30 metropolitan-based schoolteachers who are about to head out into the world and teach children. They know nothing about agriculture, by and large, so the bank organises a group of local farmers to host them for three days on a property in the great southern or the wheatbelt so that they can experience agriculture firsthand, and then, when they get in the classroom with those children who have no idea where milk comes from—it comes from almonds, apparently!—or where their meat comes from, and certainly have no idea that bread contains wheat, for example, that bank and those family farmers are getting involved so that our teachers can pass on the knowledge to the next generation of metropolitan kids. That vital link between what they eat, the air they breathe and the fibre they wear is strong and real. I really encourage members to please visit one of those programs if they get a chance to get involved.

We heard from a number of speakers about the contribution of workers in our agricultural sector. I would also like to pay tribute to the great work that the thousands and thousands of workers do in our sector. We are very short of staff at the moment. I think the minister mentioned that it is a sophisticated and technologically driven sector these days, but there are still workers who work very, very hard. I particularly pay tribute to them. The shearing industry is a favourite topic of mine. I will tell members a quick story to highlight how some of that remaining work is still very hard. A couple of years ago, a gentleman in our shearing shed crutched 800 sheep in one day. It is an eight-hour day with breaks. That works out to be roughly 50 tonnes of livestock that he dragged out of the pen. He sat them on the floor, crutched them and stuck them down the chute. He crutched approximately 50 tonnes of sheep in one day. He came back and did it again the next day and the day after that. That industry has not substantially changed for 70 years. Those guys and women still work very, very hard, and they do it every day.

The other thing that struck my brother and I as we worked out how hard this man was working was that from about three o'clock in the afternoon, he is doing that for the Australian government. On his marginal tax rate, he is dragging the last 12.5 tonnes out of the pen, onto the board, crutching them and chucking them down the chute, to pay his tax. He gets paid per sheep, not per hour. That was a sobering thought. When I was talking about my political career, my brother said, "Keep an eye on spending that money, because that guy has worked really, really hard to get it."

We are short of labour. Another issue at the moment, of course, is the trucking sector. I would like to mention some of the issues that we have coming up to harvest. We talked about the possibility of that skills summit coming up with some results on overseas labour. I wish the minister well in that task, but we are going to be short. It is now August 2021 and we have been at this for 15 months or more, and I do not expect we will have any meaningful extra labour for harvest. We are short by thousands of workers. There might be some work around the edges. We certainly will not have any extra truck drivers. In recent months, CBH Group has had some issues with contracts because it simply cannot get the grain to port to put it on a boat because it has lost train and truck drivers. Those particular transport sectors are vitally important for shipping our product. We are very short of qualified truck drivers, and that will cost the WA industry and the state money at harvest time.

We heard from Hon Colin de Grussa about what delays of harvest mean. Nothing good happens to a crop once it gets ripe and is still standing in a paddock. It can get burnt down or blown over, it can get rain on it or it can sprout—nothing good. Every single day that that harvest is delayed is potentially costing Western Australian growers money. I would urge the government to please concentrate on trying to get a result on that skills shortage.

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Even if we can get workers in that sector and others, we simply cannot house them. I was in Moora recently. Andrew Forrest is opening a feedlot there, which will create 50-odd jobs, and there will be a Westpork piggery as well, creating 30 to 40 jobs, but there is nowhere for those workers to live—nowhere at all. It is ludicrous to expect the Shire of Moora to develop the land and provide housing. The government needs to get involved around headworks and charges in those regional towns so that we can provide housing for the workers that we so badly need.

In closing, I again thank Hon Shelley Payne for moving this motion. It is a great opportunity to talk in this place about a particularly favourite topic of mine. I certainly pay tribute to everyone involved in the agricultural sector. I have particular sympathy for those people who work in and rely on the weather for their livelihoods. I think that is a very tough job. Those people need to be resilient and strong, and self-starters, and our agricultural sector is full of those individuals. Congratulations on the motion, and thank you very much.

**HON JACKIE JARVIS (South West)** [2.38 pm]: I rise today to support the motion. I thank Hon Shelley Payne for her motion commending the McGowan government for investing in the future of WA's agricultural industry and its workforce. I have some experience in this area. I thank Hon Steve Martin for a bit of grain grower 101. We have quite a few members on this side who are from the Agricultural Region. I have worked for what was the Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the Grain Industry Association of Western Australia, so I have some knowledge in this area. I need to correct the record, though: I am a partner in a commercial grape-growing property and farming business. My husband is the winemaker, though, so I stress that I know nothing about making wine; I tend to focus more on quality control and research and development!

Hon Darren West spoke quite passionately about the workers who play an important role on his farm, and other speakers have also acknowledged farm workers. As I mentioned, I have some experience in this area. In fact, in 2015 I was contracted by the then Department of Agriculture and Food to work with the 14 leading farming, food production and fishing industry groups. To put that in context, I want members to remember that in 2015 the former Liberal–National government was slashing jobs and funding to the Department of Agriculture and Food.

Industry came knocking on the door of the Barnett government, seeking urgent help. Again, for context, in 2015 we were a couple of years into the mining boom. The agriculture sector was facing critical human resource drain to the mining sector, and it was desperate for help with worker shortages, which is a recurring theme. The only response the department could offer was to fund one FTE on a short-term contract. That was my role, as a workforce development officer, and even then the position was funded by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia. DAFWA was so hamstrung by pressure from the Liberal–National government of the day and its revolving door of agriculture ministers to reduce FTE that it was forced to give funds to CCIWA to employ project staff. It was under so much pressure to reduce FTE that it outsourced to the CCI vital jobs in trade advisory and workforce development roles—roles that actually build the sector. This was the response of the Liberal–National government to the agriculture and food sector—the second-largest trade sector in WA.

This, of course, came on the back of retrenching respected agricultural scientists and research staff, slashing funding and leaving regional research stations in disarray. Between 2013 and 2017 there were three different Liberal agriculture ministers, and they slashed jobs and funding to an agency that supports thousands of small businesses. Hon Steve Martin mentioned that farming businesses in WA are, indeed, family businesses, so the former Liberal–National government slashed funding to the very agency that supports the family farms that provide this state with food security. These are family farming businesses that create exports worth \$7.5 billion annually. That was the response of the government of the day.

In 2015 food and fibre producers were desperate for workforce development programs, but there was no money for training programs and no money to encourage young people into vocational training. There was no funding to train young Western Australians to support food production in this state. We know that TAFE plays a key role in vocational training in Western Australia. I am a big believer in TAFE. Not only does it train people in important vocational skill sets, it is also vital in supporting vocationally trained people who wish to pursue further study. A certificate IV qualification delivered through TAFE provides a valuable pathway into university for people who have not taken the ATAR pathway at school or are mature-age students. It provides people with opportunities, and I have seen firsthand people who have used TAFE qualifications to leverage into agribusiness or other bachelor degree courses.

Again, in 2015, when the sector came knocking on the door, desperate for a skilled workforce, the Liberal–National government was actively cutting funding to TAFE and making TAFE courses more expensive. I have gone back through *Hansard*—because I have nothing better to do in my spare time!—and on 25 February 2015 Hon Fran Logan, the former member for Cockburn, said in the other place —

Over the past six years, the Barnett government has abandoned and effectively undermined vocational education in Western Australia.

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He went on to note that in the six years leading up to February 2015 there had been five different ministers for training and workforce development. Let us reflect upon that: five ministers in six years in the training portfolio and three ministers in four years in the agriculture portfolio. It seems to me that the Barnett government perhaps suffered from its own skills shortage.

I return to *Hansard* of 25 February 2015. Hon Fran Logan quoted the then training minister, Hon Liza Harvey, as having said —

... TAFE fees have to increase because they have been too low for too long.

Liza Harvey responded by saying —

That is true.

She was quite happy to admit that the then government thought TAFE fees had been too low for too long. In 2015, when food and fibre producers were desperate to get skilled young people into these industries, the Liberal–National government of the day was increasing TAFE fees. From my understanding, TAFE fees for certificates II, III and IV—certificates for qualifications such as rural operations, which lead to pathways into agriculture, and the very broad range of vocational skill sets—were increased by 24 per cent. There were further increases of 19 per cent in 2016 and 17 per cent in 2017. That was the then government’s response. In contrast, the McGowan government has invested \$7.5 million into a new specialist centre for agricultural mechanisation. Hon Colin de Grussa spoke passionately about precision agriculture. Well, someone has to fix and program those very expensive machines that have fabulous GPS tracking mechanisms and auto-steering. This centre for agricultural mechanisation at Muresk Institute WA is incredibly important. That \$7.5 million is part of a broader \$167 million of infrastructure investment in TAFE.

I acknowledge that the previous government spent a lot of money refurbishing the Muresk Institute, but then it spent millions subsidising east coast universities to deliver courses there, at a loss. In contrast, the McGowan government has made TAFE more affordable so that people can actually afford to go there. Those who attend this new state-of-the-art facility at Muresk to undertake a certificate III in agricultural mechanical technology can take advantage of the lower fees, local skills initiative. Fees are capped at \$1 200 for mature-age students and just \$400 for young people aged 15 to 24, or those on concessions. The McGowan government has also committed \$500 000 to a specialist shearing shed training facility at Muresk.

When the grain industry came to the McGowan government in 2020, concerned about worker shortages ahead of the time-critical seeding and harvest seasons, we did something about it. In contrast, the federal Morrison government has known since March 2020 that industries are going to be short of skilled workers, yet here we are talking about quarantine facilities, not this year but in another year’s time. Yes, we are all working hard to try to fill the skills gap, but this is not a surprise. We have known about this, as Hon Steve Martin said, for 15 months.

We did not do what the Liberal–National government did back in 2015: we did not increase training costs and we did not say they were too low. We did not make TAFE courses unaffordable. Hon Colin de Grussa talked about farming communities and their drive to learn. He is obviously one of a handful of wonderful people who have been Nuffield scholars and have enhanced our agricultural sector. There are also Churchill Fellows who have undertaken this kind of research. I acknowledge my friend I-Lyn Loo who is currently undertaking Churchill Fellowship research into regenerative agriculture in Western Australia. We know there is a drive to learn in the sector, so we do not make learning and training opportunities unaffordable for students, we do not make it unaffordable for their parents, and we certainly do not make it unaffordable for their employers.

The industry came to us and said, “We’re going to be short of harvest drivers and seeders.” Australia every year up until 2020 had about 145 000 backpackers come into the country for that work. When young people from farming families in Europe or America came to operate that machinery, they were here on backpacker visas. We knew when the international borders closed that that skilled workforce that we needed was not going to be there. The McGowan Labor government introduced some free short skill-set training at the Muresk Institute and then delivered it at TAFEs at Albany and Esperance. Hon Colin de Grussa talked about the South East Premium Wheat Growers Association down in Esperance where there are some of the most successful farmers in the state with some of the biggest yields. We went out of our way to make sure that TAFEs were delivering these short skill-set training courses for free. Before I was a member of Parliament, I had the opportunity to go out to the Muresk Institute and Hon Darren West was there. We saw the first class of people graduate from the skill-set training courses. People of all ages were there: retrenched airline pilots, young people and school leavers. We did not make TAFE training more expensive; we went out and gave free training to young people.

When the shearing contractors came to the McGowan government in 2020, knowing that they would not be able to access the usual cohort of New Zealand shearing teams, we funded regional shearing camps in partnership with Australian Wool Innovation to deliver practical shearing and wool-handling training. I know that the criticism

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will be: “Well, you just can’t put someone through a short course; we need the experience of the shearers from New Zealand.” As I said, the federal government knew back in March 2020 that we needed these people in the country.

Interestingly, Hon Alannah MacTiernan talked about V&V Walsh down in Bunbury. I had the opportunity to visit V&V Walsh, which is a sheep processing facility, about 12 months ago. For those members who do not know, processing sheep means chopping up sheep! V&V Walsh had a viable export market in sheepskins. The sheepskins would have some initial processing done here and then they would be sold to someone in the United States. When COVID hit and shipping slowed down, V&V Walsh did not have access to that market anymore, but it had sheepskins. This was at a time when the wool price was quite high, and V&V Walsh was quite innovative. It rigged up a stand to lay the sheepskins over and had students from the Western Australia College of Agriculture, from Harvey in the south west, come in to do a shearing skill set on the sheepskins. It was a good way to learn; no live sheep were involved. There is innovation across the sector.

Obviously, the WA agricultural sector will continue to feel the impact of closed international borders for a second year. We cannot continue to access backpackers at this point. The federal government knows that and has known that for a long time. If I reflect on my time in 2015, I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the Barnett government had not decimated WA’s training institutes. Definitely today, our farmers and food processors would have a much larger pool of skilled workers supporting this industry.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** I call Hon Neil Thomson, but I will draw the member’s attention to the fact that we have only 13 minutes of the debate left. I am obliged to interrupt the debate five minutes before the end to offer the mover of the motion a chance to reply, and there are a couple of other members who have indicated that they would like to speak.

**HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [2.52 pm]:** Thank you, Acting President. Thank you to Hon Jackie Jarvis for bringing this motion on.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** She didn’t!

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** Sorry! Hon Shelley Payne. It is always a pleasure to talk about agriculture —

**Hon Dan Caddy** interjected.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** Dan—that is it! Daniel Caddy.

It is always an honour to talk about the agricultural workers in the agricultural sector. It is an area that I have been involved in for many years. As a recipient of a very good education at the University of Western Australia and my college postgraduate degree in agricultural science, I must say that I was fortunate to work in the Department of Agriculture back in the day and be involved in the pastoral industry in the north. I want to focus a little bit on the pastoral industry because although people talk about the agricultural region, the pastoral industry is an agricultural industry, and it is very important that that continues to grow to its maximum potential.

**The ACTING PRESIDENT:** Member, can you just take a seat for a moment. I draw members’ attention to the fact that there is a low level of ambient noise here, which is not helpful for anybody. If you could just keep your conversations very sotto voce or take them outside. Thank you.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** Thank you, Acting President.

When I talk to people in the industry, they do not mention Mark McGowan as the person who saves them and they do not look to Mark McGowan as the person who will drive the industry; they look to themselves. They are a very self-sufficient lot. But I very much support the sentiment of Hon Shelley Payne. I hope that commending the McGowan government for its investment in the future is an aspirational goal. I hope it is something that the McGowan government will be aspiring to do in the future. I am looking forward to when the budget discussion comes on because we heard a lot about the slashing of the budget under the Barnett government. I was a little surprised because I thought that with this motion being moved, we would hear some great announcements. I thought we would hear a list of great initiatives. There were a few and I give some credit to Hon Alannah MacTiernan—thank you for talking about the 1 400 seasonal workers who will be coming into the state through the quarantine facility. It is fantastic to see that something is being done in that space, and I encourage the government to continue to move on and not deflect blame on the commonwealth and say that it is all its fault and that we cannot do more.

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan** interjected.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** The government is sitting on a massive \$5 billion windfall from the iron ore industry. I am sure it could sort out —

**Hon Dan Caddy:** It’s paying back the \$40 billion.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** No; \$30 billion, by the way. The member loves to bring up the issue of the \$40 billion. It is a great one! I had a debate on this in Kalgoorlie with —



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**Hon Dan Caddy:** It's not my \$40 billion; it's your \$40 billion.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** At the time the government left, it was \$32 billion. This is a sleight of hand; government members do not to admit that gross debt went up to almost \$10 billion during the last term of the McGowan government. Government members love to put that up there, but here we have a huge windfall in iron ore, so I would encourage the minister to do more. We heard from my colleague Hon Steve Martin—by the way, I am just trying to correct the record here a little and I will have fun during the budget. Hon Steve Martin talked about the challenges in the transport industry, particularly in the area of logistics. May I say, it concerned me greatly to see the vessel that was coming in to collect grain be turned around at short notice. That was of great concern to the industry. The industry very much relies on markets and it has to be responsive to markets. I understand that there is a COVID pandemic, but I am certain that something could have been done to load some grain onto that vessel without resulting in additional risk to the community of Western Australia. The McGowan government could look at bringing more certainty back to our marketing for agricultural produce because marketing drives the industry, not some government program. The markets and the sale of our goods drives the industry.

We heard from Hon Alannah MacTiernan about the processing industry. I will make a few comments on that. At the moment, the Kimberley abattoir is currently mothballed for a period of time. It made a commercial decision to do that and its workers have been —

**Hon Alannah MacTiernan:** And why do you think that is?

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** I will absolutely say a few things about why we think that is, and I hope the minister listens. Staff have been moved to another place, so we have not lost staff.

We have had many years of opportunity to develop a more sustainable fattening industry in the north of our state but we have not done that because we have not been able to get opportunities in irrigation and in the development of our logistics chains to allow for cheaper inputs, particularly fertiliser. Live trade and our export trade across to the eastern states et cetera is the only viable option for the pastoral industry in my part of the world. It would be great if we could see more active development in the area of irrigation and the development of good quality fodder. I know there are some excellent researchers in Broome, and I commend the minister for the good work that some of those people are involved in, but more could be done to ensure that we have a stronger agricultural sector in the north so that it is not hit by the vagaries of a very high meat price, which means that the processing sector is not viable.

**The DEPUTY PRESIDENT:** Order, member! I am required by the temporary orders to interrupt debate and offer the mover of the motion an opportunity to reply.

**HON SHELLEY PAYNE (Agricultural) [3.00 pm]** — in reply: I thank all members for their contribution to the debate. It is evident that the agricultural industry is one of which we can be proud. A number of issues have been raised. I thank the Minister for Agriculture and Food, Hon Alannah MacTiernan, for her contribution, which referred to the importance of support industries and how the agriculture industry is helping to pioneer businesses that supply farmers and the manufacturing sector. She also provided feedback on last week's skills summit, its outcome and what we need to attract more workers, including more training, more university programs and a more layered training system to encourage more people into the industry. The minister also advised us of all the work that the government is doing in talking to the industry to determine how to move forward to address the skills shortages. Her contribution also referred to the competition that we face with the mining industry, the work that we are doing to get more workers from overseas, how 1 400 seasonal workers will be here by the end of the month and how we are working with the federal government, but within the limitations of our hotel quarantine system.

I also thank Hon Colin de Grussa for his contribution, in which he talked about farmers being at the forefront of adapting to new practices in the spirit of cooperation in the agricultural region because of their isolation and the need to work together and how they are good at facing challenges. Farmers are hard workers and innovative.

I thank Hon Dr Brian Walker for his contribution in which he stated that a future hemp industry will provide many benefits and make a big contribution to our agriculture industry. Hon Darren West stated that we all have such a big connection with the ag industry because we eat every day; it is vital to mankind. He asked why it is only just now, with a shortage of agricultural workers, that we are starting to value them. Hon Darren West also acknowledged all the hard work of those who started the industry some 100 years ago. He also said that Muresk Institute is back up and running, that more people are choosing agriculture as a career and that there has never been a better time to get involved in the agriculture industry.

I also thank Hon Steve Martin for his personal stories about changes to farming practices to get better yields and how there has been a shift from livestock to grains. He also reiterated the issues for harvest because of worker shortages, including the lack of truck drivers, and housing shortages for agricultural workers in some of the regions. He also paid tribute to all those working in the regions—our resilient and strong self-starter farmers.

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I thank Hon Jackie Jarvis for emphasising the importance of our continued support for the agricultural industry and the investment in training and education and innovation. She also mentioned that our government has worked hard to support the industry by reducing TAFE fees. I also thank Hon Neil Thomson for referring to the pastoral industry and how there is potential for a stronger industry in the north. I thank everyone for their contributions. I again thank Hon Alannah MacTiernan, the Minister for Agriculture and Food, for all her efforts, commitment and hard work as the agriculture minister over the last term of government and now. Finally, I acknowledge our agriculture workers, who are working so hard in the agricultural region.

Question put and passed.