

**DROUGHT — SOUTHERN RANGELANDS**

*Grievance*

**MR K.M. O'DONNELL (Kalgoorlie)** [9.12 am]: Greetings, Mr Speaker. I thank the minister for accepting the grievance.

It was a scorching 38-degree day when I visited Woolibar station, 44 kilometres from Kalgoorlie–Boulder. The station owner, Matt, and his wife, Kat, showed me and the local media around their land, pointing out areas where grass used to be as far as the eye could see, but now covered in only red dirt and dung. We saw around 30 calves enthusiastically chomping around a bale of hay that had been outsourced by Matt. These calves were weaned off their mothers way before time because they were not getting enough sustenance. Next we saw a dam that had had to be fenced off. The water in the dam had decreased dramatically but had not completely dried out. Cattle were trying to drink from it and were getting bogged and injuring themselves or eventually drowning. We could see the track where they had dragged the carcasses out of the water. That was why the area had to be fenced off and it set Matt and Kat back \$10 000. They did not want to see their livestock injured or dead. It is unfortunate that there is still water in the dam that could be pumped into troughs, but, again, that would set them back. It made me think when Matt said to me that they are spending money not to lose money. Not even to make money—they are just trying to keep going.

Woolibar station is lucky to be one of the closest stations to Kalgoorlie–Boulder. The situation is bad but not yet dire. Can you imagine what stations that are hundreds of kilometres away from the closest towns are facing?

The perception is that the drought is in the eastern states, and that is where the spotlight is shining brightly. We saw convoys of trucks carting hay from Western Australia to the eastern states, some even bypassing the gates of our drought-stricken stations. The reality is that WA farmers and pastoralists are hurting as well. For ages, no one has come forward. Perhaps they thought, “Oh, those in the east must have it much worse than us”, or resilience and pride have cupped their hands across their mouths. But now they are speaking up and asking for help.

The first I heard about this situation was on Friday, 18th October. Paul Axford, a pastoralist from Sturt Meadows station in Leonora, came into my office and spoke about the hardships that he and his family have been going through for two years running because there is no rain. The following Monday, my office heard from Graeme Campbell, whose brother runs Kybo station in the Nullarbor. Next came an email from the Shire of Coolgardie president, Mal Cullen, just in the space of a few days.

Since then, our office has pulled together an initial meeting with those local government representatives and stakeholders who have reached out to us. People were coming in with their issues and going on different tangents, so it was necessary to sit together and move forward collectively.

My office has also recently heard from Farmers Across Borders. That is the group that organised the convoys of hay from country Western Australia to Cobarr New South Wales and Murchison this year. Their latest hay run was to the Nullarbor. They are a group of volunteers mainly consisting of farmers and truckies. When they did their first hay run, known as the Australia Day hay run, they received a lot of coverage and applause. However, they have since been inundated with calls from WA farmers asking why they did not help them instead. They had no idea that WA was suffering from drought. When they did a hay run to the Nullarbor, the drivers reported that they were shocked how bad it has been. There has been no summer rain for years. The farmers who received bales of hay wept and said they thought they had been forgotten. Farmers Across Borders are planning another run in January next year. They are currently baling up hay and fundraising for fuel. The fuel costs for the trip to the east was subsidised by the New South Wales government because drought had been declared there. I have been informed that they have approached the Western Australian government, but the government has no interest in meeting with them, let alone assisting them, because the drought is not recognised here. That is not right. The WA government would rather see this valuable hay and livestock feed go to the eastern states. To our farmers, pastoralists and graziers, this feed is as important as gold, iron ore, nickel or any other mineral resource is to our state and mining industry.

I will share an account from Colin and Brie Campbell of Mundrabilla station. They wrote that Mundrabilla station, which is approximately 116 kilometres from the South Australia and Western Australia border, has rain records dating back to 1902. They are set to break a 117-year record for the driest year —

The drought coupled with the ban on shooting kangaroos back in 2016 which caused the subsequent collapse of the kangaroo industry in WA then the explosion of kangaroo numbers has had a double whammy effect in the southern rangelands.

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We have destocked to a point that we can ... Many of our neighbours have dramatically destocked as well and have had to put animals out on agistment to try and retain some of their breeding stock. Despite our best efforts of feeding, weaning and destocking we have had large stock losses. This is a very common story

with everyone I have spoken to. This is the most heartbreaking aspect of the drought. Losing or even seeing animals you have worked so hard to keep happy and healthy suffer.

It was brought to my attention that the Queensland government has a very proactive approach towards drought declaration and management. It has a very good website called “Long Paddock” with plenty of information on its drought relief assistance scheme. The government monitors the weather patterns and sends out letters to all pastoralists asking if they want to have a drought declared. Individual droughted properties can be declared, instead of a whole area. That is very impressive and we could take a leaf out of that book.

The New South Wales government also has clear and good information available on drought assistance under “DroughtHub” on its Department of Primary Industries website. There is also a problem with absentee landlords. These are corporations or mining companies that have bought the land, destocked and failed to take care of the infrastructure. Dams and fences are just left to rot. They could not care less about the land and are not at all worried about drought as it does not affect them. They should be held accountable.

The minister was quoted in *The West Australian* of Tuesday, 29 October saying that the \$10 million in annual funding from the commonwealth government’s \$100 million Future Drought Fund, which comes into effect next July, is aimed at building resilience, not buying feed. It is all well and good that she is looking at the big picture, but she is still leaving our farmers high and dry.

I ask the following questions. The Premier answered in question time on Tuesday that there is no need for a drought to be declared to get federal assistance. Can he confirm that? He said that the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development website will give us the information. Where is that information? All I can see under the section “Dry seasons and drought” are articles such as “Managing sheep in a dry spring” and “To hold or sell breeding cattle”. Is that the kind of assistance the government is offering? Does this mean a water deficiency declaration is not required for the government to provide water for livestock? What would be the cost for the government to declare a drought? What processes are in place for absentee landlords? What has been the percentage of royalties for regions funds towards agriculture in the past three years? Would the government consider adopting Queensland or New South Wales practices such as appointing drought commissioners or their proactive approaches to drought declarations and assistance? Who can the pastoralists talk to rather than just looking at a website? I also remind the government that it does not want to see the women of the Country Women’s Association on the steps of Parliament House trying to get assistance for pastoralists in our state. Can the minister please help our pastoralists?

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Minister for Local Government)** [9.19 am]: I thank the member for Kalgoorlie for his grievance. As the member would be aware, we had a fairly extensive exploration of this important issue in private members’ business last evening. I thank him for his advocacy for his constituents and for those pastoralists, particularly in the southern rangelands but also in a more general sense, who are suffering as a result of drought-affected areas.

First of all, I highlight again that the government acknowledges the conditions faced by a number of farmers and pastoralists across Western Australia. It is true to say that the drought in the eastern states has taken centre stage in many respects and there is no denying what is happening in the eastern states is also a great tragedy and, indeed, very concerning. However, some of Western Australia’s farmers and pastoralists are experiencing significant challenges because of the effect of prolonged drying conditions on the landscape and livestock. I reassure the member that the government takes this issue very seriously, and I thank him for stating specifically the questions that he wants me to answer.

I highlight that the government has provided additional funding to support registered biosecurity groups with dry season pest control. The Minister for Agriculture and Food will look at further measures to assist in this regard. The member would also be interested to know that in his patch, the Goldfields-Nullarbor Rangelands Biosecurity Association has spent the majority of its additional funding on contractors for the ground shooting of camels in the northern goldfields and Nullarbor. The issue of feral pests and the impact that they have on this issue was also raised. I will respond to the member’s specific questions because they are the ones that he wishes to be answered.

With regards to drought assistance, as the Premier highlighted during question time on Tuesday, there is no need for a drought to be declared to get assistance. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development website provides information. The Agriculture and Food homepage has a link to “Season 2019: seasonal and management information for Western Australian farmers”, and this page provides a summary of the health and financial assistance that is available to farmers. There is acknowledgment that there may be opportunity to make this information more readily accessible, and I think it should be. I understand that the Minister for Agriculture and Food has already raised that issue with the department to ensure greater clarity.

Farmers who need assistance have access to a range of support programs, which I highlighted last night. The member may be aware of these. They include the farm household allowance, which is an income support program for farmers; the farm investment loans and drought loans program, which is provided by the Regional Investment Corporation;

the national on-farm emergency water infrastructure rebate scheme, which is specifically for emergency water supply; the Rural Financial Counselling Service; and the Regional Men's Health Initiative.

The second question was about the water deficiency declaration. The Western Australian water deficiency declaration arrangements relate specifically to the dryland agricultural region of the state and do not extend to pastoral areas. These arrangements have been agreed to by successive governments. When water deficiency is declared in agricultural regions, the state will cart water to a central point within a 40-kilometre radius of broadacre livestock farmers. Given the vast distances and comparative logistical challenges in the rangeland regions, the carting of emergency livestock drinking water is not practical or feasible in pastoral areas.

The third question related to the costs involved when the government declares a drought. There appears again to be some confusion about the need for the state to declare a drought before farmers can access financial support. This was covered in our conversation yesterday but, effectively in WA, a drought declaration is not required to access ongoing assistance measures, which is an important point. Again, I strongly urge pastoralists—I am sure that the member has done this with the pastoralists with whom he has spoken—to contact the department immediately to ensure that they are well across all the supports in place and, indeed, seek assistance.

The member also highlighted absentee landlords. All pastoral lease holders have an obligation to provide proper care, control and management of the land and there are provisions to allow leaseholders to destock for up to five years. That has the approval of the Pastoral Lands Board for the purpose of regenerating land. Again, if the member has specific concerns about this issue, he should raise them directly with the Minister for Agriculture and Food or the Minister for Lands because they will be able to provide him with additional information about absentee landlords.

The member also referred to the issue of funding. In the last three years, royalties for regions money has contributed close to \$250 million to support agricultural projects. Such money has contributed to building Western Australia's grains research and development capacity, boosting biosecurity defences, the digital farm program, Doppler radar enhancements, the Myalup Primary Industry Reserve, transforming agriculture in the Pilbara and WA Open for Business. In addition to these projects, royalties for regions funding supports the operations of the primary industries and regional development. Of course, the nine regional development commissions also play an important role in promoting agriculture. The member asked whether the government would consider adopting Queensland's practices. The government has a dry season response program underway. Officers from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage have already visited more than 120 at-risk pastoral properties and will continue to work with them. Again, the message is very clear—I strongly urge pastoralists who are concerned about whether they have sufficient feed and water to ensure their animals' welfare to contact DPIRD's dry season response group because we want to help and we want to make sure that we support growers in the pastoral regions of Western Australia.