

**AGRICULTURE — SHEEP INDUSTRY**

*Standing Orders Suspension — Motion*

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [2.50 pm]: — without notice: I move —

That so much of standing orders be suspended as is necessary to enable the following motion to be debated forthwith —

That this house calls upon the Premier to:

- (1) immediately act on the crisis affecting farmers across the state as a direct result of Labor’s planned live sheep export ban, which has resulted in farmers shooting their sheep; and
- (2) immediately provide financial assistance to assist farmers with fodder, water, and freight.

*Standing Orders Suspension — Amendment to Motion*

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah — Leader of the House)** [2.51 pm]: I move —

To insert after “forthwith” —

, subject to the debate being limited to 10 minutes for government members and 10 minutes for non-government members

Amendment put and passed.

*Standing Orders Suspension — Motion, as Amended*

**The SPEAKER:** Members, as this is a motion without notice to suspend standing orders, it will need the support of an absolute majority for it to proceed. If I hear a dissentient voice, I will be required to divide the Assembly.

Question put and passed with an absolute majority.

*Motion*

**MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition)** [2.51 pm]: I move the motion. This is of absolute urgency. We want to get the message across. This is not about politics, as the Premier responded to us today. This is about an urgent situation that is rolling out in our agricultural areas right at this moment. Today, I referred in question time to a farmer in Narrikup who said —

It’s been a very teary day for me. Started organising a neighbour to dig a pit big enough to put 3,000+ sheep in.

Yesterday morning, I was listening to the ABC Great Southern regional news and Tony from Cranbrook spoke about having to put sheep down. He cannot get any money for them at the Katanning saleyards or other outlets. He is worried about his family and about putting bread on the table, and his wife is worried about his mental health. This takes us back to the early 1990s, when there was a stockpile of four million bales. Many remember that trauma, and many of our farmers out there now who are perhaps in their 60s and 70s were there at that time; they went through that and were given those tags. They were paid a few dollars each to shoot those sheep. They are not memories that we want to repeat. That is our appeal today, to the Premier, to recognise the urgency of the situation to be proactive, not reactive.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food has been questioned for months on end and is saying, “Nothing to see here; there are no animal welfare issues”. We now have a dry season advisory council on board. That is one positive step, but we want some proactive action. We have a state budget with a massive surplus, and have had them over the last few years. Sheep in the eastern states are getting about \$50 a head more than they are in Western Australia. This is the opportunity for the Premier to say, “Okay, it costs \$40 to transport those sheep across to the east. They have had good rain and good climatic conditions. This is the opportunity for us to come in with a freight subsidy. This is an opportunity for us to help out our farmers with feed subsidies. This is the opportunity for us to help out with water carting subsidies.” The Premier knows that I wrote to him in November to ask him to come down to Katanning saleyards and talk with the farmers, transport operators, feed mill operators and anyone associated with the sheep industry. We were concerned at that time back in October and November, when it had been a dry spring, about the stocks of feed carrying across over to the summer. That was the opportunity to come down. The invitation is still there for the Premier to come to the Katanning saleyards, look at what is going on, talk to the people who are affected and bring the agriculture minister with him. They are more than welcome.

I am worried that we are going to lose the critical mass of our sheep flock. Yesterday in question time we talked about the live export market and the underlying confidence that goes with it. As farmers, we understand that it provides that background or backstop, if you like, whereby we know there is a market for the sheep. There is still time, but we have seen the federal agriculture minister disregard WA farmers. That is why we have been looking for support from this Premier to pick up the phone to the federal agriculture minister Murray Watt and say, “We need your support. Where is the report that was put out in October to give us confidence that there is potential for this industry to go forward?” I am worried about the critical mass of the sheep flock. Once it drops below 11 million, it is not a self-replacing flock. All of a sudden we will be talking about the abattoirs not having enough sheep. There is potential later this year or early next year that they will then be crying out for sheep. That is where we are coming from.

This is such an urgent issue. This is the last day of Parliament for another couple of weeks. This is the Premier’s opportunity to stand up with his agriculture minister, show support for the agricultural sector, and show support for our farmers. Please take it seriously on behalf of all WA farmers.

**MS M.J. DAVIES (Central Wheatbelt)** [2.57 pm]: I rise to support the motion that has been put by the member for Roe. I start by making some comments about question time today and yesterday. Having misunderstood the connection between live export, dry seasons and the avenues we require as an agricultural industry when things get tough, I truly thought the Premier might have gone away to reflect on those comments and come back today, given another opportunity during question time. But he came back in and doubled down. This government has failed our agricultural sector. After six years of the previous Minister for Agriculture and Food shifting the focus of the department away from what most would consider the biggest industry in the sector, which is a broadacre and sheep farming properties, towards what most would consider edge-of-grid issues, we now have a minister in charge who has no experience in broadacre or dry land farming systems and does not seem to care. When we were first faced with the issue of live exports, she stood by it and threw her arms up in the air and said, “I’m sorry; there is nothing more we can do. It’s a federal issue.” She will not take up that fight. Despite the warnings for some time now from many in the sector that we were headed for this prolonged dry period, she has failed to do anything and is now scrabbling to be seen to be doing something. As I said in private members’ business last night, the government is about to learn what it is like to be in charge when there are no bumper crops, when there is not plentiful rain and when farm businesses cannot do what they do best. It is about to learn a very difficult lesson.

<033> S/G

That is why we continue to come to this Parliament and ask the government to do better. Sadly, the industry says that 41 per cent of them believe that government intervention is making it difficult for them to do their job. They see that as the biggest challenge. That sentiment has doubled in the last two years across the nation. In Western Australia, it has increased sixfold. This is the Premier’s government putting that pressure on an industry that should actually be flying. It is his chance to step up and do the right thing. He needs to revisit the fact that he slashed the farmer and pastoral water grant scheme, which was assisting farmers and pastoral businesses to improve their self-sufficiency on farms so they were not reliant on costly scheme water. He cut that in his first term, and now we see farmers and pastoralists calling for assistance in carting water. That is his government standing by idly while our live export and sheep industry goes down the drain—that is what is happening. Those reports were spoken about in Parliament today. I have had calls to my office today saying that there are people feeling utterly disillusioned. They put up with impact after impact, driven by this government, such as the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Bill, live export, and a failure to do anything about the infrastructure that serves those communities. Get out of the way and start putting in charge people who understand the industry, because it is about to get very challenging. Given the dismal mental health support structures we have in the regions, the government might want to bolster those already out there who understand what it is like to operate when there is significant situational distress caused by a dry season. We do not want a prolonged talkfest. All I heard from the Premier today was that he was going to be talking and listening. We need action! There are people who have done this before who know what needs to be done. Freight, fodder, and water takes the pressure out of the situation very quickly. On top of that, the government could actually do something about advocating more than the hollow words it presents on live export, so that the farmers of this state actually believe it is on their side. By standing by and allowing the Albanese Labor government to shut down our live industry, the government is taking away one of those avenues that is used to manage dry seasons. That is the link, Premier! When it is dry, farmers offload sheep, and they manage it within their business. When they cannot do that and they cannot go into the domestic market, they have got no avenues.

**MR R.H. COOK (Kwinana — Premier)** [3.02 pm]: Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this motion. It is important to take stock of where we are going and how we are moving to make sure that we support our farming community. I will ignore the usual nasty commentary from the member for Central Wheatbelt. This place will be a much nicer place when she leaves. I will focus mostly on the member for Roe’s commentary.

**Mr R.S. Love** interjected.

**Mr R.H. COOK:** I will come to you in a second, sunshine! Don't you worry about that!

*Point of Order*

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** The Premier has referred to me not by my correct title and I ask that he be brought to order.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER:** There is no point of order, but we do need to refer to people by their correct title. I reference the conversation when someone was called “mate” yesterday. I ask that we use the correct names. Premier, please refer to members of the opposition by their correct titles.

*Debate Resumed*

**Mr R.H. COOK:** Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I will ignore the nasty commentary from the member for Central Wheatbelt. She does herself no credit by those sort of comments. Let us focus closely on the motion from the member for Roe, which essentially says that farmers are having to shoot their sheep because of the planned live sheep export ban. That is one of the longest bows I have ever seen drawn in Western Australia politics. I do not doubt that there is some sentiment around the long-term market conditions associated with the commonwealth's consideration of that policy position. We acknowledge that, and that is why we have joined the community in lobbying the federal government about the potential ban on live sheep exports. We do not believe it is necessary. We believe the measures that we put in place protect both the industry and the welfare of the animals involved. That is actually down to the good work of this government, which put that aspect of the industry on a sustainable footing. We will make sure that we will continue to lobby on those matters.

We need to continue to make sure that we support our farmers as a result of this dry period of drought-like conditions; we acknowledge that. That is why the Minister for Agriculture and Food continues to work with her department and the farming community to understand what we now need to do to put those supports in place. Those decisions will be made in the appropriate way. We will not listen to the rank politicisation of this debate, which those opposite have tried to do. The Leader of the Opposition's shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food grossly verbed and misrepresented the minister's position. I think that really exposes the true motives of this debate by those opposite. It has nothing to do with concern for the farmers and everything to do with a desperate group of people trying to find some form of political relevance which, for them, has been denied.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food acknowledged the mental issues impacting the farming community as a result of some farmers sometimes having to euthanise their animals. The Leader of the Opposition's representative in agriculture then went to the media to accuse the minister of saying that that is what they should do—that farmers should euthanise their animals. It completely misrepresented and verbed the minister in the most aggressive and egregious way and ultimately exposed those opposite for what they are—that is, people who are simply trying to politicise this issue to create anger in the community without actually participating in this debate in the way we would expect from a mainstream political party. He does not deserve the mantle of Leader of the Opposition, and it is not one he will have for much longer. He should be pulling his team into line. He should be going out to his team and saying, “Let us support the farming community and make sure that we work with the government and the farming community in these difficult times,” but we do not see that. All we see is this sideline commentary trying to incite anger and division, the way he has always done. He tries to create this great wedge between people in the regional communities and people in the city, rather than addressing them all as Western Australians. He does not care about people who live in the city. He simply tries to create a division between people who live in rural Western Australia and metropolitan Western Australia. You should be ashamed! You should sack your shadow Minister for Agriculture and Food for going out and politicising, and you should be apologising on behalf of the National Party to the Minister for Agriculture and Food for their egregious and outrageous misrepresentation of her position.

For a minister to talk about mental health in the farming community and politicise that is a complete disgrace. You are a disgrace! The way that you and your team have behaved over this debate is an absolute outrage. We will continue to work with the farming community to make sure that we provide the supports that we do. We will continue to make sure that farmers are supported not only through the economic impact on their businesses, but also the impact it is having on their mental health. We continue to make sure that those opportunities are available, such as Rural West, which provides free financial counselling to all primary producers. The Regional Mens Health Initiative provides wellbeing and health information for men in WA communities. Rural Aid provides critical support for farmers affected by natural disaster, such as financial, wellbeing and fodder assistance. Of course, there is also the usual range of crisis and family counselling. These supports build on extensive long-term state government investments of \$19 million in long-term water security and resilience, and farm and regional drought resilience and preparedness. There are long-term extensive and comprehensive policies to support our farming community. We are facing some tough times in the dry autumn, which comes off the back of a very dry, late winter and summer, so we need to make sure that we support our farming community—but let us do it sensibly. Let us

leave these divisive politicising tactics aside and actually get on with supporting people in the farming communities.

<034> D/5

**MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Regional Development)** [3.09 pm]: I was really looking forward to hearing leadership from members opposite. These are tough times; farmers are hurting. It is the driest season on record, as I understand it. The opposition spokesperson's comments verbalised the minister and took her commentary totally out of context. The opposition has not come in here with any sense of leadership about how to work effectively with the government to address this issue in a positive and constructive manner. That is what we are ready to do.

Rob Cossart, the CEO of the Wheatbelt Development Commission, has been appointed to the chair of the taskforce that will look at how we can constructively address both the strategic issues for the future of the industry and the immediate impacts. It is not just sheep; it is dairy, horticulture and cattle. Hort Innovation, the Western Australian Meat Industry Authority, the Grain Industry Association of WA and the Growers Group Alliance, with the inclusion of the Rural Business Development Corporation, local government, Rural Health West, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, all have a role to play in looking at how we can tackle this issue in an effective manner to support our farmers.

I object to the notion of conflating live sheep exports and capitalising—there is no other word for it—on the immediate trauma that our farmers are facing. Live sheep exports continue; some farmers are exporting sheep to the eastern states. We have just supported V&V Walsh to significantly expand processing activity. The Minister for Agriculture and Food is working hard with Minister Watt to look at opportunities for the future. As the Premier indicated, live sheep exports are a federal government issue. We have told the federal government that we want to make sure that we get the best outcomes for our farmers. If the federal government embarks on this pathway, we want the best outcomes for our farmers, and we can only do that by working strategically and collaboratively and showing leadership. The opposition has come in here berating the minister saying that she is not doing her job and that she has no experience. She has farming experience; she has been around the farming sector for many, many years. She has been up and down the state directly talking to farmers, hearing about their issues and getting constructive feedback. I contrast that with the former Liberal–National government's approach to agriculture when it was in office. Our first couple of years in office were spent rebuilding the former Department of Agriculture and Food because the Liberal–National government had guttered it and removed its capability. As has been said before, the opposition likes to rewrite history; it gladly ignores those issues. We have rebuilt capability in the department; it stands ready to assist our farmers, and it will. We will do that in a sensible way—one that helps build adaptation because of the drying climate, which will be here for a long, long time. We will have a drying climate and farming practices will change in response to that. Our department and minister stand ready to assist.

*Division*

Question put and a division taken, the Deputy Speaker casting his vote with the noes, with the following result —

Ayes (6)

Ms M. Beard	Mr R.S. Love	Mr P.J. Rundle
Dr D.J. Honey	Ms L. Mettam	Ms M.J. Davies ( <i>Teller</i> )

Noes (44)

Mr S.N. Aubrey	Mr T.J. Healy	Mr K.J.J. Michel	Ms J.J. Shaw
Ms H.M. Beazley	Mr W.J. Johnston	Mr S.A. Millman	Ms R.S. Stephens
Dr A.D. Buti	Mr H.T. Jones	Mr Y. Mubarakai	Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski
Mr J.N. Carey	Mr D.J. Kelly	Ms L.A. Munday	Dr K. Stratton
Ms C.M. Collins	Ms E.J. Kelsbie	Mrs L.M. O'Malley	Mr C.J. Tallentire
Mr R.H. Cook	Ms A.E. Kent	Mr P. Papalia	Mr D.A. Templeman
Ms L. Dalton	Dr J. Krishnan	Mr S.J. Price	Mr P.C. Tinley
Ms D.G. D'Anna	Mr P. Lilburne	Mr D.T. Punch	Ms C.M. Tonkin
Ms E.L. Hamilton	Mrs M.R. Marshall	Mr J.R. Quigley	Mr R.R. Whitby
Ms M.J. Hammat	Ms S.F. McGurk	Ms M.M. Quirk	Ms S.E. Winton
Ms J.L. Hanns	Mr D.R. Michael	Mr D.A.E. Scaife	Ms C.M. Rowe ( <i>Teller</i> )

Question thus negatived.