



Emergency levy hits volunteers

By **Claire Campbell**

FARMERS, who are often the very people volunteering with emergency services in the Murraylands, are some of the hardest hit by a rise in the Emergency Services Levy (ESL).

Member for Chaffey Tim Whetstone said the ESL was hitting every

landholder hard, but particularly asset-rich farmers.

"Any person who is a land owner, no matter how wealthy or asset rich they are, is bearing the burden of this increased ESL," he said.

"It is a wealth tax and nothing more.

"The farming sector, agriculture, food producers - the economic drivers in this state - have been hit once again and they have been hit unjustly because in many cases they are the volunteers within emergency services, they are the hard-working rural sector of food producers and farmers, and they are now getting a double whack."

Murray Bridge State Emergency Service (SES) unit manager Trevor Heitmann said the hike in the ESL was colossal and absolutely ridiculous.

"I was involved when it was originally designed and it was purely for emergency

services, now the (State) government has made it a land tax, they've increased it so much because they don't have money for the hospital - it's not going to emergency services," he said.

"They've taken away the funding they give us and upped the emergency services levy.

"Even as volunteers we're not exempt from the emergency services levy, we're on call 24/7, 365 days a year, so I understand how the public is feeling."

According to Mr Heitmann, the Murray Bridge unit is struggling to make ends meet financially.

"My unit here has not had a budget increase for five years, but all the costs have gone up, we're not going ahead as finances go, we're going backwards," he said.

"Because of the ESL rise, employers are not letting employees go to call out; it's making it harder and harder for us."

The unit receives \$1500 per year for its rescue boat but the annual mechanical service costs in excess of \$1000, plus the costs of

petrol, so there is little left for incidentals.

Volunteers are also required to pay for their own fuel to get to call outs and training and often the cost of washing their own uniforms.

Member for Hammond Adrian Pederick said some farmers had called his office outraged that their ESL bill had increased by more than 600 per cent.