

DROUGHT - 25 September 2008

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:08): Thank you, Mr Speaker. My question is to the Minister for the River Murray. In light of the recent support program introduced to assist irrigation communities along the river, what action does the government propose to assist other river-reliant businesses and communities who are similarly affected by the current water crisis?

River communities from Goolwa at the Murray Mouth to Renmark at the border are suffering greatly from the effects of low flows, because much of their local economy is dependent on the continuation and viability of the irrigators and businesses they support. Many of these businesses are directly or indirectly reliant on the river for their own survival and viability.

The Hon. R.J. McEWEN (Mount Gambier—Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Minister for Forests, Minister for Regional Development) (15:09): I thank the member for Hammond, and new shadow minister, for the question. I point out to him, of course, that EC (exceptional circumstances) is federal policy, not state policy. I point out that in these desperate circumstances that policy has worked well, with the exception of the plank that is now in place in relation to exit packages for horticulturalists.

Over 400 families in that corridor are receiving Centrelink benefits, and so they should. Over 300 businesses in that corridor are receiving interest rate subsidy support, and so they should: 50 per cent in the first year and 80 per cent in the second year. Drought policy is working. Drought policy does support both off-farm businesses that rely on primary production and the businesses themselves.

In relation to the plank that was missing, the Premier—who I might add, first came with me to discuss the matter with Tony Burke, and then personally had a number of discussions with the Prime Minister—was able to put in place the one plank that was missing. I fully support exceptional circumstances. It is being reviewed. All state ministers, along with the federal minister, have given a commitment for the duration of the present drought that all support measures will stay in place; they are available. But now, on top that, this state has been able to add two more support measures, and that community is delighted, even if those opposite are not.