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Welcome to the NSW Farmers' Association's Parliamentary Update. This Newsletter is provided to Members of the NSW Parliament to inform you and your office of the current issues important to rural and regional NSW. The Newsletter provides an overview on some of the issues in which the NSW Farmers' Association considers of interest to our Members.

Drought Update

The Association recently held a drought teleconference with the NSW Department of Primary Industries and the NSW Rural Assistance Authority. Issues discussed included funding for transport subsidies and Drought Support Workers as well as the upcoming expiry of Exceptional Circumstances ('EC') assistance across a significant portion of NSW. The NSW Government has decided to continue funding the scheme until 30 May 2008 and funding for Drought Support Workers will be continued until the end of June 2008. A decision on the continuation of funding would be made at that time. Bourke and Brewarrina EC areas are due to expire on 15 June 2008 and the other areas of the State were due to expire on 30 September 2008.

Changes to Flood Grants

The NSW Government has announced changes to the arrangements for claiming flood recovery grants. The changes now provide for the following:

- Applications must be lodged by 31 March 2008;
- The Rural Assistance Authority will now receive applications for assistance based on estimates or quotes for repair work and applicants then have until the end of May to submit their paid invoices;
- For those eligible applicants who have evidence of expenditure and submit their application before 31 March the Minister has approved for an amount of up to \$2,500 to be provided with the remaining balance to be distributed once all invoices are received after the end of May; and
- Early payment will occur to flood victims and the remainder will be paid after the scheme closing date, once applications are finalised.

Hail Netting

The NSW Government has agreed to the inclusion of hail netting under the Special Conservation Loan Scheme, which the Association has lobbied over the past months. The low interest loan is for up to \$150,000 and available by application through the Rural Assistance Authority. The Association has developed a submission which contained the results from a survey of NSW fruit growers' on Natural Disaster Relief issues; financial viability and sensitivity analyses of netted vs. non-netted crops with respect to current assistance; and an overview of the operating environment and the unique characteristics of this industry. The Government's extension of the Special Conservation Loan Scheme will enable financial assistance to be provided for the erection of hail netting therefore allowing growers to proactively manage the risk of hail as commercial insurance is either unavailable or unaffordable for many growers.

Wheat Marketing Meetings

The Association held four wheat marketing meetings across NSW to provide the Federal Government with the opportunity to explain their proposed changes to wheat export marketing, inform Members about activities undertaken by the Wheat Export Marketing Alliance and to inform Members about the Association's policy regarding wheat export marketing. The meetings were chaired by the Association's President, Jock Laurie. Concerns raised by Members included the uncertainty surrounding how their 2008 crop will be marketed, the arrangements for the transport of crop to export port facilities, and the transparency of short and long term cost and supply arrangements for cropping inputs.

UPDATE

NSW FARMERS' ASSOCIATION

Jeff Sorrell
 Manager, Government Relations
 NSW Farmers' Association
 L25, 66 Goulburn Street
 Sydney NSW 2000
 t: +61 2 8251 1820
 f: +61 2 8251 1750
 m: 0403 890 717
 e: sorrellj@nswfarmers.org.au
www.nswfarmers.org.au

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2008 Legislative Priorities

Enhanced Rural Communities

The Association supports public policy which promotes the economic and social needs of rural and regional communities, enhances rural services and improves rural communities.

Reduced Red Tape Farmers want to farm, not fill in forms. The Association urges the reduction in the high cost of regulatory compliance and excessive mandates, fees and taxes.

Continued Sustainable Farming

Farmers are environmentalists too. They are leaders in conserving native vegetation, soil and water. Conservation and sustainable production go hand in hand.

Improved Country Roads and Rail

Farming families are heavily dependent on high quality road and rail infrastructure. The Association seeks a sensible framework to dramatically improve rural roads and rail services.

Guaranteed Water security

Urban centres use more water with little attempt to reduce wastage and implement basic efficiencies such as recycling. New urban water demand should be met by urban water savings and not from agricultural supply.

Draft Wheat Export Marketing Bill

The Federal Government released the draft legislation titled the *Wheat Export Marketing Bill 2008* for the reform of Australia's wheat export marketing. A new industry regulator will be established, Wheat Exports Australia ('WEA'). WEA will administer a wheat export accreditation scheme. Under the legislation a wheat export applicant must meet a number of tests, including: be a corporation, be a fit and proper company to trade in wheat and if the applicant operates a port terminal facility for bulk grain, have an access arrangement in place. After 30 September 2009, these access arrangements must be agreed to by the ACCC and prior to that, the company must commit to grant access and publish the terms and conditions for that access. The legislation will empower WEA to suspend or revoke accreditation, where conditions have been breached. The Federal Minister for Agriculture will retain the power to direct the regulator to investigate a matter and companies will be required to provide annual compliance reports and certain export data. A copy of the draft legislation can be obtained from www.daff.gov.au/wheat

Amendments to the Exotic Disease of Animals Act 1991

The Association has held a meeting with the NSW Chief Veterinary Officer as well as other Officers from the NSW Department of Primary Industries regarding proposed changes to the Exotic Disease of Animals Act following the Equine Influenza eradication program. The Association's Exotic Disease Committee and Livestock Committees are currently considering the changes.

FarmBis

The Federal Government has confirmed that the FarmBis program which is currently operating in NSW will be terminated. Registration and approval of training courses will no longer be accepted. FarmBis subsidies are only available for courses completed up to and including 29 February 2008. Training providers and individuals will have until 14 March 2008 to lodge claims for a subsidy (claims lodged more than 30 days after course completion will not be accepted). The position of NSW FarmBis Networker concluded on 4 March 2008. DAFF is unable to confirm whether any replacement or similar program will be introduced.

Sustainable Food and Fibre Policy for Schools

Association representatives met with Officers from the Department of Education and Training to discuss the need to develop a Sustainable Food and Fibre policy for schools. The meeting was very positive. The Department of Education and Training has agreed to work collaboratively with the Association on the issue. Further updates will be provided.

Senate Select Committee Inquiry – Fertiliser and Chemical Pricing and Supply

The Federal Senate has established a Select Committee to inquire into the price and supply aspects of fertilizers and chemicals. The Terms of Reference of the inquiry are to examine the pricing and supply arrangements in the Australian and global chemical and fertiliser markets, the implications for Australian farmers of world chemical and fertiliser supply and pricing arrangements, monopolistic and cartel behaviour and related matters. The Association is preparing a submission to the Inquiry.

Water Entitlement Purchasing Program

The Federal Minister for Climate Change and Water, Senator Penny Wong, has announced \$50 million for water entitlement purchasing in the Murray Darling Basin. The water entitlements will be held by the Commonwealth Environmental Water Holder. The Water Purchasing Program will complement other environmental water recovery programs, such as The Living Murray. The water entitlement purchases will be conducted using a public tender process. The Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts is currently seeking Expressions of Interest from irrigators interested in selling their water entitlements to the Government. The Association is seeking details as to the specific guidelines under which the water will be purchased, so as to ensure that specific communities or irrigation areas are not unfairly targeted in the purchasing process. Further information regarding the Water Entitlement Purchasing Program is available from www.environment.gov.au/water/programs/entitlementpurchasing/

Woolworths Emergency Drought Funds

Following Woolworths' National Drought Action Day on 15 February 2008, the Country Women's Association of NSW has received \$1,272,600 and they will be distributing drought relief funding from 3 March 2008. Grants of up to \$2000 per household are available to help meet essential household expenses and other basic necessities such as food, clothing, fuel, emergency medical and dental costs, house rates, electricity and telephone expenses. Application forms and further information is available from www.cwaofnsw.org.au or by phoning (02) 9358 2923.