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Drought assistance supports communities

The NSW Farmers' Association says it is grateful to see today's Federal Government announcement of a \$714 million package to help farmers hit by the worst drought in living memory.

NSW Farmers' Association President Jock Laurie says the amendments to the eligibility criteria for Exceptional Circumstances (EC) drought assistance as well as a range of important support programs, on top of \$430 million in EC funding announced by Prime Minister John Howard last week, is recognition of the seriousness of the situation.

"This unforgiving drought is not only affecting farmers, but entire communities. By boosting support for farmers, the Government is increasing support for farming families and rural communities that are really hurting," Mr Laurie said.

"We particularly welcome the increase to the off-farm assets limit for access to the EC interest rate subsidy from \$473,000 to \$750,000, something we have been pushing for some time," he said.

"The changes are recognition of the fact that off-farm assets are often utilised as a part of a family's superannuation strategy.

"The changes to the off-farm income test for household support are also pleasing, particularly for those families who are facing up to their 7th year of drought.

"We are also relieved to see small business assistance, grants for irrigators, support for school students, and increased counselling services for rural communities included in this important drought support package.

"The Association will be taking the Federal Agriculture Minister Peter McGauran to visit drought affected regions of NSW tomorrow, showing the Government is committed to understanding the devastation on the ground."

Minister McGauran will accompany Jock Laurie to Young and Lake Cargelligo to speak with farmers and witness first hand the difficulties facing intensive and broadacre industries and farming families.

"Our intensive industries such as pork, egg, dairy, horticulture and chicken production are feeling the massive impacts of failing crops and high wheat prices. This drought is not confined to only one aspect of our industry," Mr Laurie said.

"Last week we took Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd to Walgett, and the Federal Opposition has announced bipartisan support for today's drought support package, so we are very pleased to see all sides of politics and the broader population showing so much concern for our rural and regional communities," Mr Laurie said.

"It means a lot to farmers to know they have this support behind them," Mr Laurie concluded.

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Fast fact: Agriculture employs 122,000 in NSW