



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

TONY WINDSOR MP
INDEPENDENT
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR NEW ENGLAND

Shop 5
259 Peel Street
TAMWORTH NSW 2340

All Mail: PO Box 963
TAMWORTH NSW 2340

Ph: (02) 6761 3080
Toll Free: 1300 301 839
Fax: (02) 6761 3380
e-mail: Tony.Windsor.MP@aph.gov.au
Web Page: www.tonywindsor.com.au

Media Release

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Part of New England one of regions to miss drought help

Flows on to Envirofund Drought Grants too

Independent Member for New England, Tony Windsor has met with representatives of a part of the Northern New England area that has not been able to access any Exceptional Circumstance drought assistance despite it being surrounded by Exceptional Circumstance declared areas.

“I met with representatives of the area formerly known as parts E and J of the Armidale and Northern New England areas on Saturday in Armidale along with Richard Torbay, the Independent Member for Northern Tablelands and a representative from the NSW Farmers to discuss their circumstances and what can be done to help them and find out why they were found not to be eligible three times in the past so that their issues can be addressed.

In light of the revelation in the media today that millions of dollars have not been spent in drought assistance, it is very disappointing that despite being surrounded by Exceptional Circumstance declared areas, this area has not met the criteria to even be declared eligible to apply for EC assistance which then enables individual farmers the opportunity to apply for help – remembering it doesn't guarantee individual farmers assistance,” Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor is also concerned that not only has this area been ineligible for Exceptional Circumstance assistance, but as a result they are also ineligible to make application for Envirofund Drought Grants.

“The fact that this area is not Exceptional Circumstance declared has unfortunately had a flow on effect to making farmers in this area ineligible to even make an application for Envirofund Drought Grants as only those areas that are in Exceptional Circumstance declared areas can make application for this assistance to help make their properties more resilient to the effects of drought.

So not only have these drought impacted farmers missed out on access to Exceptional Circumstance support but they also miss out on the opportunity to apply for assistance to prepare their properties for when the next drought occurs,” Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor recognised the efforts of the NSW Farmers Association and NSW Agriculture to rectify the problem.

“New NSW Farmers' President Jock Laurie, and NSW Farmers' Regional Service Manager Gennie Gittoes along with local NSW Agriculture representatives have been working closely with these farmers who have been adversely impacted on as a result of their three applications being rejected and I will be liaising with these people and those affected to have their circumstances reviewed and remedied as soon as possible.

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What this situation highlights however, and the matter was also raised at last Saturday's Vision New England Summit, is the need for a complete overhaul of the Exceptional Circumstance process from what constitutes an Exceptional Circumstance, the eligibility criteria to access timely assistance and how Exceptional Circumstance assistance is funded because it is obviously not working efficiently.

In fact it could be described as being a lot for show but not much for blow – the big fanfared announcements of large amounts of money going to help drought affected farmers aimed at showing metropolitan based Australians that the Government is appearing to be helping farmers in need - but in reality, the full amount doesn't get through to where it is needed because of the burning hoops and hurdles placed in the way of those who really do need help," Mr Windsor said.

Mr Windsor wants Government Ministers to be more open in acknowledging the problems caused by the Exceptional Circumstance process.

"Ministers who continue to peddle inflated figures despite their knowledge of the facts should be ashamed of their misleading statements and act immediately to ensure that all those in need of assistance can access it in a timely manner without having to be totally on their knees begging for help.

Not only does drought and accessing assistance hurt financially, but the psychological strain put on people leads to other mental health problems - sometimes suicide - family breakdown and stresses that could otherwise be avoided if the process was fixed.

Now is not the time to play the State-Federal responsibility tennis match, it is time to deliver to those in need.

The Auditors Report indicates that there is more than enough money to help these people and as it has been allocated it should be able to be accessed," Mr Windsor said.

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Australian National Audit Office details

<http://www.anao.gov.au/WebSite.nsf/Publications/CEF17B3E4D781F36CA257014001C260A>