

Agriculture Estimates Opening Statement – 890 words

Thank you Chair.

I was appointed Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry at a time when our nation's primary producers have, on the whole been doing very well.

Good conditions over the course of three seasons now has meant high prices for commodities across the country.

Overall our sector is estimated to be worth more than 87 billion dollars this year while our total agricultural, fisheries and forestry exports are expected to be worth more than 74 billion dollars.

However, at the same time our agriculture sector has faced a number of challenges many of which have been beyond our control.

Several floods across the east of our country have wiped out crops, resulted in stock losses and caused massive damage to freight routes.

In Victoria alone early reports suggest more than 3,000 farm animals have been lost and more than 120,000 hectares of crops have been damaged.

This is causing immense pain to producers and rural Australia and is driving up the cost of groceries for people right around the country.

There can be no doubt that the severity and regularity of these natural disasters is a result of climate change.

And its our farmers who are on the frontline.

Over the past five months I have visited nearly 20 farms and almost every time I step foot on the property one of the first things farmers raise with me is their focus on sustainability.

Farmers and rural Australia finally has a government that will join with them to lead their efforts to improve sustainability and adapt to climate change, instead of denying it and putting future trade opportunities at risk.

We're delivering on that commitment in this year's budget, allocating \$20.8 million for drought resilience, \$8.1 million to develop the seaweed industry in Australia and \$302 million for the next phase of the National Heritage Trust.

Climate change is also increasing the spread of exotic pests and disease and the threat of an incursion to our strong biosecurity system.

We have seen Varroa Mite breach our border defences earlier this year, while the extremely serious Foot and Mouth Disease and Lumpy Skin Disease have spread to our neighbours in Indonesia.

Our government has acted incredibly quickly to these threats, with a three-pronged approach of helping our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific, strengthening our border controls and enhancing our own preparedness to ensure our biosecurity system is well prepared.

I would like to specifically pay tribute to our biosecurity officers at the border who are keeping our ag sector safe.

Officers like Lara and Caroline at Perth Airport who found a range of meat products in a traveller's suitcase, and promptly fined and deported the offending passenger.

This just goes to show how seriously we are taking this issue.

And we have further strengthened our biosecurity system, by investing more than \$134 million in last month's budget.

Not only will this mean more biosecurity officers, more detector dogs and handlers and more support for our neighbours to deal with outbreaks, but also a doubling of the money allocated by

the former government to improve our livestock traceability system.

This is a down payment as we move toward a sustainable funding model for biosecurity, and you may have seen that consultation on that has now begun.

We have also begun work in dealing with the longstanding workforce shortage that is crippling parts of the sector.

This is not a new problem – it began well before the election – but we have been working hard on it since taking office.

A direct outcome from the Jobs and Skill Summit, we have established a tri-partite working group of government, unions, and employer groups to help deal with the key issues to get more people working in the ag industry.

Many of these groups have commented they have never previously been brought together by government and this cooperative approach is already producing results.

In the meantime, our government is also bringing forward 180,000 fee free TAFE places to train locals for agriculture and other industries, lifting the migration cap and clearing the visa backlog.

But despite these challenges I am incredibly optimistic about the future of the industry.

The opportunities for value adding in this sector are immense and will set up the entire sector for more growth in the years to come.

We are also making a significant investment in our forestry sector, with more than \$204 million set aside in this budget to help the industry innovate and grow.

I'd be pleased to talk more about this during the hearing.

And, in conjunction with Senator Ayres, we have also begun the consultation process to introduce mandatory country of origin labelling for seafood products across the country.

Something I know the industry has been asking governments to do for a very long time.

Can I also thank our departmental officials, led ably by Secretary Andrew Metcalfe and my Ministerial office team for their hard work since I've held this role.

I would also like to especially thank all members of industry – peak bodies, employers, unions, workers, scientists, First Nations groups and more for their cooperative and collaborative approach.

My sense is that this is something the industry has been wanting for years and I'm looking forward to seeing what we can achieve together.

Thank you very much and I look forward to answering your questions.