

**Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration**

**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**Human Services Portfolio**

Additional Estimates 2006-2007, 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February, 2007

**Question: HS73**

**Agency: Centrelink**

**Outcome 1, Output 1.1**

**Topic: Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment**

**Hansard Page/Written Question on Notice: Written Question on Notice**

**SENATOR MOORE** asked on 16/02/2007:

1. How many drought affected farmers are seeking and are being paid Commonwealth assistance through Centrelink as at 1 February 2006?
2. How many people were paid Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (ECRP) in 2006? For drought related reasons?
3. How many staff with appropriate training have been engaged to deal with the increased workload?
4. Can you indicate the average time ECRP drought relief applicants have to wait in Centrelink offices before Customer Service Officers are able to see them?
5. Can Centrelink confirm that Centrelink offices in drought affected areas do not have sufficient staff to deal with the increase in demand?
6. Have there been any complaints regarding the administration of this payment?
7. Due to the lengthy application process for ECRP drought relief, why can't applicants make an appointment with a Centrelink officer?
8. Have Centrelink staff been trained and provided with adequate knowledge to assess customers claiming Exceptional Circumstances due to the drought? If so, please explain the training they received and how many staff received it.
9. What plans does the department have in place to reduce this time?
10. Can you please explain what the 'The Drought Assistance – interim Income Support' is?

**ANSWER:**

1. At 1 February 2007 the number of drought affected farmers receiving payment was 15,798 (15,625 Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment and 173 Interim Income Support).
2. In 2006 a total of 16,070 farmers were paid drought assistance payments. This includes both Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment and interim income support.

**Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration**

**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**Human Services Portfolio**

Additional Estimates 2006-2007, 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February, 2007

3. At 12 March 2007, over 100 staff were specifically involved in processing Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payments claims. Further staff support the process in the local Customer Service Centres and Rural Call Centres.
4. The average time Exceptional Circumstance Relief Payment drought relief applicants have to wait in Centrelink offices before Customer Service Officers are able to see them cannot be separately identified from other Centrelink Customer Service Centre customers.
5. Centrelink offices in drought-affected areas have enough staff to accept Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment Claims. These claims are forwarded on to processing centres who have the requisite expertise to process the claim. Centrelink has progressively reviewed and increased the number of staff available to process new claims and respond to enquiries. Centrelink is currently processing applications at a faster rate than they are received.
6. Fewer than 20 complaints have been received regarding the administration of this payment.
7. Centrelink staff are available to assist customers with claim processes where necessary. Customers may also make an appointment to see a Rural Services Officer.
8. Yes. The majority of staff assigned to Exceptional Circumstances claim processing had direct prior experience in processing complex claims such as these. Those who required training received that training on the job, under the supervision of an experienced supervisor, before they could commence processing.
9. Centrelink has reviewed and continues to review the business processes associated with these intrinsically complex claims.
10. Drought Assistance – Interim Income Support is an ex gratia payment made available to farmers under similar conditions to Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment, if they are in an area whose application to the Commonwealth for an Exceptional Circumstances Declaration is assessed by the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to have a *prima-facie* case. If the area is subsequently declared in Exceptional Circumstances these farmers are transferred to Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment.

To prepare this answer it has taken approximately 7 hours and 10 minutes at an estimated cost of \$384.