

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET ESTIMATES - 20 OCTOBER 2011 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Centrelink Rural Services Officers

Question reference number: HSW 66

Senator: Colbeck

Type of question: Written

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 9 December 2011

Number of pages: 1

Question:

- a) Please outline the changes to the Centrelink Rural Officers network?
- b) Have Rural officer numbers been reduced?
- c) If so, by how many and where have these cuts been made?
- d) How has the national "Drought Bus" been staffed; through external recruitment or internal secondment?

Answer:

- a) The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has historically funded the bulk of Rural Service Officers positions since their inception in 2006.

Funding has reduced due to the expiry of some key budget measures, along with the cessation of funding provided with Exceptional Circumstances Drought Declarations in many areas.
- b) Yes. Since the inception of the Rural Services Officer network in 2006, the number of positions has risen and fallen in direct proportion to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry drought support funding, which is linked to the number of customers receiving Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment (drought assistance) income support.
- c) In 2008-09, Centrelink had 59.5 (average staffing level) Rural Service Officers through drought response programs which, at their peak, saw approximately 25,000 customers receiving the Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment income support payment.

From 2009, as seasonal conditions improved across the country, the number of drought declared areas reduced, as did Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment customer numbers. Rural Services Officer numbers reduced from approximately 44.2 (average staffing level) in 2010-11 to 23 (average staffing level) for 2011-12. The numbers have reduced across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.
- d) The Mobile Offices are staffed via internal secondment. Each trip has a separate crew and is usually made up of at least some staff from the local service zones, including a social worker and a rural service expert.