

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates November 2013

Agriculture

Question: 1

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Concessional loans for Western Australian farm businesses

Proof Hansard page: 99

Senator STERLE asked:

Senator STERLE: Okay, but the WA agriculture minister is bagging you out. He reckons he wrote to Mr Joyce more than a month ago about rolling out the loan and said the decision meant that 50 WA farmers would miss out on low-cost loans of \$200,000. So, can we clear this up? Has the state government not done the deal and just led farmers to believe it is all Canberra's fault?

Mr Tucker: We remain in discussions with our state colleagues in Western Australia. We are extremely close. We obviously have to provide the outcomes of those negotiations and discussions to the minister and to the government to approve the arrangements. We are extremely close to being able to do that. They have asked that the loans be used for productivity enhancement, I think with a maximum value of \$200,000.

CHAIR: Could you describe to me what the—

Senator STERLE: Someone told me. I reckon the Western Australian government was misled.

Ms Freeman: Those details have yet to be agreed by the government. But the principle is that farmers who are still experiencing debt stress put in for productivity enhancement. The WA government has listed a range of initiatives.

CHAIR: And what are they?

Ms Freeman: I would have to take that on notice.

CHAIR: Run more water? Put out some more fertiliser?

Ms Freeman: There was a range of initiatives. But they have yet to be considered by government.

CHAIR: I have been at it a long while. Could you take that on notice.

Ms Freeman: I am happy to.

Answer:

Under the Concessional Loans Scheme in Western Australia, loans will be available only for farm business productivity enhancement activities.

As stated in the Western Australia Scheme Guidelines, examples of eligible farm business productivity enhancement activities include, but are not limited to:

Question: 1 (continued)

- enterprise build-up/expansion of operations
- diversification of farm business
- investment in farm-related value-adding
- improving supply chain
- purchase and upgrade of equipment, plant or machinery
- purchase of livestock that will provide long term improvement to the Farm Business's productivity (e.g. dairy herd conversion or purchase of breeding livestock)
- water harvesting and water quality protection
- reclamation of degraded areas
- best practice systems to minimise the impacts of climate change on production
- other activities not listed which are intended to increase productivity and viability, and to mitigate the effects of climate and market risks.

Ineligible activities include, but are not limited to:

- debt refinancing/restructuring
- funding of normal or additional working capital (e.g. overdraft facilities)
- family succession arrangements
- applicant's own labour costs
- reimbursement for depreciation of assets
- activities for which funding has previously been obtained (including the WA State Assistance Package – Investing in the future of Agriculture in Western Australia 2013)
- standard variable inputs such as fodder and chemicals, but excluding lime
- payment of tax, existing creditors and other statutory and legal payments.

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Question: 2

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Productivity enhancement activities in Western Australia

Proof Hansard page: 104

Senator STERLE asked:

Senator STERLE: Okay. Help me out. You said there were two parts: productivity enhancement and debt relief. Whose decision was it to be productivity enhancement?

Ms Freeman: The WA government.

Senator STERLE: The WA government. Okay.

Senator SIEWERT: Do you know if they had consultation with the farming community over that?

Ms Freeman: That would be a matter to put to them.

Mr Tucker: We do not know.

Senator STERLE: We will see if we can find out.

Mr Tucker: We have been advised that right from the very first, so that would have been in our original discussions around June-July.

Answer:

Consultations between the Western Australian farming community are a matter for the State government and Western Australian government.

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Question: 3

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Rural Financial Counsellors

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator MACDONALD asked:

Question on Notice 111 from Budget Estimates in May 2013 asked the Department to clarify the provision of Rural Financial Counselling Services in the Gulf Region of Queensland.

In answer to Question on Notice 111 from Budget Estimates in May 2013 the Department indicated that:

A single counsellor who is based in Longreach provides counselling services in the Gulf Region on an "as needs" basis;

That this Longreach-based counsellor had been available "in situ" in the Gulf Region six (6) times over the previous twelve (12) months;

That telephone counselling services are always available;

That under the Farm Finance Package, in recognition of the increased need for financial counselling services in the Gulf Region, the Australian Government is providing funding for five (5) additional full-time equivalent rural financial counselling positions in Queensland: and,

One (1) of these five (5) positions will be based in the Gulf Region.

1. Are the five (5) counsellors identified in the answer to Question On Notice 111 still being deployed?

2. Have the five (5) counsellors identified in the answer to Question On Notice 111 been deployed?

3. Has one (1) of the five (5) counsellors identified in the answer to Question On Notice 111 counsellors been dedicated to the Gulf Region?

4. Where exactly is this Gulf Region counsellor based?

5. What are the boundaries/is the extent of the area being serviced by this Gulf Region counsellor?

Question: 3 (continued)

Answer:

1. The five additional full-time equivalent rural financial counselling positions in Queensland have been filled and deployed.
2. Yes.
3. Yes.
4. The Gulf Region counsellor is based in Mena Creek and regularly travels into the Gulf to visit clients.
5. The area that is serviced by the Gulf counsellor is defined by the Local Government Area Shires of Burke, Carpentaria, Croydon, Mount Isa City, Cloncurry and parts of Etheridge on the western side, meeting up with the existing Rural Financial Counselling Service, Queensland - Central Southern Region service delivery areas of the McKinlay, Richmond and Flinders Shires.

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Question: 4

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Concessional loans funds removed from the jurisdictions

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

When were the states that were having their funds removed informed?

- a) Who told them?
- b) Was it before a media release was put out?

Answer:

On 6 November 2013, each state and the Northern Territory were informed of the Australian Government's decision to reallocate Concessional Loans Scheme funding.

- a) On 6 November 2013, Minister Joyce contacted his counterparts in each state and the Northern Territory to inform them of the Australian Government's decision.
- b) Yes.

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Question: 5

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Terms of agreement with the change in concessional loans funding

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Do you have the assurance of the three states who have had their funding reduced that they won't seek to renominate the terms of the agreement with the change in funding?

Answer:

The scheme guidelines for Western Australia and South Australia, reflecting the decision to reallocate funds, have been agreed by those states.

As at 5 December 2013, Tasmania had sought some changes to its loan guidelines.

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Question: 6

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Scheme guidelines for the jurisdictions

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

When is the next meeting of officials to discuss the guidelines for each state where officials have reached agreement but not signed?

Answer:

As at 5 December 2013, Australian Government officials are continuing to work with their state counterparts, via phone and email, to finalise arrangements for delivery of the scheme.

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Question: 7

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Approval for the reduction in concessional loans funds

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

When will a brief be provided to the Minister to take to his cabinet colleagues to gain their approval for the reduction in funds to relevant states?

Answer:

On 4 November 2013, the Minister for Agriculture announced the Government's decision to reallocate Concessional Loans Scheme funding between jurisdictions.

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Question: 8

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Agreement on the Concessional Loans Scheme in Western Australian

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

When did officials reach agreement on Western Australia?

- a) What date?
- b) When do officials expect ministers of both jurisdictions to get the approval of their governments?

Answer:

- a) 18 November 2013.
- b) The Australian Government agreed the arrangement for the Concessional Loans Scheme to be delivered in Western Australia on 4 December 2013.

Timing on the completion of the relevant Western Australian approvals is a matter for the Western Australian Government.

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Question: 9

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Announcement to cut the Western Australian funding

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Did Minister Joyce travel to Western Australia to meet with the Western Australian Minister before or after the announcement to cut the WA funding?

Answer:

No.

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Question: 10

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Concessional Loans Scheme interest rate and states signed on to implement the scheme

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

1. What interest rate is being charged on the loans?
2. Is there a signed agreement with Queensland or any other states to implement the loans?

Answer:

1. The concessional interest rate is currently 4.5 per cent.
2. Yes, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales have all signed agreements to implement the Concessional Loans Scheme in their respective jurisdictions.

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Question: 11

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Treasurer excusing himself from Farm finance package

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Did Treasurer Joe Hockey excuse himself from the cabinet room for the discussion of the FMD tax changes under the farm finance package given he owns a working property?

Answer:

The department does not comment on Cabinet matters.

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Supplementary Budget Estimates November 2013

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Question: 12

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Status of additional RFCS officers

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

What is the status of the additional RFCS (rural financial counselling service) officers under the farm finance package?

Answer:

The 17 additional full-time equivalent rural financial counselling positions funded under *Farm Finance* have been filled and deployed.

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

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Agriculture

Question: 13

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Drought Program Reform

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Please update on the action being undertaken after the election regarding the Drought Program Reform?

Answer:

Since the election, the Australian Government has continued to liaise with the state and territory governments to implement the Intergovernmental Agreement on National Drought Program Reform (IGA). Draft implementation plans for all jurisdictions have been prepared. According to the IGA these plans must be completed by 31 December 2013.

The Australian Government's key contribution under the IGA is the Farm Household Allowance which is to be implemented from 1 July 2014. Legislation is being drafted and a supporting information technology system is being built by the Department of Human Services.

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Agriculture

Question: 14

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Concessional Loans Scheme—decision to amend and renegotiation

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

1. Update the committee on the decision process for changing the Farm Finance initiative?
2. Will the Minister/department need to renegotiate with states to make the funding available to farmers?

Answer:

1. The Australian Government has decided to reallocate Concessional Loans Scheme funding between jurisdictions as announced by the Minister for Agriculture on 6 November 2013.
2. Officials have been in discussions with all jurisdictions about the reallocation to ensure that funding is available to farmers as soon as possible.

Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Supplementary Budget Estimates November 2013

Agriculture

Question: 15

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Western Australian Government informed about the reallocation of *Farm Finance* Concessional Loans Scheme funding

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

When was the Western Australian Government informed about Minister Joyce's decision to cut \$10 million of *Farm Finance* to Western Australia?

Answer:

Minister Joyce telephoned the Western Australian Minister for Agriculture and Food about the reallocation of *Farm Finance* Concessional Loans Scheme funding on 6 November 2013.

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Agriculture

Question: 16

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Rural Financial Counselling Service

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Is the Rural Financial Counselling Service program being considered for cuts in the commission of audit?

Answer:

The National Commission of Audit terms of reference state that the Commission has a broad remit to examine the scope for efficiency and productivity improvements across all areas of Commonwealth expenditure.

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Question: 17

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Red tape reduction to Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry and program cuts

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

1. Will the branches under the Agricultural Adaptation & Forestry Division be affected by the staff reductions or the government's cuts to red and green tape costs?
2. Are there any programs under this division that will be cut by the government?

Answer:

1. The department expects that a number of voluntary redundancies will be required in the next few months. The exact number and location of staff reductions will depend upon detailed budget and workload planning for 2014-15, including consideration of regulatory reduction opportunities.
2. The department is not able to speculate on future Government decisions.

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Agriculture

Question: 18

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Farmers' ability to recover from droughts

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator STERLE asked:

Is the Minister concerned about farmers' ability to recover from droughts?

Answer:

The Australian government is aware of the many challenges facing farmers, including drought. It is committed to ensuring that farmers are getting the help they need and has a number of initiatives available to assist farmers including: an income support payment; the Farm Management Deposits Scheme; concessional loans; and free rural financial counselling.

Agriculture

Question: 19

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Revenue and productivity lost to drought

Proof Hansard page: Written

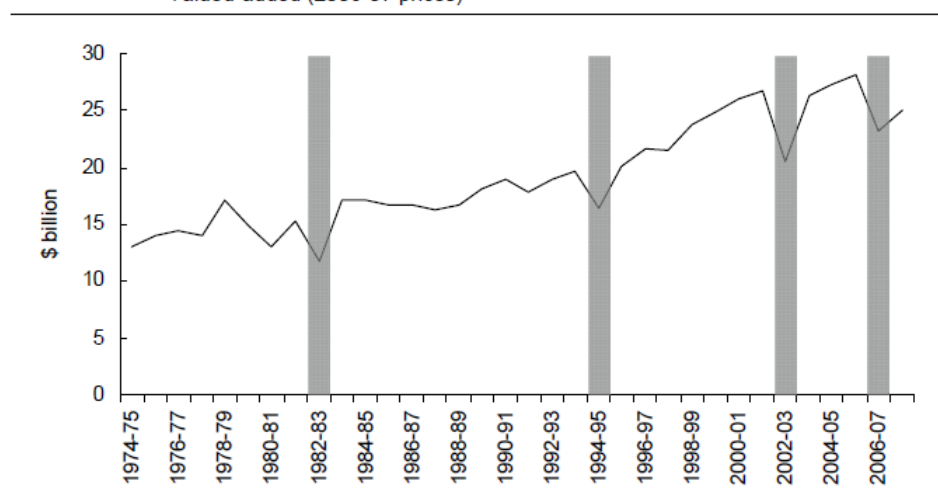
Senator STERLE asked:

How much revenue and productivity is lost to Australia due to droughts?

Answer:

Droughts can be a contributing factor to a drop in revenue or a decline in productivity in the Australian agriculture sector. It is difficult to quantify the effect of drought on Australia's agricultural productivity and revenue. The Productivity Commission's Final Inquiry Report into Government Drought Support includes *Figure 2.1 Agricultural output, 1974-75 to 2007-08*, highlighting the drop in output due to major droughts.¹

Figure 2.1 Agricultural output, 1974-75 to 2007-08^a
Valued-added (2006-07 prices)



^a Throughout this publication, shaded years on graphs indicate major droughts.

Data source: ABS (Australian National Accounts: National Income, Expenditure and Product, Cat. no. 5206.0).

¹ Productivity Commission 2009, *Government Drought Support, Report No. 46, Final Inquiry Report*, Melbourne, p.15.

Question: 19 (continued)

In addition, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences has identified that the run of poor seasons since the turn of the last century has been a major factor contributing to the slowdown in agricultural productivity growth.²

² Dahl, A., Leith, R. and Gray, E. 2013, 'Productivity in the broadacre and dairy industries', *Agricultural commodities: March quarter 2013*, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Canberra, pp. 200-220.

Agriculture

Question: 20

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Regional Forest Agreements & Victoria

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator RHIANNON asked:

1. Given that one of the main stated objectives of Regional Forest Agreements is to identify a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve System and provide for the conservation of those areas, what studies is the department undertaking, or planning to undertake, to determine the adequacy of the CAR reserve system for meeting obligations relating to threatened species in Victoria?
2. Please outline the measures that the Department has taken to ensure the adequacy of the CAR reserve system for meeting obligations relating to threatened species in Victoria. Please also outline any steps the Department has taken to ensure that these measures have been taken based on a recent, credible and robust scientific evidence base.
3. Is the department satisfied that the Victorian state government is meeting its forest management and species protection obligations under the RFAs?
 - a) If not, what action is being undertaken by the department to ensure these obligations are being met by all signatories?

Answer:

1. Scientific Comprehensive Regional Assessments of forest values and uses, and consultation with stakeholders were at the heart of the RFA process. Together, they resulted in a world-class forest Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve System being established to protect biodiversity, old-growth forests and wilderness, secure access to wood resources and provide certainty for the industry's future.

RFAs include an adaptive management process, whereby forest management practices are updated, where necessary, as new information becomes available. The five-yearly reviews of RFAs cover the commitments made by state governments (including in Victoria) in relation to threatened species and the operation of the CAR Reserve System.

Outside of these formal processes, discussions between relevant Australian state government officials are held on issues that arise, including on threatened species, when necessary.

Question: 20 (continued)

2. The establishment of the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve System, at the time of the establishment of the Victorian RFAs, was based on a comprehensive regional assessment against nationally-agreed JANIS Reserve Criteria. The JANIS Reserve Criteria is available at <http://www.daff.gov.au/forestry/policies/rfa/about/reserve-criteria>.

RFAs are twenty year agreements and are subject to five yearly reviews on their implementation which are available at <http://www.daff.gov.au/forestry/policies/rfa>.

3. Yes.

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Question: 21

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Regional Forest Agreements – replacement/ rollovers

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator RHIANNON asked:

Are Regional Forestry Agreements still intended to have a 20 year lifespan, with five year reviews; and is the third (15 year) review for each RFA still intended to describe the process to be followed post the 20 year RFAs?

1. Is work underway on a process for replacement or rollover of Regional Forest Agreements?
 - a. What is the current timetable for this work generally: what stage is this work at? When will it be completed?
 - b. May I have information on the RFAs that are currently up for review; where those reviews are up to; when they are expected to be completed; and challenges in timely completions?
 - c. May I have an outline of how this process will work?
2. Will any process to rollover or replace Regional Forest Agreements include broad multi-stakeholder and community consultation?
3. Will it include in-depth and peer-reviewed environmental, social, and industry analysis? May I have a copy of any Terms of Reference to this effect please?
4. Will the expiry and replacement of Regional Forest Agreements be addressed in a consistent process? May I have the details how please?
5. Have discussions been opened with state governments regarding the expiry of Regional Forest Agreements? May I have details please?
6. What measures, if any, does the Commonwealth employ to ensure that protection available to threatened species in Regional Forest Agreements areas is equivalent or better than protection that would be available if the EPBC Act applied in those areas?
7. Has the Commonwealth ever protested or complained to a State Government about the inadequacy of protection available to threatened species in Regional Forest Agreements? May I have details please?

Question: 21 (continued)

8. What efforts are being undertaken to ensure that the reporting requirements of Regional Forest Agreement outcomes are being enforced?
 - a. Is there any intention to strengthen these requirements? How?
9. What is the budget for Commonwealth funding to monitor states' compliance with RFAs?
 - a. What are the processes to achieve this?

Answer:

The Australian Government has committed to establish a 20-year rolling life to each Regional Forestry Agreements (RFAs), with RFAs being extended for five-years following the successful completion and implementation of each RFA five year review.

The RFAs provide for parties to jointly determine a process for extending the RFA as part of the third five-yearly review.

1. The Australian Government is currently considering options to deliver its policy commitment for supporting long term RFAs.
 - a. The process for extending RFAs will be determined as part of the third five-yearly review process.
 - b. For New South Wales: The draft Joint Government Response report to the first five-yearly review of the New South Wales Regional Forest Agreements is expected to be provided to Australian and NSW government ministers shortly.

For Western Australia: The Independent Reviewer's report on the first and second five-yearly review of the WA RFA is expected to be provided to Australian and Western Australian government ministers shortly. Subject to consideration by both governments, this report will be tabled in the Australian Parliament in early 2014. The two parties (Australian and Western Australian governments) will draft the Joint Government Response report to any recommendations contained within the Independent Reviewer's report. This will also be tabled upon completion.

For Victoria: The draft Joint Government Response is expected to be provided to Australian and Victorian government ministers in early 2014 for their approval. This would complete the first and second five-yearly reviews of the Victorian RFAs. This will also be tabled upon completion.

For Tasmania: The department has commenced discussions with Tasmanian officials on a scoping agreement for the third five-yearly review and aims to progress the review during 2014.

- c. The Australian Government is considering options to deliver this policy commitment.
2. Refer to the response to question 1c.

Question: 21 (continued)

3. Refer to the response to question 1c.
4. Refer to the response to question 1c.
5. The department is not aware of any such discussions.
6. RFAs contain clauses that outline the requirements for ecologically sustainable forest management, threatened flora and fauna, and the Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve System. These clauses are used to deliver equivalent values and obligations to that of the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.
7. The question would be best directed to the Department of the Environment. The Department of Agriculture is not aware of any such protestations or complaints.
8. The Australian Government continues to work with RFA state governments to progress the RFA reviews.
 - a. Refer to the response to question 1c.

The Commonwealth monitors the states' compliance with RFAs through five-yearly reviews. The costs of the five year reviews are covered by departmental appropriation.

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Question: 22

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Forestry Standards Certification

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator RHIANNON asked:

1. Under the Tasmanian Forests Intergovernmental Agreement signed in May, \$0.5 million was allocated to 'assist the Forest Stewardship Council of Australia to develop its national forest certification standard for Australia'.

(a) How much of this money has been dispersed?

(b) May I have details of the recipients of this funding; how much each recipients has received; and when they receive or will receive it?

2. Is the government providing input into the development of a national standard around forestry standards certification? Which agencies might be involved in this?

Answer: As at 30 November 2013, \$200 000 (excluding GST) has been paid to the Forest Stewardship Council of Australia, to assist in the development of its standard for Australia. The balance of the funds is to be disbursed this financial year upon meeting milestones in the funding deed with the Forest Stewardship Council of Australia.

The Forest Stewardship Council of Australia is the only funding recipient.

The Australian Government is not providing input into the development of the standard.

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Question: 23

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: Forestry Protocols regarding injured animals

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator RHIANNON asked:

1. Are there any federal protocols regarding the reporting, referral and care of wildlife injured by forestry logging operations? For injured Threatened species?
2. Whilst there are prescriptions regarding threatened species, it is recognised that workers and often their companies are unaware of those prescriptions and do not apply them. What research or oversight is being applied or considered to determine if those prescriptions are followed; where the gaps are; and what is needed on the ground to address this lack of oversight?

Answer:

The states and territories have the responsibility for operational management in multiple-use native forests including issues involving fauna within harvesting areas.

Agriculture

Question: 24

Division/Agency: Agricultural Adaptation and Forestry Division

Topic: ESCAS breaches

Proof Hansard page: Written

Senator RHIANNON asked:

1. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation has identified that livestock production is responsible for approximately 18% of the total greenhouse gas emissions worldwide and the CSIRO has found that over 30% of greenhouse gases emissions produced in Australia can be attributed to animal industries.
 - a) What mechanisms are being used to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from these sources and incentivise animal intensive industries to reduce emissions?
 - b) What projects are being funded to address this issue?

Answers:

1. a) The government's Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) will source emissions reductions from various sectors across the economy, based on the principle of lowest cost abatement. The design of the ERF will provide for continuation of the Carbon Farming Initiative (CFI) and for abatement achieved under the CFI to be eligible under the ERF.

Five methodology determinations are currently approved under the CFI to allow farmers and land managers to earn carbon credits by reducing greenhouse gas emissions within animal industries.

These include various activities for destruction of methane generated from manure in piggeries and dairies, and feeding dietary additives to milking cows.

A register of CFI offsets projects can be found on the Clean Energy Regulator website—www.cleanenergyregulator.gov.au/Carbon-Farming-Initiative/Register-of-Offsets-Projects.

b) For a list of funded projects, which are scheduled for completion by 30 June 2017, visit the Department of Agriculture website—www.daff.gov.au/cff.