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Climate Change and Agriculture

SPEECH

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Speaker Furner, Sen Mark

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Senator FURNER (Queensland) (5.56 pm)—This evening I rise to discuss a matter in my backyard. Last month on a hot Queensland summer day I was given the opportunity to accompany the Hon. Tony Burke MP, Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, to inspect a successful project funded by the federal government on a farm in Morwincha in southern Queensland. Anyone who has travelled the Cunningham Highway would have passed the area when driving through Aratula.

Brookland Stud is run by Ian and Barbara Conochie with their son, Stewart, and his wife, Karen, and it is a successful 238 acre dairy farm with about 150 jersey cows that bring in 5,000 litres of milk per cow annually. The Conochies have been in Morwincha for over 40 years and Stewart is a second generation farmer. However, the family has had the same stock of jerseys for three generations beginning with Ian's father in the early 1900s. The Conochies have 40 paddocks on their farm with two-thirds planted with kikuyu pastures and the other third with lucerne and rye grass.

The reason for our visit was to inspect a successful climate friendly project which was implemented on the farm thanks to federal government funding. Most of us recognise climate change as a huge global issue and one we must address. We live in one of the driest continents on earth and, if we take no action, we will lose our agriculture industry along with our tourism industry, which employs tens of thousands of people.

Australia's agricultural industry is worth \$36.1 billion to our economy and employs about 360,000 people. We are major exporters of agriculture and the industry comprises 35 per cent of Australia's exports. The industry is expected to feel the full brunt of climate change, and we have already seen how drought has been affecting farming families in recent years. That is why it is important for this government to continue investing in the agriculture industry to help our farmers expand their knowledge and adapt their skills to enable them to invest and install more climate friendly practices on their farms. This is not only to prepare them for climate change but also to insure that their livelihoods will not be lost.

One program encouraging farm sustainability is Caring for our Country. The Australian government provided \$153,700 in funding to the Queensland Dairy

Farmers Organisation, QDO, under Caring for our Country for its support of climate conscious milk production in southern Queensland through adaptation and mitigation. Thanks to this project, farmers from more than 40 farms in southern Queensland were given training and education on how to best manage the risks and impacts of climate change. A large portion of the funding was also allocated to support the implementation of on-farm activities to help address the risks associated with climate change.

Under the QDO's project, Brookland Stud was granted assistance to upgrade their existing high-pressure irrigation system to a low-pressure towable centre pivot. This system enables the Conochies to use their irrigation water more efficiently and therefore enhance productivity. The cost of this new and more efficient system has been about \$74,000 compared to the travel irrigator's price tag of \$20,000. However the Conochies have already seen the benefits from their new investment.

QDO's executive officer, Adrian Peake, who attended the farm visit along with QDO president, Brian Tessman, QDO vice president, Ross McInnes, QDO executive member and chairperson of the Queensland Rural Industry Training Council, Jenny Easlea, and QDO project manager, Ruth McInnes, all said that low-pressure system irrigators provided many more benefits when compared to a high-pressure system. They said that the benefits from making the switch included a saving of over 50 per cent in energy use, a 25 per cent increase in productivity due to improved water application and distribution, a reduction in labour and lower maintenance costs. The Conochies have had the new irrigation system up and running on Brookland Stud for six months and have found a 25 per cent increase in productivity. Stewart said the paddocks could now be brought back in four to five days because of the fast growth of the pastures and they would be looking at lowering the rotation as well as turning grass into hay. The Conochies were very welcoming and took Minister Burke and me out to the paddock along with the others where their low-pressure centre pivot was in operation. I in my RMs wandering around the pasture was up to my ankles in a field that was looking very lush and green.

The new centre pivot system costs quite a considerable amount more than the existing

travelling irrigator—almost three times more—but the Conochies have found it to be more efficient, power saving and lower maintenance. In fact they have found it to save more than 40 per cent in time and labour. Stewart said it takes about 45 minutes to shift the new central pivot, whereas the older system took 30 minutes to shift and another 30 to 45 minutes to set it up. He also said the old system's longevity was not as good as the newer system. The Conochies have also found that the area watered by a single pivot has increased by 400 per cent.

The implementation of more climate-friendly technologies like the low-pressure centre pivot irrigation system are imperative to our future and for the continued success of our agriculture industry. The Australian government has invested \$2 billion into Caring for Our Country, which aims to improve biodiversity and sustainable farm practices. The objective of the new program, which began in 2008 and incorporates the Natural Heritage Trust, the National Landcare Program, the Environmental Stewardship Program and the Working on Country Indigenous land and sea ranger programs, is 'have an environment that is healthy, better protected, well-managed, resilient, and that provides essential ecosystem services in a changing climate'. It has six national priorities which are: a national reserve system; biodiversity and natural icons; coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats; sustainable farm practices; natural resource management in remote and Northern Australia; and community skills, knowledge and engagement. More than 60 per cent of Australia is used for agricultural purposes, which is why it is important that we find sustainable and climate-friendly farming practices.

According to the Caring for Our Country website, in its first five years since inception, from 2008 to 2013, the program will: assist at least 30 per cent of farmers to increase their uptake of sustainable farm and land management practices that deliver improved ecosystem services; increase the number of farmers who adopt stewarding and property management plans or other arrangements to improve the environment both on farm and off farm; and improve the knowledge, skills and engagement of at least 30 per cent of land managers and farmers in managing our natural resources and the environment.

Thanks to the Queensland Dairyfarmers' initiative to educate and help local farmers move into more climate-friendly technologies with the help of the federal government's Caring for Our Country program, the Conochies now have a new system which is water saving, more manageable and more energy efficient, and has increased their productivity by 25 per cent. If more farms adopt sustainable practices like the Conochies, we will see more productivity while saving

our most precious resource—water. Our farmers are among the most innovative in the world and the Rudd Labor government will continue to help them stay ahead of the game when dealing with the impacts of climate change. The Rudd government has continued its support of Australia's primary producers as they adapt to a changing climate, announcing \$3 million in funding under the second round of the FarmReady Industry Grants. No-one will feel the effects of climate change more than our farmers, and they continue to respond strongly to this support.

I guess it is ironic that today in this chamber the opposition once again tried another stunt of deferring the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme bills off to another inquiry, the third inquiry that they have been involved in. It shows their commitment, after 12 years of neglect, in not being willing to deal with this particular impost on our environment. It demonstrates clearly their commitment when it comes to the environment and climate change. In closing, it certainly was a pleasure to spend time with generational dairy farmers like the Conochies and listen to the way they are successfully dealing with issues that affect their lives concerning climate change.