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Thursday 28 March 2013

 Countryman

Hope on farm relief

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Publication: Countryman (4,Thu 28 Mar 2013)

Edition: General

Section:

Keywords: **Wayne (1),Swan (1)**

The bones of a relief package for farmers in desperate need could be on the drawing board as early as this week, according to Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group spokesman Rowell Walton. Just hours after Thursdays Labor Party spill motion, the former Wheatbelt farmer, who now farms at Condamine, Queensland, met Federal Treasurer **Wayne Swan** to follow up a pre-budget submission to help address the rural debt crisis. Mr Walton said Mr Swan said "things were happening among departments" and he would be able to indicate what the government could do in a week or so. In the eastern and central Wheatbelt, Mr Walton said there would be 30 foreclosures and an unspecified number would not get carry-on finance. In WAs north, Mr Walton said 30 per cent of cattle producers were in default while parts of eastern Australia were in drought and in southern Victoria dairy farmers were in strife. To quantify the exact number of WA producers suffering financial pressure, the Department of Agriculture and Food is going to undertake a producer survey. Rising costs, nominal returns, a high Australian dollar, interest payments, crushing debt and lack of rain have been blamed. "The Government could step in to precipitate a dip in the value of Australias currency," Mr Walton said. "If they dont, they are going to have to step up to the mark and accept that some of these guys have become uncompetitive because of things completely outside their control." The RDRWGs key mission is to establish a reconstruction bank or authority but it could take a year or longer for legislative processes to be put in place. In the short-term, Mr Walton hopes help from the Federal Government will take into account the extent of need across the country with carry-on finance for 2013 at the top of the list. Yesterday, the Pastoralists and Graziers Association and WAFarmers were scheduled to meet with Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig ahead of a community cabinet meeting in Thornlie. Both groups wanted to discuss the rural debt crisis, live exports and the Export Supply Chain Assurance Scheme. But it wont just be up to the Federal Government, believes Mr Walton and State Governments will need to play a role. Premier Colin Barnett singled out the plight of farmers after his election win this month and has been invited with his new Minister for Agriculture, Ken Baston, to the Muntadgin Farming Alliance public meeting in Merredin on April 15. DAFWA chief economist Ross Kingwell, economists Ben Rees and Dr Mark McGovern, Bob Katter MP and Senator Chris Back are on the program for the meeting. Muntadgin Farming Alliance spokesman Jeff Hooper said the issues affecting Muntadgin were being echoed across the Wheatbelt and the State. "Banks

are making finance increasingly difficult to obtain and are in some cases denying finance to farmers who have found themselves struggling to service their debt," Mr Hooper said. "Its having a dire effect on our businesses, schools, families and communities. The group wants the meeting to provide policy-based solutions to protect the future of agriculture in WA. The public meeting will start at 10am on April 15 at the Merredin Regional Community and Leisure Centre.

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