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Katter, Back set for Merredin



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JENNY BARTLETT



Senator Chris Back is one of several high profile politicians who will attend a crisis meeting in Merredin on April 15.

FIREBRAND federal politician Kennedy MP Bob Katter and Senator Chris Back will spearhead a list of high profile speakers at an agricultural crisis meeting to be held in Merredin on April 15.

And local farmers Jeff Hooper and Scott Stirrat, who were responsible for organising the meeting, are calling on all growers, business owners and community members from throughout the Wheatbelt to attend and have their voices heard.

Mr Hooper and Mr Stirrat were also responsible for setting up the Muntadgin Farming Alliance which held a successful meeting in Muntadgin attended by more than 100 farmers earlier this year.

Mr Hooper said issues affecting the community in Muntadgin were being echoed throughout the State and said this was a chance for farmers to air those issues and discuss how to tackle the problems affecting rural WA.

The Muntadgin Farming Alliance also has invited Premier Colin Barnett and Agricultural Minister Ken Baston, to speak at the meeting.

Economists Ben Rees and Mark McGovern also have been invited to speak.

The meeting is to be held in conjunction with the Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group (RDRWG), whose chairman Rowell Walton liaised with Mr Hooper and Mr Stirrat following the Muntadgin meeting.

Mr Hooper said having Mr Walton on board was a great opportunity to learn from his experience influencing government policy.

Mr Walton had previously said the Federal Government needed to intervene to help solve the rural debt crisis, but acknowledged there would be no simple solution.

The RDRWG met with the Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan and Federal Agricultural Minister Joe Ludwig late last year to discuss the issues faced by rural Australia.

Following the roundtable, the RDRWG was asked to provide a pre-budget submission to Treasury on the issue of rural debt.

Nationally, rural debt levels had climbed from \$1.9 billion in 1969 to about \$64b in 2011, while net farm value has risen only slightly to \$12.1b in 2011 from \$1.27b in 1969.

Mr Hooper said it was clear the agricultural industry was in trouble and could not continue under its debt load.

"We have to stand up for ourselves and get the State and Federal Governments to take notice," he said.

"We invite people from across rural WA to attend and have their say and push for policy changes to ensure the future of our farms and rural communities.

"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.

"Nobody, not the farmers themselves or the government, can afford to have thousands of hectares of unfarmed land, but that will happen if we don't get some support."

Mr Hooper said constant rationalisation in agriculture had destroyed communities and individual farming business and alternatives needed to be considered.

"The removal of drought relief had weakened farmers who have had also had to contend with falling real prices and rising input costs for years," he said.

"The suggestion that we should continue to grow food for the world with no profit and no safety net is extraordinary."

The public meeting in Merredin will start at 10am at the Merredin Regional Community and Leisure Centre.

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