

Why I'm taking on Windsor

## WA farmers rally over rural debt crisis



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PENELOPE ARTHUR



**Queensland farmer and chairman of the Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group, Rowell Walton, will address WA farmers this morning.**

HUNDREDS of Western Australian farmers will attend a crisis meeting in Merredin this morning where they are expected to call for an overhaul of agricultural economic policy to address rising rural debt levels.

The meeting will be hosted by the Muntagin Farming Alliance and will be chaired by Queensland grain grower and chairman of the Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group (RDRWG), Rowell Walton.

Mr Walton will also chair a second crisis meeting at the invitation of dairy farmers in Colac, Victoria, on Tuesday evening.

Mr Walton said there was growing concern among Western Australian farmers that they would be unable to plant a winter crop this year, due to a lack of finance.

“The urgency over there is pretty high,” he said.

“There are only a few weeks until planting and we know there are a number of foreclosures underway and there are also an unknown number of people who have not had their money approved to cover the costs of their wheat plant.”

“There is an urgent need for some action by the State or Federal Government and we are all hoping we can apply some appropriate pressure at the meeting today.”

Last Thursday, the Western Australian Farmers Federation called on the Western Australian Government to invest in the Rural Business Development Corporation (RBDC) to assist struggling farmers in WA.

WA Farmers said the State Government should put in place financial mechanisms to provide assistance to the rural sector, similar to the Queensland Rural Adjustment Authority (QRAA).

The QRAA administers assistance programs including subsidies, rebates, grants and loans on behalf of the Commonwealth and State Governments throughout Australia.

WAFarmers president Dale Park said Western Australia already had such a body, the RBDC, the replacement for the Rural Adjustment and Finance Corporation (RAFCOR).

“The biggest issue I am hearing from farmer meetings is that carry-on finance is the key issue for farmers who may be agonising over whether to put this year’s crop in,” he said.

“What we need is an Approved Assistance Scheme that recognises the need for carry on finance for the agricultural sector.”

“So the big question is we have an existing mechanism in the form of the RBDC, why isn’t it being utilised?”

Mr Park said now was the time for the State and Federal governments to step up and assist farmers with a scheme to help get them through the upcoming season.

“Farmers do not want a handout, they want a hand up,” he said.

Calls for an overhaul of agricultural economic policy have been strongly supported by Federal MP Bob Katter who will speak at the meeting and is expected to draw some parallels between WA and his home state of Queensland.

Mr Katter said rural debt in Queensland had climbed from \$1.2 million to \$1.4m per farm in the past four months and was just \$700,000 per farm two years ago.

“There are huge similarities between rural Queensland and Western Australia – water, mining, land, isolation – each of these present a considerable number of risks to agriculture production as we have seen time and again in Queensland. I understand these risks implicitly,” Mr Katter said.

“The Rural Finance Roundtable Working Group has proposed a reconstruction Bank much like the Commonwealth Development Bank to reconstruct rural debts that have become unserviceable for members of the rural community.”

“This is the only way to stabilise rural industry while we review policy failures that have led us to this place.”

Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan will not attend today’s meeting but in a statement to Queensland Country Life, a spokesperson said the Treasurer was committed to the issue of rising rural debt.

“The Treasurer has had a series of very productive conversations with members of the Rural Debt Roundtable Working Group, but consistent with standard practice, we don’t comment on the contents of those private meetings,” the spokesperson said.

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