



Speech by

Andrew Cripps

MEMBER FOR HINCHINBROOK

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HERBERT RIVER DISTRICT, SUGAR CANE CROP

Mr CRIPPS (Hinchinbrook—NPA) (10.31 pm): I would like to draw the attention of members to an interesting article which appeared in the *Courier-Mail* on Saturday, 14 October 2006. It drew attention to two issues in north Queensland that are of considerable concern to that region. One was the shortage of labour in the Mareeba district as far as the mango industry is concerned and the ability of mango growers to harvest their crop this season. The other issue, which I would like to comment on in more detail, is the circumstances that plague the 2006 harvest of the sugar cane crop in the Herbert River district. The two main concerns are the unseasonable wet weather that has prevailed throughout the current harvesting season and what the growing and harvesting sectors have described as the poor performance of the CSR mills in that area.

The performance of the mills has been subject to strong criticism from the local Canegrowers organisation and from operators in the harvesting sector in terms of the frequent breakdowns at the mills and the numerous derailments of cane bins on the tramway system. These problems are said to be the result of a basic lack of investment in the mills as far as maintenance is concerned. This criticism is levelled at the corporate management level of the CSR rather than mill management at the local level, which can only use what resources are provided by the parent company.

The very serious concern is that there will be standover cane in the Herbert River district as a result of the ongoing unavailability of the mills. I do not have to elaborate on the seriousness of that prospect for those members in this place who come from sugar cane-growing areas. Undoubtedly, there have been very significant difficulties during the season as a result of unseasonable wet weather. For example, parts of the Herbert River district received 22 inches of rain on the first weekend in September. That is highly unseasonable and record rainfall for that time of year during a critical time in the sugar cane harvesting season.

However, the bottom line is that during the 17 weeks of the 2006 crushing season so far I understand it the mills in the Herbert River district have been unavailable for 281 hours as a result of breakdowns rather than harvesting being suspended as a result of wet weather. This means that the industry as a whole in the Herbert River district cannot take advantage of harvesting the crop in the period when commercial cane sugar or ccs is at its peak. The longer the cane stands in the field past this peak period the less sugar is produced, and this will be reflected in reduced returns for all sectors involved in the industry—growers, harvesters and millers.

Skilled labour issues are just as pertinent in the sugar industry. There is a strong incentive for experienced harvester operators and haul-out drivers to accept high-paying positions in the mining sector due to the inefficiencies being experienced during this and previous harvests. Over the last couple of decades, there has been a strong emphasis on the sugar industry to increase its efficiency by achieving best practice in its operations. There needs to be reciprocity between sectors if the industry is to advance as a whole. Other milling companies and operations in similar circumstances are achieving much higher levels of availability. The CSR needs to address the issue of its performance in the Herbert River district.