

Last roll of the dice

KIERAN ILES

TUESDAY'S Federal Budget looms as a last roll of the dice in the bid to save Hamilton's National Centre for Farmer Health from certain closure.

The globally successful centre's future has been in limbo since the State Government axed \$1 million in yearly funding in its May 2012 Budget.

As work progresses on the centre's two remaining health and wellbeing programs in drought-stricken Queensland, it was dealt another severe blow this week when the NCFH was again overlooked by the Napthine Government in its 2014-15 Budget.

Western Districts Health Service chief executive officer, Jim Fletcher described the latest snub as "dire and devastating".

"The Commonwealth Budget next week is really our last glimmer of hope," a candid Mr Fletcher said.

"In terms of a State Government commitment, we've made no progress.

"Next Tuesday is it, if there is no funding forthcoming from the Commonwealth Government that is the death-knell of the National Centre."

The State Government has set aside \$250,000 for the centre, but says it will only provide the funding if it is matched by a \$750,000 contribution from the Federal Government.

Mr Fletcher said despite the best lobbying efforts of local Federal Member for Wannon, Dan Tehan, the Government had so far balked at the 2:1 coast-share arrangement.

"Dan Tehan has worked extra hard to get funding for the centre on to the national agenda," he said.

"He has obtained a lot of information from us in respect of putting our case forward and everything that he could be doing for the National Centre he has done.



JIM FLETCHER

"I believe we're a 50-50 chance on Tuesday." Staff numbers at the centre have dropped from 12 at the time the State Government cut funding to a current level of six.

That number is expected to be cut to two after June 31 if urgent funding is not found.

The centre's plight became the focus of a heated debate in State Parliament on Wednesday, with Labor MP for Western Victoria, Jaala Pulford, moving a motion calling on the government to immediately restore funding to previous levels. Despite lavishing praise on the world-

renowned facility, the region's three Coalition MPs – Liberals Simon Ramsay and David Koch and the Nationals David O'Brien – joined their government colleagues in defeating the motion. "I guess that's what happens when people choose to vote along party lines," Mr Fletcher said.

"From a Western District Health Service point of view, and a Hamilton and Southern Grampians (Shire) point of view, it's disappointing and devastating that we haven't got any firm commitment from the State Government."

The Premier Denis Napthine this week refused to comment on why the centre had again been denied funding, his office ignoring questions put to him by the Hamilton Spectator.

It is not the first time Dr Napthine has avoided questions on the NCFH.

In March, a spokesperson for the Premier said Dr Napthine was too busy to answer questions sent by the Spectator.

Nationals candidate for Lowan, Emma Kealy said she had spoken strongly favour of a motion at last week's state conference in Benalla calling on the state and federal government to match funding for the centre.

"There is a promise of funding from the state, but what we are waiting for is the Federal Government to match that," Ms Kealy said.

"The conference did support ongoing funding from both the state and federal governments and I will continue to advocate for the centre to continue its great work."

Labor candidate Bob Scates was disappointed, but not surprised no guaranteed funding had been made available in a Budget he said was "devoid of any major funding announcement for Hamilton and surrounding towns".

Mr Tehan this week said he was hopeful federal funds would be forthcoming for the centre, but predicted next week's Budget would be "tough".

... remains grim for NCFH

KIERAN ILES

THE future of Hamilton's Rural Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) remains grim after the State Coalition Government this week voted down a motion calling on the immediate restoration of \$1 million in base funding.

Labor Western Victoria upper house MP, Jaala Pulford, introduced the motion after the centre was again snubbed in Tuesday's State Budget.

It fuelled a heated debate with MPs on both sides of the chamber declaring their support for the centre's continuation, before the motion was opposed by the Liberals and Nationals.

Ms Pulford, who visited the centre last week, accused the Napthine Government of effectively forcing its closure.

"The National Centre for Farmer Health is on

its knees plainly and simply because of budget cuts inflicted on it by the Baillieu and Napthine governments since 2012," Ms Pulford said.

"The funding has just about run out.

"The last State Government funding it received came in July 2012.

"The centre had 12 staff members then. As we stand here in early May of 2014 it has six.

"At the end of this financial year – in some six or seven weeks from now – it will have scarcely more than two staff members because the last of its research grants are running out and the last of its research work is wrapping up.

"Time is running out. I urge the government to put its skates on and find some compassion and support for Victorian farmers."

Liberal MP Simon Ramsay

said he agreed with "much of the substance" of Ms Pulford's comments, but said the Government had already "put \$250,000 on table" for the centre.

The funding would only be provided if matched by a \$500,000 contribution from the Federal Coalition Government.

"We have put on the table a firm offer of \$250,000," Mr Ramsay said.

"That is not just a one-off payment; it is a yearly payment to be matched by \$500,000 from the Federal Government, which will provide at least \$750,000 of continuous funding for the centre.

"That sum is in addition to many of the other new programs that displaced some of the work the National Centre for Farmer Health was previously doing because those programs were not in existence.

"It is now time for the

Federal Government and private industry to step up, and it is time for a review to be undertaken of the programs that have been provided historically to make sure that we are not duplicating those programs in other areas."

Labor MP Gayle Tierney said the importance of the NCFH had been recognised by the Victorian Farmers Federation, Southern Grampians Shire Council, health professionals, farmers and their families and also internationally, where its Sustainable Farm Families program had been simulated in Canada.

"The only people who do not seem to understand the real value of the National Centre for Farmer Health are members of the Napthine Coalition State Government," Ms Tierney said.

"That is typified by the fact that they believe its value is only \$250,000

per annum, because that is what they have put on the table in terms of its negotiations with the Federal Government.

"They have ripped an enormous amount of money out of the National Centre for Farmer Health budget, to the point where the doors are about to close.

"Already a number of staff have had to be retrenched, and further retrenchments are imminent."

Nationals MP David O'Brien said as beneficiaries of the centre, it was not unrealistic to expect other states to contribute funding.

"We do support the National Centre for Farmer Health, and we call on the Federal Government to step up to the plate," Mr O'Brien said.

"We look forward to some hopefully positive news in next week's Federal Budget."

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