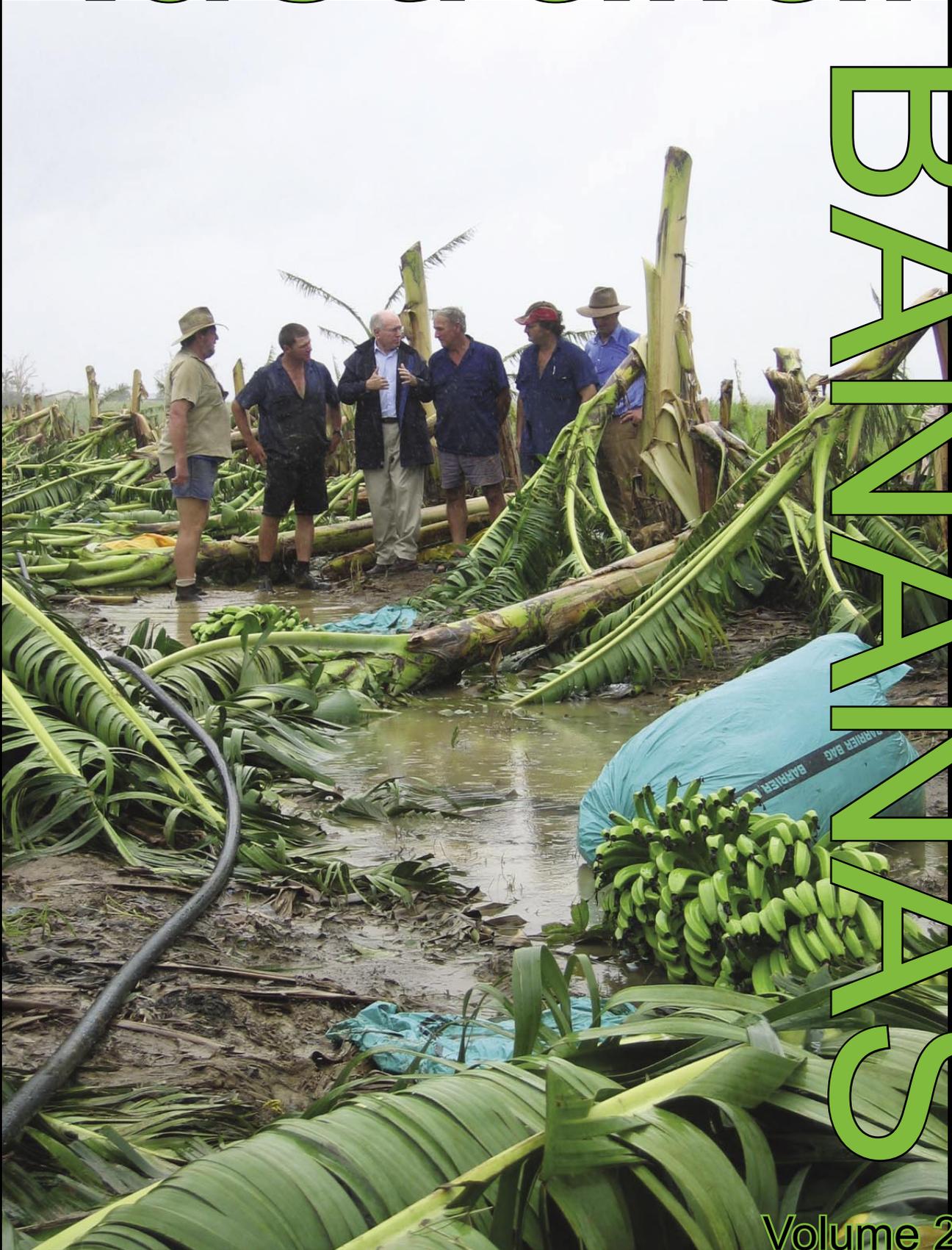


Australian



BANANAS

Volume 22
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Australian Banana Growers' Council Inc

Dealing with Larry's destruction

By Patrick Leahy
ABGC President

IT'S difficult to imagine a more disheartening sight for a banana farmer than to see your entire plantation of bunched and unbunched plants snapped off, blown over or rolled out. This was the sight that greeted north Queensland banana growers on the morning of 20 March when Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Larry crossed the north Queensland coast near Innisfail.

With the scale of destruction to property, crops, native vegetation and local infrastructure unprecedented in living memory, it is remarkable that not a single cyclone-related fatality was recorded.

The average level of destruction sustained by banana plantations alone across the cyclone-affected region has been put at 90 percent. Production losses have been estimated at \$298 million with a further \$145 million required to get farms back into production.

Given the scale of the disaster, the response to the cyclone recovery effort has for the most part been swift and effective. Expressions of support received from well wishers around the country have been overwhelming and continue to this day. Local, state and federal governments are to be commended for their bipartisan response to the disaster recovery.

After the initial damage assessment and clean-up operations are completed, the focus for banana growers will shift to the next crop.

Long-time growers will recall that after the last big cyclone (Winifred in 1986), almost 12 months production was harvested in a four-month period, beginning nine months after the cyclone struck. This massive oversupply depressed prices and set back the financial recovery of the industry for at least a year.

ABGC has sought to address this



PHOTO: Patrick Leahy has the ear of (from left) grower Kerry Alcock, local Federal Member Bob Katter, Prime Minister John Howard, Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile, and Premier Peter Beattie.

potential oversupply problem by developing a staggered cropping plan in conjunction with the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries **see page 14-17**.

Meanwhile, Cyclone Larry has demonstrated the importance of having a geographic spread of viable production areas.

Western Australia had its own cyclone scares, with ABGC's WA director Tom Day reporting that they were on cyclone alert four times, with two storms being Category 5 but eventually crossing the coast further north of banana production areas.

It is fortunate the other Australian growing regions have been able to provide some fruit for consumers used to having affordable fruit readily available. The supply interruption has caused prices to spike and presented a chance for growers in other regions to establish their place in the industry.

Crop insurance

For those who believe in taking a proactive approach to risk management, it is frustrating that there is not a single insurance company in Australia willing to provide insurance for banana crops.

We need to look at the issue of multi-peril insurance for banana crops and debate the possibilities of establishing an insurance scheme of our own, along the lines of the one established by Western Australian growers. A system similar to the recent cost-sharing provisions in the Emergency Plant Pest Response Deed developed to handle the eradication of exotic plant pest outbreaks in this country provide one possible starting point.

Vale Mort Johnston

It is with great sadness that we note the passing of industry stalwart, entrepreneur and innovator Mort Johnston. Mort passed away on 24 March 2006 following a heart attack and will be sorely missed by all who knew him. Mort was a positive, supportive and generous individual. If the value of a man's life can be summed up by the attendance at his funeral, Mort was indeed the most valued of men and I personally will miss his support and input to our industry. He is survived by wife Jill and their four children Anthony, Melanie, Paul and Stephen. Our tribute to Mort appears on **pages 22-23**.

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Australian Banana Growers' Council Inc
PO Box 309
BRISBANE MARKET QLD 4106
Phone: 07 3278 4786
Fax: 07 3278 4938
Email: abgc@abgc.org.au
Internet: www.abgc.org.au

Board of Directors 2006:

Chairman: Patrick Leahy
Vice-Chairman: Nicky Singh
Directors: Peter Molenaar, Cameron MacKay,
Marc Jackson, Mark Reppel, Tom Day, Vicky
Kippin-O'Connor

Staff:

Chief Executive Officer: Tony Heidrich
Office Manager: Jann Bonsall

Magazine production:

Editor: Jane Milburn
0408 787 964 jane@milburnmedia.com
Advertising: Annabelle deMilliere
0414 561 945 or 07 3818 2468
demillieremedia@optusnet.com.au

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Pictures tell story of devastation



The PM and the Premier came



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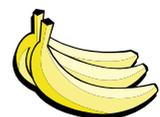
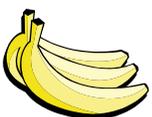
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6 Australian BANANAS

and other politicians followed up



Peak body tackles levy issues



PHOTO: At the recent ABGC meeting were (from back left) Tony Heidrich, Mark Warmington, Ron Peterson, Stewart Lindsay, Len Collins, Nicky Singh, Mark Reppel, Tom Day, (front left) Cameron MacKay, Marc Jackson, Vicky Kippin-O'Connor, Jann Bonsall and Patrick Leahy.

In a decisive move, the Australian Banana Growers' Council has resolved to increase funding for the industry peak body and put a national banana levy back on the agenda.

At its board meeting in north Queensland in late May, ABGC voted to increase its levy from 2c to 3c per 13kg carton, effective from 1 July this year.

ABGC President Patrick Leahy said the levy had been kept at 2c/carton for the past 15 years but that rate was no longer sufficient to meet the running costs of the organisation.

He said the board needed to ensure the peak industry body is appropriately funded to provide leadership and profile on national issues, particularly at this time as the north Queensland industry recovers from Cyclone Larry.

Mr Leahy said ABGC effectively negotiated with all levels of government during the Cyclone Larry crisis and thereby secured significant additional assistance to the initial package of measures.

ABGC is continuing to work with Ministers and their departments on issues such as the staggered crop management plan that will help our industry return to a more normal production pattern as soon as possible.

The ABGC board also decided to put the national levy back on the agenda, with plans to conduct another ballot of commercial banana growers later this year.

Mr Leahy said the new proposal is for a 1.7c/kg (22c/13kg carton) levy which is expected to raise about \$4.8 million annually for research and development, marketing and the plant protection needs of Australia's leading fruit industry.

Elections

The ABGC will hold elections for two board positions that will become vacant later this year.

The ABGC board consists of five Queensland directors; two New South Wales directors; and one Northern

Territory director or Western Australian director.

Advertisements notifying members of a call for nominations for election as Directors of the Council will be placed in newspapers generally available in banana production areas.

Assistance update

Producers are advised that applications **close** on June 30 for a number of assistance measures on offer as part of the Cyclone Larry recovery program.

These include:

- small business support grants of up to \$25,000
- fuel excise relief
- \$1000 one-off support grant
- wage assistance package, which has now been extended to those employing contractors as well as permanent staff.

Negotiations for an exit package, to enable those wanting to leave the industry to do so with dignity, are still under way.

Imports Committee stays on alert

By Len Collins

ABGC Imports Committee chairman

Within days of Cyclone Larry and news of the major crop wipe-out, media speculation was rife about whether imports would be fast-tracked to meet the shortfall.

Having spent the past five years working through the convoluted import risk assessment process, the banana industry is keenly aware that any suggestion of fast-tracking was naïve, inappropriate and invalid.

But it was reassuring to hear Prime Minister John Howard, in reply to media questions, responding strongly and definitively that there was a process for deciding on imports which would not be interfered with or compromised in any way.

This was reinforced by Australian Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Peter McGauran who said Cyclone Larry damage to banana and sugar cane crops will have no impact on Australia's strong biosecurity and quarantine safeguards.

Mr McGauran made it clear the impact of the cyclone would not



PHOTO: ABGC Imports Committee chairman Len Collins with ABGC board member Cameron MacKay and CEO Tony Heidrich.

change Australia's focus on a proper scientific assessment of the potential quarantine risks. He said a current application to export bananas to Australia from the Philippines would continue to be dealt with according to standard processes, and timelines would not be influenced in any way by crop losses in far north Queensland.

"The comprehensive scientific assessment of any quarantine risks

associated with the proposal will continue in the normal way," he said.

Biosecurity Australia has been undertaking an import risk analysis on potential banana imports to Australia since 1999.

"It is expected Biosecurity Australia will issue a revised draft report for comment by the banana industry and other stakeholders towards the middle of the year," Mr McGauran said.

Plastic waste collection all part of recovery service

Plastic waste has emerged as a real problem for banana growers post-Larry therefore industry is pleased that plastic pick ups will occur in coming weeks as part of Operation Farm Clear.

The clean up operation is being managed by the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries and plastics will be picked up from individual farms on request.

Banana industry cyclone recovery officer Mark Warmington said it will be important for growers to stockpile the plastics (with any irrigation pipe put into manageable lots) in an accessible pick-up point so trucks do not become bogged and farm hygiene is not compromised.

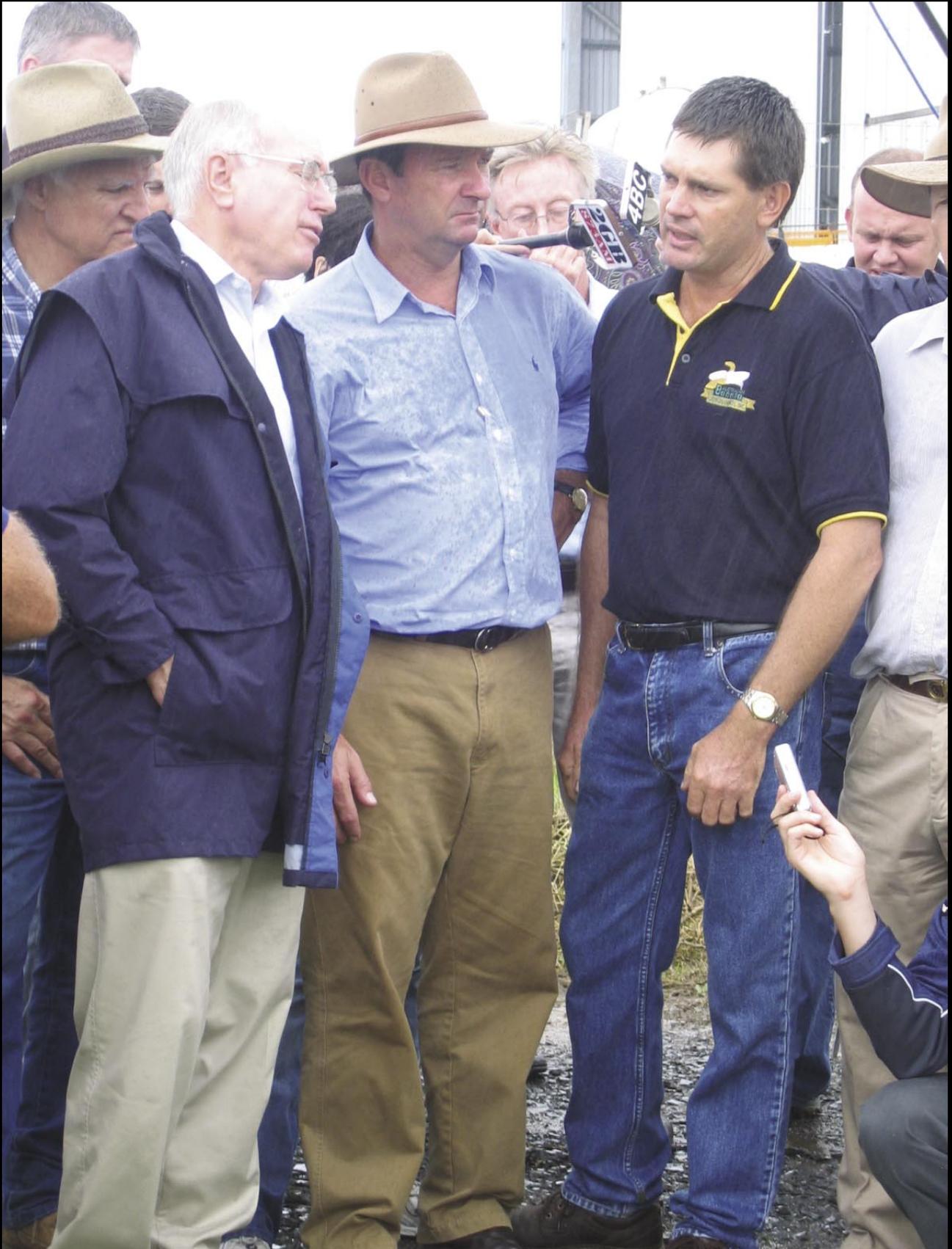


To lodge your request for assistance, or for any enquiries you have about Operation Farm Clear, contact DPI&F on 13 25 23.

Mark (left) is working under an agreement between the Department of Education and Training, QFF, Growcom and ABGC to provide advice to farm families and local communities on available State and Federal Cyclone Larry assistance measures.

This role also involves helping growers complete any documentation or applications for government assistance.

Mark Warmington is contactable on a hotline number 1800 068 371 and is available to visit farms to discuss whatever issues growers may have with assistance packages or planning their production rotation to manage a return to 12-month harvesting.



**Prime Minister John Howard, Deputy Prime Minister
Mark Vaile and ABGC President Patrick Leahy
– 23 March 2006**