



Down: Fire levies are expected to fall.

Risky not to cut fire levies

By CIMARA PEARCE

INSURANCE companies are on notice.

With the transition from an insurance-based fire services levy to a property-based levy collected by councils, insurance holders can expect to see their premiums drop from Monday.

If they don't, the Fire Services Levy Monitor Alan Fels said he would be watching.

"If insurance companies claim that higher costs offset any part of the benefit of the reduced FSL, they will be expected to justify in detail these cost increases," Mr Fels said.

Elders Insurance general manager Jon Fox would not reveal how much insurance holders would, on average, see their premiums drop, but said he was confident Elders was fulfilling its legal obligations regarding the abolition of the insurance-based FSL.

"The pricing of insurance risk is complex and dynamic with a number of key drivers considered and taken into account when setting premiums," Mr Fox said.

Municipal Association of Victoria president Bill McArthur said while councils remained unhappy about collecting the FSL on behalf of the Victorian Government, the MAV was pleased at this stage with the level of compensation councils would receive for administering the levy.

LIVE EXPORTS

Ban's cruel result

By KATE DOWLER

THOUSANDS of cattle could face a slow death from starvation as a direct result of the Federal Government's 2011 live export trade ban to Indonesia, according to a leading farm policy analyst.

Mick Keogh, executive director of the Australian Farm Institute, said this could mean more widespread cruelty than isolated abuse in Indonesian abattoirs.

Mr Keogh's comments have the backing of Queensland farm lobby group AgForce.

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However, he said the biggest threat to livestock producers now was not drought, feed prices, disease or market volatility, but major business disruption driven by activists.

"The suspension of this (live export) trade and subsequent response by the Australian Government ... have had a major economic impact on the beef industry of northern Australia," Mr Keogh said. "This has been exacerbated by drought."

"Ironically, the live export suspension has resulted in more cruelty, in the form of the slow death of cattle by starvation, than it prevented."

AgForce Queensland chief executive officer Charles Burke agreed.

"The live export suspension ... has put at risk, down the chain, the welfare of thousands of cattle," Mr Burke said.

He said producers with no alternative market were forced to keep them on their stations. This was followed by a severe drought, compounding the financial strain on producers.

A third of Queensland was now drought-declared and "well in excess of 300,000" cattle now faced a lack of feed.

"We call on the federal and state governments to get on with

sorting out the promised assistance package and, looking forward, we need to secure free trade agreements and rebuild trust with trading partners like Indonesia."

Animals Australia spokeswoman Lisa Chalk said: "Blaming the Queensland cattle situation on a five-week trade disruption two years ago is just a convenient political football when the Indonesian government made it clear in 2009 that quotas were being reduced in their drive towards self-sufficiency."



Sharing: The NCFH's Cate Mercer-Grant and Sue Brumby (front) with Canadians Kathy Aheam, Laurel Aitken and Laura Nelson.

Health tips to go north

By KATE DOWLER

CANADIAN farmers will benefit from ground-breaking health programs developed in Australia.

But Australian farmers will no longer be able to access them, with the National Centre for Farmer Health to close when government funding ceases.

On Monday Alberta farmer health experts visited the NCFH in Hamilton to learn about its successful Sustainable Farm Families program.

Alberta Farm Safety Centre's Laura Nelson said the SFF program was the most successful of its type in the world.

It had a "magic ability to engage" with farmers, Ms Nelson said. "This work is too valuable to lose."

Centre founder Sue Brumby said she was "gutted" by the lack of funding for the NCFH.

"This borders on a human rights issue," Prof Brumby said.

Gas pledge may be pipe dream, residents say

By CHRIS McLENNAN

RESIDENTS at the twin towns of Wandong-Heathcote Junction remain pessimistic about the Victorian Government's promise last week to connect 450 houses to natural gas.

Residents group president David Moran said: "We're not holding our breath, there's still another election between now and then. We've had lots of politicians here. The Premier has even been here, but there's still not a pipe been laid."

Deputy Premier Peter Ryan visited the towns last week to announce homes and businesses in Wandong-Heathcote Junction, north of Melbourne, would soon have access to natural gas.

Envestra will build about 1.3km of supply and trunk pipe-

line, and more than 11km of reticulation pipeline to connect the town to gas under a deal with the Government.

Ten more country towns are still waiting for the State Government to fulfil its pre-election commitment to a natural

gas rollout around the country.

Another study will be needed first before the rollout begins at Wandong-Heathcote Junction.

Mr Ryan said "it was estimated" the twin towns would be connected to natural gas by the end of 2015.

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