

DPI's extra disaster funds

By PETER HUNT

VICTORIAN agriculture's capacity to rapidly respond to natural disasters and emergencies was given an \$8.8 million boost in yesterday's budget.

"Department of Primary Industries staff provide critical services during and after natural disasters, including fires on private land, floods, storms, hail, frost and drought, as well as associated threats to animal welfare and energy supplies," Agriculture Minister Joe Helper said.

"This investment will ensure we have the best staff in the right place to help as quickly as possible when disasters strike.

"With climate change leading to a greater frequency and duration of natural disaster

emergencies requiring DPI to respond, it is important we have the right tools in place."

Until now the Government has relied heavily on the Victorian Farmers Federation to coordinate donations of fodder and volunteers to re-fence fire and flood damaged properties.

While the VFF received some funding from the government for its efforts, the federation has argued its involvement came at a huge cost in staff and members' time.

Mr Helper also announced a further \$5.4 million, spread over four years, to continue to protect Victoria's farmers from the most threatening incursions of weeds and pest animals.

DPI's work is increasingly

focused on new and emerging weeds, rather than on those that have already invaded public land and roadsides.

While local councils and the VFF are certain to welcome the extra funding, the DPI and Mr Helper have still not resolved who is to pay for controlling roadside weeds — cash-strapped councils or the Victorian Government.

The Government is also forging ahead with its \$180 million investment in the Bundoora Centre for AgriBioscience, which will eventually house staff from its Knoxfield and Frankston sites.

The DPI has been guaranteed all revenue from the sale of these sites will go back into the

department.

As part of the Budget announcements, Mr Helper also announced rapid genome sequencing technologies will be housed at the AgriBioscience centre and DPI Bendigo.

Mr Helper said the investments in this year's Budget were on top of the 2008 five-year commitment of \$205 million to the Future Farming Strategy, which included investments in drought, cold and salt-resistant crops, plant and animal disease-control technologies, \$24 million for managing weeds and pests, a new **National Centre for Farmer Health** and market development.

AG HIGHLIGHTS

- \$11.6 million over four years to establish rapid geosequencing technology at Bundoora and Bendigo.
- \$8.8 million over four years for DPI to plan, mobilise and coordinate resources when confronted with natural disasters and emergencies.
- \$5.4 million over four years to tackle weeds and pest animals.



Booster shot: extra funding will help DPI respond effectively to natural disasters and emergencies affecting farmers