Emerald talks workers' visas

EMPLOYERS and overseas workers on temporary visas have been invited to attend a free information session next Thursday about employer-sponsored visa options for skilled workers.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship, supported by the Central Highlands Development Corporation (CHDC), will provide information about the sub-class 457 visa program, employer obligations and pathways to permanent residence, including the regional sponsored migration scheme.

Information will also be presented on the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme, which can be of benefit to fruit and vegetable growers.

Queensland outreach officers will conduct free information sessions and will also be available for individual meetings with regional employers.

This session will provide details of the range of visa options available and an update on changes to the 457 visa program, employer obligations and pathways to permanent residence.

This will provide a chance to ask questions and gain a better understanding of these visa programs.

Officers will be on hand to answer a range of questions about the skilled migration program, such as market salary rates, health insurance, training requirements and employer obligations.

There will also be a brief look at the other side of the story. CHDC has invited a local couple who have been through the immigration process to share their story about coming to live and work in Australia.

To make an appointment for an individual consultation, contact CHDC on 4982 4386 or email zhite@chdc.com.au.

■ For more information on this visit or employer-sponsored skilled visa programs, contact Scott Wickham on 0466 150 713 or email qld.outreach.team@immi.gov.au.

Visa Options Information Session

When: Thursday, August 25, 5.30pm–7pm
Where: CHDC, Wally McKenzie House, Emerald Showgrounds
Contact: Numbers are limited, so RSVP to CHDC on 4982 4386 or email zhite@chdc.com.au by Wednesday, August 24

Individual Consultations
IMMIGRATION outreach officers will be available for 30-minute individual appointments at the Central Highlands Development Corporation:
When: Friday, August 26, 9am–5pm
Where: CHDC, Wally McKenzie House, Emerald Showgrounds
Contact: RSVP to CHDC on 4982 4386 or email zhite@chdc.com.au by Wednesday, August 24

State's make-good rules 'meaningless': PRA head

THE first female president of a national land rights advocacy group, Joanne Rea, has accused the Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) of behaving as "advocates for the coal seam gas industry" during Senate committee hearings in south-west Queensland.

Ms Rea is a Central Queensland grazier who recently took over as president of Property Rights Australia (PRA) from Gracemere beef producer Ron Bahnisch.

"Never has a disregard for agriculture and property rights been more evident, with DERM behaving not like the umpire – making sure that too scant regulations are adhered to – but as advocates for the CSG industry. This came through again and again in presentations to the Senate committee," Ms Rea said.

An indication of problems landowners were facing could be seen in the Condamine Alluvium – a small, productive piece of prime farming land east of the Condamine River.

"It was revealed at the inquiry that, at the same time as CSG companies have had their unlimited access to water in the Condamine Aquifer reaffirmed by Section 185 of the Petroleum and Gas Act, farmers on the Condamine Alluvium, according to the Central Downs Irrigators Ltd, were having access reduced and had to pay for the installation of new meters on their bores," she said.

Ms Rea said the State Government had made much of its "make-good" provisions if a bore was dewatered by gas extraction.

"No one has a clue what this means or how a company will make good," Ms Rea said.

"They have three years to do it, no one knows what negotiations will take place or whether it will go to court and a level of proof will be required. Until there is some experience of how it will work in practice, it is a meaningless phrase," she said.

"It is quite possible that this delicate aquifer below our very best farming land will be rendered useless," Ms Rea said.

"If the CSG companies were required to meter and pay for their water and suffer cutbacks without compensation, as the farmers do, they may regard it as a valuable property rather than a waste product which they have to dispose of."

There was also a fear, due to connectivity with the Walloon Coal Measures, that if this was dewatered and depressurised, gravity would cause water to flow from the Condamine aquifer to the Walloons.

"This is before even any above-ground effects, such as farming around a mess of wells, pipes, bores and all-weather roads on a floodplain, are considered," Ms Rea said.

Producers plead for rate bands

RURAL ratepayers are again appealing to Rockhampton Regional Council to introducing rate-banding – in a bid to give them some financial relief.

A group of about 50 ratepayers near Marlborough gathered for a meeting with Mayor Brad Carter and other council representatives last Friday to discuss the issue of rising rural rates.

Cattle producer Peter Shannon said he was disappointed the council had not introduced banding for agricultural properties. Banding would create smaller divisions, according to the value of the property.

Cr Carter told the group that the council had looked at the proposal but, in the end, had decided not to implement it because it would create pressure to increase rates on lower-value properties.

He said the council had instead reduced the rate in the dollar for the rural category to provide some relief from increased valuations – over which the council had no control.

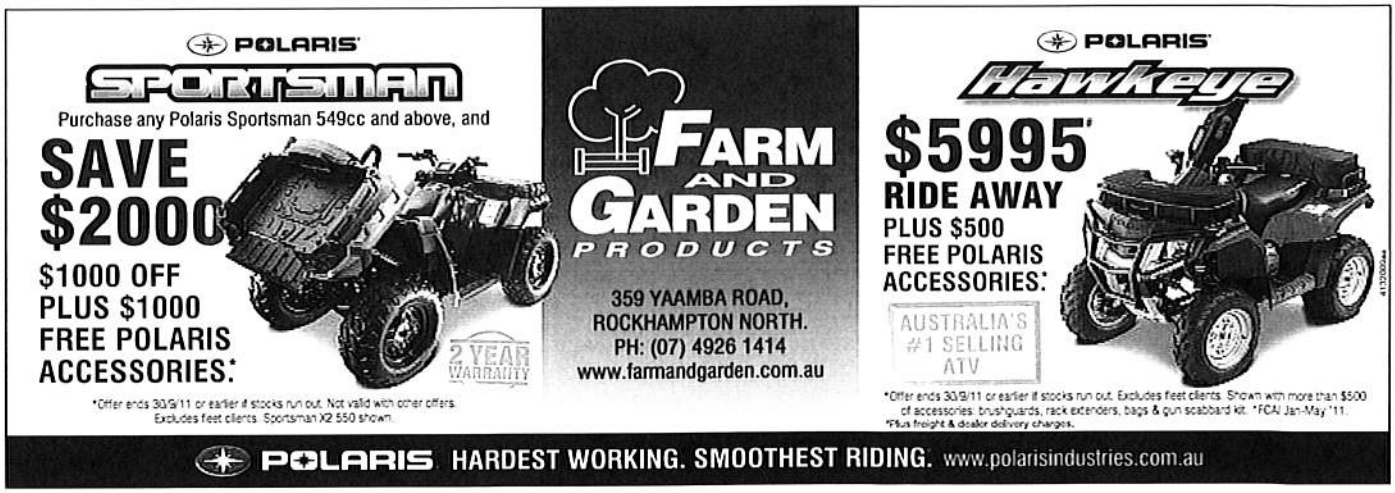
But Mr Shannon said he felt the rural category was the object of discrimination.

"Why is our category being treated differently to rural residential and the other categories?" he said.

He said he didn't want to interfere with the rates of residents in other categories but that rural property-owners were not getting a fair go. "I copped close to an $800 rise; some people got up to $3000. We are all here because we are hurting financially."

Mr Shannon said the rural increase was double the increase in residential areas.

Cr Glenda Mather said she would like to see a working group meet create a more equitable formula, adding she had always supported banding.

Cr Cherie Rutherford said she had also supported banding on behalf of her constituents but had "lost the battle" at the council table.

She reminded the group that, with suggested boundary changes to council divisions, the majority of rural areas would come under one division and encouraged residents to voice any concerns about that.