

*“Draft Cane Toad Strategy for Western Australia 2009–2019” — Statement by Minister for Environment — Motion*

Resumed from an earlier stage of the sitting on the following motion moved by Hon Robin Chapple —

That the statement be noted.

**Hon ROBIN CHAPPLE:** Before question time, I was talking about Kimberley Toad Busters, which has been doing an absolutely sterling job since its establishment in 2005. I think I mentioned that I was lucky enough to be at the formation meeting for that organisation that was held in Kununurra. The objective of Kimberley Toad Busters is to try to slow the front line of toads as they migrate west and mitigate their impacts on native fauna.

**Hon Ken Travers:** I’ve never seen anyone clear an audience so quickly!

**Hon ROBIN CHAPPLE:** Thank you, guys!

**Hon Liz Behjat:** They’re all rushing off to check out your website!

**Hon ROBIN CHAPPLE:** It is [www](http://www.kimberleytoadbusters.org.au) —

**Hon Giz Watson:** Just google Robin Chapple!

**Hon ROBIN CHAPPLE:** Turning a serious mind to this subject, the other objectives of Kimberley Toad Busters is to facilitate and sponsor scientific field work and to take the biodiversity education program to schools and other community groups in the Kimberley. It has invested more than 2.5 million volunteer hours since 2005 and has disposed of 1.5 million adult cane toads and countless million eggs, tadpoles and juveniles. Kimberley Toad Busters is committed to working to try to reduce toad numbers. I point out that it has a very difficult task. I think this house is beholden to thank the many people in Kununurra who go out night after night in pursuit of the cane toad. KTB has established a living Google map on the home page of its website to enable interested parties to see the progress of the cane toads through the Kimberley. All seven years of data are being collated and will soon be available on the website. Although state government funding of \$1.2 million over four years has been appreciated, it has not been nearly enough to cover toad-busting operations. Kimberley Toad Busters also raises funds within the community—around \$30 000 per annum—and has received Caring for our Country funding.

Toads are now in the Kimberley and present Kimberley Toad Busters with an even greater challenge in maintaining community engagement and reducing the impact of toads on the Kimberley’s biodiversity. Only one year’s worth of funding remains of the \$1.2 million state government allocation. I will talk about the Stop the Toad Foundation in a moment. That funding of \$1.2 million is coming to an end. I appeal to the state government, and to the National Party with its royalties for regions program, to direct further funds to this incredible community effort, which is doing the bidding of all Western Australians in keeping the cane toad at bay. There have been positive outcomes in the area that Kimberley Toad Busters has undertaken action in, including the prevention of any breeding activity. Toad movements have slowed in two central corridors, taking toads into Kununurra. There has been a reduction in the number of toads being picked up and there has been a reduction in the loss of native biodiversity in those areas where the toad populations have been reduced. It is to be noted that a Johnstone’s crocodile was recently found in the region, which, when opened up, was found to have died as a result of eating a cane toad. Kimberley Toad Busters has trialled several different methods and continually works on its annual toad busts. Although these are effective for the few weeks that volunteers are in the field, they are not nearly as effective in the long term and deal only with a handful of aquatic systems in the landscape that contains thousands of similar toad-infested systems. Again, if we are to save the Kimberley, as the government has talked about in its bold conservation vision for the Kimberley, there is a definite need to put some more money into the front line of defending Western Australia.

It is also important to mention the Stop the Toad Foundation, which is another organisation operating in that region. It is doing its management not by cane toad collection, but by putting in fencing controls. These fences are not very big, but they are webbed into the ground to stop the toads burrowing through them or getting through them. It is like a pit trap; as the toads run along the fence line, they are collected at the end of the fence line. There is a really good amalgamation of efforts being applied in the Kimberley by the Stop the Toad Foundation with its fencing program and by Kimberley Toad Busters with its collection system. I hope that, if funding is to be made available from the state government or, indeed, from royalties for regions, both programs can be funded. Although they are different programs, they have a great synergy.

The Stop the Toad Foundation commenced its operations in 2005 when it was incorporated. In 2005, the state government pledged \$500 000 to the Stop the Toad Foundation to start the foundation and to raise community awareness. In April 2006, three full-time staff were employed by the Stop the Toad Foundation. The first great toad muster was held in September 2006, during which 50 000 toads were collected with the help of 120 volunteers. In March 2007, staff positions were no longer available due to financial constraints. The campaign was run voluntarily by board member Russell Gueho. In September 2007, the state government gave a further

\$100 000 to the Stop the Toad Foundation to support the second Great Toad Muster during which 12 000 toads were collected with the help of 30 volunteers.

What I am really saying is that there is a great will amongst a range of community members in the Kimberley to do the bidding of all Western Australians. I think that their efforts should be applauded. No-one has really asked them to do it, yet they are doing it on our behalf. As far as their future and the potential halting of the cane toad advance into Western Australia goes, I seriously hope that the state government will consider providing more funding to these valuable members of the community who do our work for us.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** As Hon Robin Chapple noted, it has been some years since the former Minister for Environment made her statement about the draft cane toad strategy. In fact, it was so long ago that there is now a final version of the “Cane Toad Strategy for Western Australia 2009–2019”. It will be interesting to see what substance there is to the claim in the foreword of the strategy that —

The final strategy is action oriented, streamlined and produced as a ‘living’ document that can be updated readily as new information comes to hand.

I cannot say that there has been any evidence of that so far, so it will be interesting to hold the government accountable for that. I must note in passing that the minister’s statement contained the immortal sentence —

The Liberal–National government has come in at a time when the threat of this noxious pest has become critical.

I think the minister was referring to cane toads rather than the Liberal–National government!

I take this opportunity to mention the work of Kimberley Toad Busters. It has been acknowledged by the previous Labor government and the Liberal–National government, which have both tried to manage this cane toad infestation, that we need community involvement if we are to ever slow or stop the passage of cane toads across the north of the continent. The previous Minister for Environment referred to a \$30 million investment by government. She would have been very much aware that \$12 million of that was put in by the Labor government, a substantial proportion of which went to Kimberley Toad Busters, whose members have been the living embodiment of this kind of community involvement with the campaign. I know that many members of this house have been to the Kimberley and had direct involvement with KTB. I acknowledge the unbelievably intense efforts of the Scott-Virtue family who I think have in effect devoted the whole life of their family in the past few years to Kimberley Toad Busters. It is certainly a family with a huge commitment to that organisation. Earlier this month, Kimberley Toad Busters was honoured once again for the work it has done. It was a finalist in three categories of the United Nations Association of Australia World Environment Day Awards 2011. Kimberley Toad Busters won the community award, which is the second year in a row that it has won that award. The UNAA citation states —

Nearly 80 years since the introduction of the Cane Toad into Australia, the Kimberley Toad Busters volunteer program is now showing clear signs that community action can mitigate the impact of toads on native biodiversity, and that with consistent and continuous efforts to take adult toads out of the system, and towards preventing major ongoing breeding cycles, we can slow the toad movement down. This community effort is also showing that an empowered community can undertake much needed scientific research and that without community efforts, government and scientists will continue to make natural resource decisions based on insufficient information.

That is the key; that is the role that the community plays in contributing not only directly contributing to slowing the rate of the invasion, but also collecting that much-needed practical evidence to contribute to scientific programs. A few years ago I had the pleasure of presenting to a group at the University of Western Australia that was the core team engaged in cane toad research. Essentially, I expected it to be a pretty dry presentation—that was not supposed to be a pun. Until that time, I imagined that cane toads were basically a noxious pest, but I saw some absolutely astonishing results from some of the scientific work that was going on. It is in that field, I think, that everybody acknowledges the real breakthroughs will be made. That is not to diminish in any way the work that the volunteer organisations are doing, particularly the KTB. However, I think that it is incumbent on this government to work very closely with the commonwealth, because of course the research is not just ongoing in Western Australia; it is a nationwide project. This is one of the most important steps that we can take to protect our environment. I will give honourable members a little flavour of this. One of the other things that KTB does is put out a regular newsletter. I make a point of reading this every couple of weeks when it comes to me as it is always very interesting to read the on-the-ground reports of people’s observations about what is happening in the Kimberley. The account I want to share with honourable members is from the newsletter at the end of last year, just before Christmas, so a few months ago. It states —

... serious problem that every resident of Kununurra does face this Christmas. The march forward of the toad. As most of the agriculturalists will testify, the toad is here. Still in small numbers, but none the

less a change can now be heard in the sounds of the bush at night. There is a new kid on the block and the gravelly staccato is building with devastating consequences for our wildlife. Noel, the manager of Paul Mocks Sandalwood farm has recorded the deaths of seven monitors and goannas in the last few months alone. In his words,

“I have worked here now for a number of years and I have never prior to the arrival of the toad seen such a loss of reptile life happen so quickly. I know you read about it, but seeing it for yourself highlights the toxicity and vulnerability that the toad poses to our wildlife. I’m out at night now, bagging and tagging the little b’s with the hope that it’ll mitigate further impacts”

When I read “bagging and tagging the little b’s”, I imagine a couple of guys wandering around with a sack; however, the number of toads that they bag is staggering—it is thousands and thousands of toads every month. Kimberley Toad Busters states —

In the month of May 34 different toad busts were undertaken by KTB, with a total of 922 cane toad juveniles, 368 male and 916 female toads removed from the system. This equates to a grand total of 2206 toads removed from our environment. These figures are only those removed by KTB registered volunteers and many more toads were removed by community members who were taking care of their own ‘backyards’.

Coming back to backyards, KTB won the United Nations Association of Australia World Environment Day Community Award for its What’s in Your Backyard program. I have seen the DVD and it is very, very impressive. It is the sort of thing that is now being shown by community groups to children at schools in the Kimberley. It is a magnificent educational presentation of what this threat consists of, and what individuals can do to help mitigate this threat.

As I said earlier, this is not the first award that Kimberley Toad Busters has won. This is the second year in a row in which it has won the United Nations’ award. KBT was also the finalist in the 2010 Banksia Award for its work in the area of native biodiversity. It was a semi-finalist in the regional achievers award. It was the only Australian volunteer organisation to make it into the United Nations 2010 International Year of Biodiversity calendar. That is a major achievement for what started off as virtually a family business. I am reading from KTB’s list of achievements for 2010. KTB also organised and hosted a three-day cane toad environmental forum in March 2010. It produced a DVD of the forum. It uploaded the papers for the forum and made them available to everybody. It had a stall at the Perth Royal Show stall. It established working partnerships with several major Indigenous organisations in the Kimberley. It published and printed 10 000 new cane toad educational brochures, bumper stickers and posters. It produced a range of caps and other merchandise. Its membership has now grown to well over 6 000 people. This is a remarkable achievement. It is making a tangible difference to containing this menace.

In 2010, the toad busting volunteer nights moved to an average of five a week, with up to two teams heading into the field at a time. Over 1.3 million large mature cane toads have now been removed, and countless eggs, tadpoles and metamorphs. Only a few weeks ago, we were debating a statement by Hon Robyn McSweeney about volunteering in Western Australia. KTB has now put over two million hours of volunteer labour—that is a very impressive figure—into the fight to slow down and mitigate the impact of cane toads, as well as recording and monitoring wildlife before and after cane toads arrive.

I would like more resources to be given to this group. Kimberley Toad Busters is not only making a tangible difference to the number of breeding toads that are being removed from the breeding cycle, but also contributing in an irreplaceable way to the research that I think will eventually give us the answer to how we can eradicate this menace.

**Hon HELEN MORTON:** I would say that the one thing that the Liberal–National Party has in common with these cane toads is that it appears to be unstoppable in every respect.

Several members interjected.

**Hon Sally Talbot:** I was just quoting!

**Hon HELEN MORTON:** I know, and I was just adding to it!

Considerable government and community attention in Western Australia has focused on the issue of cane toads since the state government launched the cane toad initiative in December 2004. Cane toads have been spreading across Australia from Queensland for over 75 years. No strategy or technique has been developed and successfully implemented to date to prevent the expansion of cane toads. This is despite intensive research into the bio-control agents and other control methods. Since December 2004, the state government has allocated over \$14 million, and the federal government over \$4 million, to the fight against cane toads in Western Australia. Actions include a mix of direct control, research, and community awareness activities across the board.

Cane toads crossed the Northern Territory–Western Australian border in February 2009. Following their entry into Western Australia, the Department of Environment and Conservation refocused its strategy on mitigating the impact of cane toads on high-priority areas and identifying pathways for cane toad movement within Western Australia. DEC also continues to support innovative research that may help reduce the density of cane toad populations and/or their impacts on native fauna.

Cane toads have been increasing in abundance around Kununurra during the current wet season, and they have been establishing a breeding population in the Ord River irrigation area. Cane toads have been reported at Kingston West, about 20 kilometres west of Kununurra. In recent times they have moved across northern Australia at a rate of up to 50 kilometres a year, and they are expected to continue to expand their range further west into the Kimberley region at a similar rate. There is no evidence that their rate of movement or impact on native fauna has been impeded by any control work that has been undertaken to date.

Kimberley Toad Busters has recently called for increased investment for bio-control research. There has been considerable investment in searching for biological control techniques for cane toads. However, these have not yet proved to be a satisfactory solution. The state government has been contributing funding for research into the impact and control of cane toads since December 2006. This includes \$850 000 to the University of Western Australia for the Australian cane toad genome program, and over \$800 000 to the University of Sydney for research into the impacts of cane toads and the potential for parasitic lungworms to control cane toad populations. Current state government funding of \$1.2 million over four years to Kimberly Toad Busters for community action, and \$750 000 per annum to the Department of Environment and Conservation for implementation of the Western Australian cane toad strategy, has been provided. The department's cane toad program for 2010–11 is budgeted at \$800 000. That comprises \$550 000 for Kimberley-based operations, \$50 000 for communications, and \$200 000 for research aimed at determining and minimising the environmental impacts of cane toads.

The following key actions are being taken by the Department of Environment and Conservation consistent with the cane toad strategy for Western Australia. Traps have been located in Kununurra at places where hitchhiker toads are most likely to occur. Cane toad information is available to East Kununurra residents and tourists via a number of outlets. The Department of Environment and Conservation is working with the Department of Agriculture and Food to identify pathways for cane toad hitchhikers to move into and within Western Australia. The department continues to fund the cane toad operations at the Kununurra quarantine checkpoint and will use the pathway analysis to assist with future operations for the detector dog and hitchhiker management strategies. The department is assisting the University of Sydney researchers to identify potential impacts of cane toads on key predators in the East Kimberley. It is also assisting with new research on the use of taste aversion concepts to train native predators to avoid eating toads. The department's cane toad team, in collaboration with the Miriuwung–Gajerrong joint management program, conducted 10 bio-diversity surveys in 2010 on the six Miriuwung–Gajerrong joint management reserves and the Lake Argyle joint management reserve in the East Kimberley. The Stop the Toad Foundation worked with the department to erect a fence around the Point Springs Nature Reserve to determine whether fencing is a viable strategy for protecting high-value areas. The outcomes of this will be known after the 2010 wet season.

The previous Minister for Environment, Hon Donna Faragher, had prepared to talk on this statement. She is not here today. I hope that I have covered some of the points that she wanted to mention.

**Question put and passed.**