

EUCLA AIRSTRIP

Grievance

MR K.M. O'DONNELL (Kalgoorlie) [9.46 am]: Greetings, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for Transport for accepting my grievance. First, I would like to apologise for not getting back to the minister sooner. Today, I would like to talk about the Eucla airstrip. Eucla, which is in my electorate, lies next to the South Australian border. The distance from Kalgoorlie–Boulder to Eucla is just under 900 kilometres. From Norseman, it is just over 700 kilometres. From Perth, it is just over 1 436 kilometres and it would take a person about 15 hours by car to get there. The very first time I discovered that I had a body of water in my electorate was when I visited Eucla back in 2018. Back then, the community wanted its airstrip sealed so that the Royal Flying Doctor Service could utilise it in all weather conditions, amongst other issues. Fast forward two years later and the issue remains unchanged. But first, let me give members a bit of insight into Eucla. It is governed by the Shire of Dundas, which covers a humungous area of 93 179 square kilometres. The shire has had its fair share of challenges this year, starting with the bushfires, stranded travellers due to the Eyre Highway closure, ongoing drought and water deficiencies and COVID-19 amongst many other things. Due to emergency situations, it is now apparent that the airstrip needs to be sealed urgently.

Currently, the airfield is closed for significant periods of time due to rainfall and residual flooding. Twice I have chartered a plane to go to Eucla, but the trips had to be cancelled due to water on the runway. There does not even have to be torrential downpour to cancel a trip. There needs to be only a mist and a light drizzle or any water on the runway and the airstrip has to be closed because it is made of dirt! Has any politician landed on the Eucla airstrip before? I have no doubt they have. Were they meant to land there and could not because for whatever reason the airstrip had to close? How many politicians even know where Eucla is and how important this tiny place is as one of the main gateways into WA? This is the real “wander out yonder”, remote places like this! With the hard border, Eucla has become very prominent.

Various user groups use this airfield, including the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the Western Australia Police Force, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services, St John Ambulance and charter companies. I note that the Premier was in Eucla on 3 July visiting the border. I cannot stress enough how important this airstrip is for emergency services. Ambulance services on Eyre Highway are limited and there is a big reliance on the RFDS for medical emergencies. There were thousands and thousands of vehicle movements on Eyre Highway prior to COVID, and obviously fewer now. If there is a major accident, the airstrip is not always available for necessary medical evacuation and the only alternative is braving a nine-hour drive to Kalgoorlie Health Campus. Police responses could also be delayed due to this. The RFDS has used the airfield on 283 occasions in the last 10 years—that is, once a fortnight.

If there was a better airstrip, we could undertake the COVID testing required for truck drivers and those entering the state at Eucla, which the Premier described as “the middle of the desert”, with a roadside testing facility. We could then fly out tests instead of drivers having to go to Norseman and Kalgoorlie for testing.

What the Shire of Dundas is asking for the airstrip is not excessive. All it is asking for is to have 1.2 kilometres of gravel road upgraded to all-weather sealed road, with an ambulance car park and change over cover for patient transfers on the RFDS. As the airstrip is commonly used by emergency services and government agencies, is it fair that the ratepayers of the Shire of Dundas, which is a small shire with scarce resources, have to fork out funds the shire does not have to upgrade the airstrip so that these user groups can have access, without any state government assistance at all? Not only that; the Shire of Dundas has to maintain two airstrips—one in Norseman and one in Eucla. How many other shires have to do that? This just shows that regional areas are disadvantaged at times in the maintenance of airstrips. It is something a metropolitan council does not have to worry about.

The Shire of Dundas has not been sitting idle on this. It has applied for the state's regional airports development scheme for the past two years, but was unsuccessful. The shire recently applied for the 2020 grant, but the whole amount is only \$3.5 million for the entire state. At this rate, if it gets anything, it will barely cover gravel pushing. Through discussions with the shire, I have been informed that should this project go ahead, the shire will employ and lease equipment from local pastoralists to build the airstrip to keep them on the land. Some of these families have been there for more than 100 years, and this will give job opportunities to those who are facing hardship.

Last weekend, I drove to Eucla. I drove nine hours there and the next day I drove nine hours back. I spoke to Rasa Patupis whose family owns the Eucla Motor Hotel. She is also a councillor on the Shire of Dundas. Rasa told me that it is a number one priority for the Eucla airstrip to be accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for priority 1 patient evacuations. In addition, due to COVID-19, transportation of essential services border employees and health officials is now paramount. RFDS road access for an emergency on a federal road is limited to daytime evacuations only. Stray animals are also a concern. Many priority RFDS evacuations occur during the night. The unusable airstrip means that patient transfers to the emergency department are extended indeterminately. Ambulance transfers are 900 kilometres to Kalgoorlie or 700 kilometres to the Norseman airstrip or 350 kilometres to the Yalata

airstrip, east of Eucla. We are not only worried about Great Eastern Highway; we have hundreds of kilometres on the South Australian side of the town to help.

The airstrip is on state land currently. Silver Chain resources are limited to only one nurse, if they are not on their break, and St John Ambulance is also limited due to a small population and lack of volunteers on Eyre Highway. Simply speaking, the Shire of Dundas is in serious need of state financial assistance to upgrade the Eucla airstrip and also in lobbying the federal government on its behalf for federal funding. I urge the state government to consider this matter. I thank the minister again.

MS R. SAFFIOTI (West Swan — Minister for Transport) [9.53 am]: I thank the member for Kalgoorlie for the grievance and raising this issue. Of course, Eucla has been in the media quite a bit this year with the fires that closed Eyre Highway and now as the key border point maintaining our hard border. In the past few months, the Premier has visited Eucla to see the border and the town.

The member is right that the government has a commitment to the provision of regional aviation infrastructure. In July this year, we announced that more than \$3 million worth of grants would be made available for regional airports as part of the rural airports development scheme. RADS is a grants scheme to help support regional air services and safety, and demand for grants is huge. Western Australia is a very, very big state and many towns rely on their airstrip. We work very closely with the Royal Flying Doctor Service, because the regional airstrips support the RFDS, in the assessment and delivery of much-needed upgrades. The government announced that the regional airports development scheme grant contribution will increase to 75 per cent of the eligible project costs for airport owners and they can complete their projects by 31 December 2021 if they can demonstrate the employment of local workers. This is consistent with our COVID-19 recovery plan for the regions.

In 2019–20, 14 regional airports development scheme projects were completed. Funded projects included the development of runways and patient transfer activities, important facilities on the ground, and the completion of planning studies. As I said, I have visited a number of towns and Aboriginal communities that have accessed the scheme. The scheme has lasted for many, many years under both governments and has really supported aviation and activity in the regions.

In 2019–20, there were a total of 22 Royal Flying Doctor Service landings at the current landing strip at Eucla. In the previous year, there were a total of 12 RFDS landings. The department has advised that the shire has, as the member outlined, submitted an application for funding for the upgrade. Sometimes an application is for a greater amount than is available. I think that happened with an application from the City of Geraldton. Further work was done on that application with the commonwealth government in particular through, I think, the Building Better Regions Fund. As I recall, the City of Geraldton got funds through that program and then we assisted. Maybe we can work together to try to highlight this issue to the federal government, which, of course, also has responsibility for aviation. The committee oversees the applications. It will assess the Shire of Dundas's application. That committee comprises representatives from the RFDS, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services has a key role, as the member rightly pointed out, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Main Roads WA, Tourism WA, the Department of Communities, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage and the Department of Transport. I suspect the recommendations on RADS will come to me by the end of this year. Depending on what happens with the Shire of Dundas's application, potentially the Department of Transport could work with the shire to maybe copy what the City of Geraldton did to get further funding from the commonwealth.

I thank the member for that grievance. I am quite aware that the task is enormous and the needs are significant across Western Australia. I am very committed to supporting regional aviation in Western Australia.