APPROACH OF AIRCRAFT TO MARINE MAMMALS — MINIMUM DISTANCE TO BE OBSERVED

5996. Hon Giz Watson to the Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for the Environment

(1) Is it correct that a person in charge of an aircraft is not permitted to approach any closer than 300 metres to marine mammals which includes dolphins, dugongs, whales, fur seals, and Australian sea lions?

(2) If no to (1), what is the specific number of metres that a person in charge of an aircraft is not permitted to approach marine mammals?

(3) If yes to (1), can the Minister explain the rationale and basis as to how a distance of 300 metres was determined to provide a buffer of protection for marine mammals?

(4) Can the Minister explain how do aircraft which may include gliders, balloons, helicopters and ultra light aeroplanes, affect marine mammals when approached closer than 300 metres?

(5) If no to (4), why not?

Hon SALLY TALBOT replied:

(1) Yes.

(2) Not applicable.

(3) The operation of aircraft in close proximity to marine mammals can disturb or stress the animals and cause them to alter normal behaviour patterns. Western Australia adopted the 300 metre minimum approach distance in a 1998 notice proclaimed under the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950. This was adapted from the Commonwealth Government Whale Watching Guidelines that specify a 300 metre or 1 000 feet minimum approach distance for aircraft. These guidelines, which have applied since September 1989, became law when included in regulation 8.05 of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Regulations 2000.

Scientific studies in New Zealand have suggested that approach distances for aircraft could be set as close as 150 metres, however in the absence of similar studies in Australia, most States and the Commonwealth have, as a precautionary measure, adopted the 300 metre or 1 000 feet limit. This is considered adequate for protecting marine mammals from aircraft disturbance, without being impractical or unnecessarily restrictive on aircraft operators.

(4) Avoidance behaviour such as immediate diving has been observed in cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) in response to overflying aircraft, particularly helicopters. Marine mammals may react to the noise or shadow of overflying aircraft and to the rotorwash of helicopters. The sudden appearance overhead of a fast, low flying aircraft can also startle marine mammals.

Typical signs of disturbance in the presence of low flying aircraft include attempts to leave the area quickly; regular changes in direction or speed; hasty dives; changes in breathing patterns; increased time spent diving compared to time spent at the surface; changes in acoustic behaviour; and aggressive behaviour.

(5) Not applicable.