

Division 43: Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions — Services 1 and 3 to 10, Environment, \$373 208 000 —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Environment.

Mr M. Webb, Director General.

Mr P. Dans, Deputy Director General.

Mrs A. Klenke, Chief Finance Officer.

Dr F. Stanley, Executive Director, Conservation and Ecosystem Management.

Ms W. Attenborough, Executive Director, Zoological Parks Authority.

Mr A. Barrett, Executive Director, Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority.

Dr M. Byrne, Executive Director, Biodiversity and Conservation Science.

Mr D. Forster, Principal Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available tomorrow. The Chair will ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. If an adviser needs to answer from the lectern, will they please state their name prior to their answer? The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussions of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee, and I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information will be provided. I will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by Friday, 30 October 2020. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge that through the online questions system.

The CHAIR: I give the call to the member for North West Central.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I refer to paragraph 2, on page 673 under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, which states in part —

A new Fitzroy River National Park will be created and managed jointly by the Department and Traditional Owners to protect the environment and cultural heritage of the Fitzroy River.

What impact will this have on irrigation in the area, by having this newly created joint management by the department and traditional owners?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thanks for the question, member. The issue of irrigation is being examined. We are talking to stakeholders in the area. The state government is working to deliver a suite of additional election commitments and the Fitzroy River is very much part of this, so it is an election commitment to preserve the area and enhance it. It is about ensuring the health of the river, and it provides a basis for sustainable economic development in the catchment. We are opposed to having the Fitzroy dammed. There has been consultation with pastoralists who are direct neighbours, to ensure opportunities for their operations are not impacted by the national park. The proposed stage 1 does not include any acquisition of any pastoral leases. Other mutual benefits are being aligned with the national park to ensure that pastoral lease boundaries, where there are culturally and environmentally significant areas and other issues such as water access, bores, fencing and management approaches continue to be discussed.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: With that answer to that question, there clearly is no certainty over those pastoral leases that adjoin the Fitzroy River. Can the government provide any certainty that the next stages will not lead to acquisition of pastoral leases to be able to suit the government's joint management with the traditional owners? Is there going to be an impact on our pastoral owners into the future moving along the first stage?

Ms C.M. ROWE: That does not relate to this point.

The CHAIR: Once again, there is a fair bit of leeway when it comes to talking about different services and the member for North West Central is following on from the previous answer. He is probably pushing the boundary once again, but I will give the parliamentary secretary the discretion.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I can say this, Chair: Proposed stage 1 of the national park does not include any acquisition of any pastoral leases. Furthermore, there is consultation with stakeholders. We want to see pastoralists in the area succeed and we want to see the environment protected. However, we appreciate there are all sorts of pressures on that catchment

area, including tourism, and the cultural rights of the traditional occupants of that area. The interests of pastoral leases will be very much part of the consultation process. The government has made it clear—this will give the member some clarity—that the Rights in Water and Irrigation Act 1914 will continue to apply for pastoralists whose leases are adjacent to the river, and includes the Fitzroy River National Park. Accordingly, they can access the river for water for the purposes of watering stock, for domestic purposes and for domestic gardens. A decision on whether the water can be accessed for other commercial purposes is the subject of consultation and will be part of the management plan.

Dr D.J. HONEY: In relation to the creation of the national park, it was stated, I think, that it would be completed by now. What is the anticipated date for the completion of the park?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, member. We have had COVID which —

Dr D.J. HONEY: I appreciate that; I understand the reasons.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Many of the meetings that were arranged have not happened, but we are hoping that stage 1 will be announced this year.

Mr W.R. MARMION: My question relates to the plan for our parks in paragraph 1 on page 673, under “Government Initiatives”. The parliamentary secretary might know the answer, as might the department people, whom I have asked a number of questions about every single national park in Western Australia and how many resources were allocated, but I did not get any answers. I am relating the question to resources. How many FTEs are engaged in the plan for our parks, which is covered by this spending budget estimate of nearly \$8 million for this year and then \$8.7 million the following year, \$6 million the following year, and then \$2.8 million the following year. Can the parliamentary secretary outline the resourcing of the plan for our parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: In terms of FTEs?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Yes, and anything else.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Member, it is difficult to come up with a number because it involves a package of services across agencies that would not necessarily occupy a person full-time in each agency. It is therefore a very difficult number, and we just do not have a number before us in terms of full-time equivalents that we could attribute to that program.

[5.50 pm]

Mr W.R. MARMION: There must be some people in the department. Someone must be project managing and coordinating it and there must be an indication of how many staff there are. For expenditure of \$8 million, a lot of it would be for people power to get that. I know a lot of negotiation has to be done, but I would be interested to know. There must be even a division set up for such large expenditure.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I can tell the member now that at the moment a dozen people have been applied to managing the project, but the end result of how many will be needed is unknown.

Mr W.R. MARMION: No, I am just after that figure, that is fine, that is all I am after. Thank you very much. Given there are 12 people there, the next bit might be harder to answer. There are 100 national parks and lots of other reserves. I think I have made a comment in the past that if I was the Minister for Environment, which I was, I would need to be a Minister for Environment for over 20 years to even visit half of them. There are 100 national parks for just the minister to visit, let alone departmental people, so there is a lot to manage. The plan for our parks is to increase the area by another five million hectares and most of the increase is by expanding the areas of the current parks. There are 12 FTE dedicated to planning on expanding the parks, so, roughly, how many are allocated to manage the existing parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Sorry, member, how many are currently allocated?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Yes.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: For the totality of the national parks?

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Fair question.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, member. I was hoping to hear more from the member for Nedlands about roads in the Pilbara —

Mr W.R. MARMION: No, I am after estimates about figures—dollars and figures.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am disappointed. I will seek some advice.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: He is happy to take it as a supplementary.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will seek some advice from the deputy director general on this.

Mr P. Dans: Thank you, member for Baldivis. The eventual number of FTEs is still to be determined because a lot of the detail about what the on-ground management arrangements will look like will be contingent on what the Indigenous land use agreements are actually agreed with our traditional owner partners’ management partners

for the parks. We have a fairly broad range we are working within and as we progress those ILUAs and we progress the management plans for the proposed parks, we will have a much clearer understanding of what ILUA benefits will look like. ILUA benefits will largely be around employment outcomes for Aboriginal traditional owners in jointly managing the parks with us. It is a bit open-ended at the moment; we cannot put a figure on it. It is very early days of the management planning process and very early days of the ILUA negotiation process. So it is a bit too early to start nailing in, but yes, there are something in the order of a dozen ILUA negotiators, management planners and people working on getting those discussions, negotiations and working arrangements with traditional owners going. It will take some time before we get to an agreed ILUA—probably 12 or 18 months.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Given that the national parks exist already, what is the benefit to the state of just increasing the areas by going through this massive process, which is costing a lot of money? What is going to be the benefit to Western Australia of having to manage more areas when it is very hard to know how many staff we have currently managing existing national parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I would have thought the benefit was obvious, because it secures more of our natural environment for the conservation estate. I would have thought that it is a very good outcome for the people of Western Australia, and it is self-evident.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I think anything done for the mining industry has to go through the Environmental Protection Authority. The state's area is extensive. If the parliamentary secretary goes to these areas, as he probably has, he will see that the boundaries are in a straight line, so all the government is doing is moving a line. The government has already secured the environmental approval through the EPA. That is just a comment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, we will take that as a comment.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What is the anticipated increased ongoing cost in establishing those? I assume it will be based on what is going to be in large part a whole number of new rangers being appointed, which will be negotiated under ILUAs. What is the anticipated cost of that to the government?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thanks, member, the director general is happy to respond.

Mr M. Webb: As indicated earlier, there is about \$25 million allocated over the next four years to develop this suite of new parks, then the ongoing management of those will form part of our future submissions through the budget process.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Is the director general saying that he cannot provide an estimate now?

Mr M. Webb: I can provide only the estimate, which is in the forward estimates, which is \$25 million over the next four years.

Dr D.J. HONEY: My question refers to page 676, around the “Proportion of planned Priority 1 prescribed burns achieved”. I will say at the outset, and I have said this to the Minister for Emergency Services to his face and in Parliament, that I think one of the reasons our state did not suffer the enormous harm from bushfires that the eastern states suffered last year is that over consecutive governments there has been a refocusing on maintaining prescribed burns. I congratulated the minister for maintaining that: it has been a bipartisan policy that has saved hundreds of lives, and millions of hectares of land in this state from being devastated as it was in the eastern states. I was just intrigued by the proportion of planned priority 1 prescribed burns achieved. My understanding is that the state is achieving its target typically of around that 10 per cent of forest being burned every year in prescribed burns. I was just intrigued as to why we were hitting a target of around 50 per cent, if that is the case. So there was something I did—when I saw note 3, I really did not understand that. Where it said priority 1 prescribed burns cannot constitute more than one-third of planned prescribed burns. I thought: “Boy, that is a bit pyrrhic, isn't it, planning when you know you can't possibly achieve it.” Anyway, I was interested to understand the subtlety of that point, if someone could explain.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The prescribed burning is very important and it is always problematic, obviously, with climatic conditions and balancing the concerns of wine growers, for instance, or beekeepers. This year we actually had the added complication of COVID, which actually presented an issue in terms of the location of staff who had to be in close proximity, to get into fire trucks and appliances to go out to the scene and take part in the prescribed burning. It is an inexact science; we can never know how many days we can take advantage of the situation. However, we are more than exceeding our goals in a global sense in terms of prescribed burning, where the target is to have 45 per cent of the south west forest region, less six years or younger in terms of the age since the last fire. I think we are at 47 per cent or 49 per cent even. So we are exceeding that. But in terms of the very specifics the member has asked, I might refer to the deputy director general, Peter Dans.

Mr P. Dans: We have an annual program that we aim for—something in the order of around 200 000 hectares in the south west region. To do that, each year we would plan something in the order of between maybe 500 000 and 700 000 hectares' worth of burns, so we have a suite of burns to choose from when the conditions are right, given the nuances of fuel dryness and aspect and weather. We have a lot of burns in the program. We pick what we can get to on the prevailing conditions, and that is why it is not the best indicator.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Keep up the good work.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 22 October 2020]

p526b-529a

Chair; Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Reece Whitby; Ms Cassandra Rowe; Mr Bill Marmion

The appropriation was recommended.

Meeting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm