

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Motion

HON DR SALLY TALBOT (South West) [11.35 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house —

- (a) notes that natural resource management funding for local community-based projects through the community stewardship grants program has been increased this year to \$7.5 million and an additional \$1 million has been provided to assist NRMs and the Western Australian Landcare Network with core funding; and
- (b) congratulates the McGowan government for providing this additional support to community groups dedicated to caring for Western Australia's precious environment.

I will take any opportunity presented to me to pay tribute to the NRM groups in the south west region. They are a fabulous bunch of people and they do absolutely outstanding work. In these times that have been quite dark and troubled over the last couple of months for a number of people, my spirits rose when I saw the announcement from Hon Alannah MacTiernan and Hon Stephen Dawson that NRM groups have been granted a pay rise this year. In these very difficult economic circumstances, these two outstanding ministers have found extra money to fund NRM groups in Western Australia. I could not let the moment pass without paying tribute to the seven NRM groups that operate throughout Western Australia and these two ministers who, as I say, have done an outstanding job in not just maintaining, but increasing, this funding.

I have had a lot to do with the NRM groups in my electorate, as I imagine you have, Mr Acting President (Hon Dr Steve Thomas). As a fellow member for the South West Region, you would be very familiar with the Peel–Harvey Catchment Council, the South West Catchments Council and the South Coast Natural Resource Management, and I am sure you would be the first to agree with me that they do absolutely outstanding work. People like Jane O'Malley, Sally Wilkinson and Justin Bellanger are really the mainstays of our environmental community, and all three of them—I know Sally is relatively new to the job—have all embraced the sense that a good NRM set-up is about building social and human capital in our community. I really want to salute the work they have done over the years to give real substance to that notion. This is not just an abstract concept that looks nice when somebody does a desktop exercise in Perth; it plays out on the ground every day of the week, every week of the year all around Western Australia.

This morning I am particularly noting this evolution of the NRM culture in Western Australia, which has now got to the stage at which we can proudly call it a state NRM program. This has not always been the case. I acknowledge that a group of public servants has effectively given their professional lives to the establishment and maintenance of the natural resource management movement. It started a couple of decades ago with such high ideals and a fine set of principles. Unfortunately, what we have seen over those couple of decades is a gradual whittling away of the spirit of natural resource management. Sadly, 18 months to two years ago—essentially on coming to government in 2017—our analysis showed us that we had some real problems both delivering on the ground the practical outcomes that NRM is supposed to deliver and also maintaining the community spirit that is so essential to this kind of environmental work. For a brief period during the years that I was shadow environment minister, we had a federal Labor government, and I acknowledge and confess that I was pretty excited by what a federal Labor government would do for NRM programs. I have to say, probably with the benefit of hindsight, that it was a little bit disappointing because, by then, the whole NRM structure nationally had begun to unravel. I know that many of my colleagues had similar conversations with their federal counterparts during which we tried to explain to them that NRM in Western Australia had always been good and effective and had always delivered in spades for every dollar that we put into it from the top to the bottom of Western Australia. Unfortunately, that was not always the case in the eastern states. As we know, eastern states' voices are very loud in the ears of our federal members of Parliament. Over the years, to try to contain what was going on in the eastern states, where there was more of a corporate culture around NRM and a lot more competition between groups, the NRM groups in Western Australia, which were never run like that, have paid quite a high price. I refer to the work that our ministers have done—particularly Hon Alannah MacTiernan and Hon Stephen Dawson, and I should also mention Dave Kelly as Minister for Water—in bringing back something that we can call the state NRM program and, particularly, the community stewardship grants programs that run as the lifeblood or the arterial artery through the NRM body that pumps money into small community groups. For those honourable members who did not have time to unpick the recent announcement, \$7.5 million is in the forward estimates and will be given to the NRM groups over the next few years, which will go to the community stewardship grants, and an extra \$1 million for the next three years will be pumped in through the seven regional NRM bodies. This is very significant money. It is exactly what our local communities need to keep these groups going. When I was the shadow environment minister, I emphasised time and again the importance of providing some kind of certainty to small community groups. I am talking now about

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the groups that style themselves as “friends of”. We have friends groups all over Western Australia, including in the south west. I am thinking of groups such as the Denmark Weed Action Group—the Denmark WAG—and other tiny groups that comprise volunteers who come together a couple of times a week. If you have never done this, Mr Acting President (Hon Dr Steve Thomas), I recommend that you contact the Denmark Weed Action Group and spend half a day with its members. They will show you things that you have never seen before. They will pull up by the side of the road and walk you up a stream course and show you how they are clearing. You will see before your very eyes the environment coming back to life and the wildlife returning to areas from which it had disappeared due to infestations of exotic things and creatures. We are talking about not only “friends of” groups, pest and biosecurity groups and bush care groups, but also growers groups, which clearly have an interest in their local environment. I remember years ago when Hon Murray Criddle, who was a Nationals member in this place, interjected on me and said that farmers were the first people to spot climate change. He was absolutely right. Clearly, anybody who is a grower in the south west region is forever affected by the fact that it is a biodiversity hotspot. I repeat again for those who have not caught up that being a biodiversity hotspot is a bad thing. We do not want to be a biodiversity hotspot. I do not think areas are advertising themselves as a diversity hotspot as though it is a good thing. It is a bad thing because it means that our biodiversity is under serious threat. We have growers groups, tourism industry groups and local government now involved with NRM, and that is a very good thing.

What we are trying to do with this money is leverage skills and knowledge. We know now that if we really want to know what is going on in an area, we go to these community groups. There are experts, and our seven NRM groups around the state have a wealth of academic and practical expertise, some of which is paid and some of which is unpaid, but we also need to include local knowledge. I feel very passionately about this, particularly in areas of the south west where ranger programs are linked in with the delivery of NRM projects. We have the involvement of people who have been on country for generations. They know what used to be there; sometimes they did the original clearing. Over the decades, what is now called the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development had a difficult time in terms of its databases about what was cleared and when, what counts as native flora and all that sort of thing. Often through the wealth of knowledge and experience, including the information that we have through incorporating rangers into these programs, we are able to go back and talk with real authority about what we want our land to look like. We are also building social capacity, and that is all part of what goes on in these groups.

It was a Labor Party election promise to improve NRM funding security precisely because people on my side of the chamber recognise that the lifeblood of environmental programs are small community groups, and that small grants programs and community conservation groups have to be brought together to enable this work to take place to make real change at the local level. If people put their energies into forming a friends group for a local park, a stream or whatever, but they miss out on funding for a year, they lose everybody. They then spend a year putting their funding proposals together to get the money back again. By the time they are ready to recreate their Facebook page and update their email addresses and phone numbers, another year has gone past. Effectively, if small groups do not have funding security, they stagger from small grant to small grant with sometimes up to three, four or five years in between. That is not the way we ought to be looking after the land that we value so much.

Our model, which is now thankfully enshrined in the state NRM program, is about building the capacity of local community-based small groups. As chair of the Vasse Taskforce over the last three years, I have seen firsthand what has happened to a couple of NRM groups in the south west because of the kind of culture that is feeding out of Canberra, which has moved from a competitive outcomes-based funding model to market-based instruments in competition for grants. I have seen what that has done to on-the-ground activities. Philosophically, members opposite may prefer a different model. I do not have a problem with that. If they want to argue for a different model, I will have that argument with them—I might win; I might lose—but proponents of that model have to account for the fact that there is now no core funding for NRM groups. I do not know how a program of this kind could be run without core funding. The funding announced by Hon Alannah MacTiernan a couple of weeks ago will go some way towards redressing that, and I really look forward to seeing the practical outcomes on the ground.

I do not have much time to go through the individual projects, but I acknowledge Hon Diane Evers, who is here and who I imagine wants to participate in the debate on this motion. Hon Diane Evers and I recently went to the Torbay Catchment Group’s presentation of some money from the Lotteries Commission, which also receives NRM funding. Its big project is the preservation of the western ringtail possum and it has had outstanding success. Several hundred million dollars has gone towards that project so far. I acknowledge this group in particular because Hon Diane Evers told me that it was the group that got her into the green movement; her first taste of activism was with the Torbay Catchment Group. Good on that group; it is a great group. The thing that really came home to me that day as we were standing in this little car park area next to Cosy Corner was the remarkable diversity of people there. This was a little, local presentation. There was no media and Hon Diane Evers and I were the only two members of Parliament there. I had the certificate to hand over to the group and about 40 or 50 people had come along because that little group had put out a message: “Come along at 10.30 on Wednesday morning. We’re going to

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hold a little ceremony to celebrate getting this money.” It was a remarkable event and it showed how people buy in at a local level. When we talk about building social capital, human capital, it could be seen that day, living and breathing, as a celebration of the kind of work that can be done when proper, consistent funding is provided.

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [11.51 am]: I, like Hon Dr Sally Talbot, have the highest admiration and care, support and love for these community groups. They do so much and they do it because they care; that is very important and that is what keeps them going. I am delighted and pleased to note that an extra \$1.5 million will go to these groups and to the natural resource management fund, but I must also note that \$1.5 million is a drop in the bucket. When I put forward a motion to have 10 per cent of the royalties for regions funds go into NRM funding, that would have equated to \$100 million a year, making \$1 million just a drop in the bucket. I note it and I am very pleased about it, but these are baby steps. These groups need much more money to keep them going and to make sure that they can continue to apply for little bits of available funding, because so much work needs to be done on our environment and these are the groups that are doing that work. Day after day they are out there pulling weeds, planting trees and looking after the animals. They do so much.

What pains me right now is that in the Dalgarp state forest, machines are waiting to go in and knock down this healthy, ecologically sound forest. Numerous echidnas have been sighted there and quokka footprints have been found in the bulldozer tracks. This has been going on for the past week and the forest is being destroyed. There are only 10 to 12 hectares left and I implore the government to get these machines to back out. They are looking for the large logs in this forest to fulfil contracts. We are talking about 200-year-old jarrah trees, a metre in diameter, that are being felled as we speak. It cannot happen; it should not happen. As far as I know, people are being chased through the forest because they are trying to stop the equipment from going in there. I hope that the trees that fell in the last few days are the last ones. We need to stop that from happening. We are handing out a million dollars to keep these organisations going and to keep people coming back to do what they love doing for the benefit of the state, the planet and all of us, but they need so much more. These people make sure that dieback does not spread as quickly, they collect the animals that now have no home and they do their best to give biodiversity a chance. Biodiversity has an intrinsic value; it needs to exist whether humans do or not. It will help to repair the planet, but as long as humans are out there day after day causing more destruction, these groups will need to continue their work to help the environment to rehabilitate, repair, restore and regenerate. Their job is to give nature a chance to do what it wants to do, which is to heal the planet, yet day after day we cut down more forest. Treenbrook is another area from which logs are being sourced to fulfil the contracts. No, we do not have to do that. We do not have to continue logging and destroying; we can actually stop it. Victoria is attempting to stop logging in 10 years, but in the meantime it is trying to destroy as much forest as it can, including the recently burnt out forest. Why not give it a chance to heal?

I know that the economy depends on this industry, but it depends on more than just the logs and timber that we get from the forest. The economy depends on the tourism to the area and the bee industry. It is an area that has so much more potential for growth if we would just look at how we manage the forests and put in place the deliberative process that I have suggested in here many times. We should ask the residents of Western Australia what they want—“How do you want our forest to be managed?” The government might be a little afraid of doing this because it knows the answer. I acknowledge there is an industry in that area that mills timber, but that is why we need to support the plantation industry. These regional groups can help in that area because they run nurseries and have the planting equipment and the people ready and willing to do the work. We can restore what we have and make this state, this country and this planet healthier. We can make it a better place so that perhaps one day the area will come off the list of biodiversity hotspots because of the good job that we are doing.

I applaud the government on its actions to address the immediate COVID-19 crisis. It is wonderful. We are really on track and up there with the top countries in the world in avoiding the damage that could be done by the coronavirus. It was an immediate threat and the government responded immediately. The damage to our forest is also an immediate threat. It has caused a reduction in rainfall and a reduction in habitat for the animals that make up the biodiversity of this state. The people from these groups are in the forest right now staying overnight, running through the forest and taking part in chasing games to protect that habitat for the benefit of us all. These people on the ground are volunteers and bush fire fighters. They do this work because they need to. We are not asking to pay them and provide them with vehicles and equipment. We want these groups to be provided with base funding so that they can have an officer who can encourage more volunteerism and apply for funding to take part in more restoration projects. We need to support those people who are willing to do the work. Right now, many people in the workforce have lost their jobs. It is great that they are receiving funding to help them continue to survive—that is really good—but they also want something to do. If their jobs do not come back, volunteering would be an excellent opportunity for them. If those people do not have to worry about where their income is coming from, they can get out and help. The planting season is approaching now with winter and more rain. If we could provide considerable funding to these NRM groups right now, they could get going on all these projects. They have plenty of ideas, but each time there is a funding round, it is oversubscribed by 10 to 20 times or even more; it is just

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incredible. We need to make sure that these groups are given the opportunity to put in place many of these projects that they have in mind to help restore this state's environment. Giving them that opportunity will help the social needs of those people who need to get out and be involved. We can do it with social distancing. We can manage that. It can be managed and restored. They can start planting trees, building up more nurseries and making sure that our environment is not continually being destroyed.

What I would really like to say is: stop cutting down our trees. Please stop destroying our forests and support the people who want to support the environment. Support the people who are out there on the ground, willing to put their time, effort and their own resources into this. Give them support. If we have 10 people volunteering and doing a good job, imagine what we could do with 100 people. Get the equipment in their hands so that they can look after the environment by managing the animals that have lost their homes through building tree hollows to provide them with a habitat. We have had to resort to building tree hollows—I know a number of groups that have done that—because we have cut down all the trees. Bring back the Lorax. I note that the government has given \$1 million, but all I can ask is, "Please, sir, may I have some more?" Can we give more to those people who need it? Can we make sure that they have the funds to repair the damage that has been done by many others in the state so that those environment groups can provide animal habitats and keep out the weeds and the feral pests and look after the waterways and put in structures so that we do not have so much erosion that causes flooding? The list goes on. They do so much and we need to do more for them. I appreciate Hon Dr Sally Talbot moving this motion.

The ACTING PRESIDENT (Hon Dr Steve Thomas): Before I give the call to the Minister for Regional Development, can I confirm that you are giving the government's official response?

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: I am.

The ACTING PRESIDENT: The Minister for Regional Development has the call.

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development) [12.02 pm]: I thank Hon Dr Sally Talbot for moving this motion and Hon Diane Evers for her contribution. I know that both members are very passionate about this cause and have extraordinary connections, as I am sure others across the chamber do, with these magnificent groups that do so much work to restore the state's natural assets.

I will give some background to this matter, because there is no doubt that over the last six months the natural resource management peak groups have raised a lot of concerns about their financial situation. As Hon Dr Sally Talbot said, we came to government with a clear commitment that we would provide \$6.5 million per annum on an ongoing basis for stewardship grants. Traditionally, the core funding that went to the seven major NRM groups and the Western Australian Landcare Network tended to come from the federal government. The federal government provided the support for those entities that, in turn, provided for all those extraordinary volunteer groups such as the Denmark Weed Action Group, the catchment councils that members talked about, the possum finishing school that Hon Adele Farina has raised in the past and organisations in the metropolitan area such as the Swan Estuary Reserve Action Group in Bicton, which is a particularly fabulous group. Bigger agencies sat on top and provided that support. That funding model started with the partial sale of Telstra when selling off the family silver. The proceeds from selling the silver teaspoon were given to the volunteer groups through the federal NRM system. Eventually, we ended up with seven of those NRM groups. Over time, however, the federal government has stepped back from providing that funding.

I am disappointed with what happened in around 2008 or 2009 when the bilateral process that was in place between the Western Australian government and the federal government ceased. I am not clear about why that happened. Those positive bilateral arrangements are in place in some other states, so I have written to Minister Ley, the federal Minister for the Environment, and Mr Littleproud, the Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management, and asked them whether we could look at re-establishing a bilateral arrangement to put the funding back on a sound footing. Obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic intervened and people have had very little opportunity to think of anything else. In the interim, we determined that we would—we indicate this was a one-off—provide \$1 million this year for the seven state NRM groups plus the WA Landcare Network. This will give them some support for providing basic coordination work and having someone on board who can assist all the small groups with writing their funding applications et cetera. Some of these NRM groups have a substantial asset base, but it is quite clear that their capability to employ people is diminishing. This is always a fine balance. We do not want these things to become very large bureaucracies and for much of the money to be absorbed by staff costs. We want as much money as possible going out to those groups that are making changes on the ground. However, we recognise that those things will not happen without providing some structure for even basic things like organising insurance and providing administrative support for those smaller groups. That is why we have invested that extra \$1 million this year. We do not see that as a long-term solution. It is absolutely necessary for us to re-establish the bilateral arrangement with the commonwealth. Hopefully, we can get that underway in the second half of this year.

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I noted Hon Diane Evers' concerns that we are not listening to the people about logging. I remind the honourable member that I was very much part of the campaign to stop logging in old-growth forests. We were very clearly listening to the community and it was a very challenging time for us to put through that legislation. In certain communities such as Manjimup, Pemberton and others that was a very challenging thing to do, but we did it. We got that legislation through and it was, I think, broadly supported by the community. We said that certain forests that were not old-growth forests would continue to be utilised for a time for the purpose of retaining a timber industry in the state, so we do have timber plantations. I understand that, as a community and as a continent, we need to plant many more trees. Hon Stephen Dawson, as the Minister for Environment, would love to see us plant many more trees. We saw this consciousness of climate change re-emerging as a very big issue in the electorate in 2007; then the global financial crisis came in and a lot of the worry quotient was moved from climate change to the economy. It took time for that to rebuild again, and then we had COVID-19. But having seen what has happened with COVID-19, I think there is the potential to really think and reflect on what we might need to do more generally in many communities where the level of industrial activity has dropped so dramatically that people have seen a vastly different environmental response. Indeed, once people move out of absolute anxiety surrounding their health and the risk of contagion, they might indeed be brought back to thinking about what we need to do to deal with the very real problem of climate change.

Massive changes are required for us to address climate change, and we are not saying that the natural resource management office is the major initiative to do so, but it is an important initiative. It helps connect communities with the landscape and it helps support and generate interest in and engagement with the issue of the value of our natural resources including, importantly, the expanding definitions in farming communities of the use of regenerative agricultural farming systems, right throughout the state.

I again thank members for their contributions. This is a really important program.

HON LAURIE GRAHAM (Agricultural) [12.12 pm]: It is a pleasure to stand today to support this motion moved by Hon Dr Sally Talbot. I think it is a great motion and it is very timely, considering the extra funding that has been provided. I acknowledge the comment by Hon Diane Evers that there will never be enough money in this area. Obviously, for every project that is approved, a large number of very good projects do not get through, so hopefully the extra \$1 million will allow some of the projects on the backburner to be funded. Hon Diane Evers obviously has particular views about issues in the south west, and although I acknowledge them, I cannot fully accept them. There has to be a balance between the environment and all the aspirations we have as a community to achieve better outcomes than we have in the past.

I would like to start by acknowledging a couple of Geraldton groups that I was involved with before I came to this chamber. I was actively involved with the Chapman River Friends and the Friends of Geraldton Gardens. One sees the same people in both groups. If one goes to any clean-up of the beaches or any similar event, all those people are there. Jenna Brooker is the driver of Chapman River Friends and she has been doing that for about 15 years or more. She has an active group of committed followers. I know that group has received grants in the past, and I would like to think that because they are doing such a tremendous job, they will be able to get the funds required to clean up the legacies of the past in those areas. The Friends of Geraldton Gardens is a group that might seem a bit outside the scope of this motion, but, as I said, the same people are in every other resource group in the area.

There are also other groups. Recently there was a clean-up of the Abrolhos Islands that was funded through a grant, and that was fantastic to see. Not only did they have a clean-up, they took all the rubbish and turned it into an art competition afterwards. I have not seen the results of that, but the people who participated took something like 40 tonnes of debris back from the islands and cleaned it up. That has been going on for many years now and it would not be possible were it not for funding like that being provided here.

The McGowan government is committed to this funding after making the initial commitment, and it is fantastic to see the extra \$1 million added; it will be good to see it continue to increase. I will talk about this more in a minute, but the federal government has largely withdrawn core funding from most of those groups. I have seen a number of groups lose most of their good people. They attempted to hold on to them for many years, but as they held on to them, they chewed up their funding; I suppose they had projects for them to go to, but they did not have the big projects to manage. They held on to those people for as long as they could, but when they inevitably left, they left a big hole in the skill sets that are necessary to drive these groups forward. As part of that, the McGowan government has committed to maintaining the short-term viability of landcare groups. The minister indicated that she has written to the federal government, and we hope it will, in due course, come forward with some additional funding.

On the question of the funding that has been provided over the years, I refer to a chart showing the state and commonwealth investment in community-based NRM over time. It is interesting. In 2003–04, there was \$10 million from the federal government and about \$1 million from the state government. That peaked in 2007–08, when there was \$70 million from the federal government and \$40 million from the state government. Obviously, it built up to

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that level very quickly over that period, flattened off and then, in the following year, there was a major dive. The state commitment has remained fairly stable to this year, and will creep up slightly with the extra \$1 million.

I turn now to some of the projects that have been funded over that time. The Northern Agricultural Catchments Council has only a very small grant of \$12 364 for community-based feral control across the Agricultural Region. It seems a very small amount of money, but when one turns up to one of these events and interfaces with these people, one sees that there are large groups of people involved and the value for money cannot be questioned. The same group got a grant of \$17 500 for workshops and, again, a whole heap of people who travelled at their own expense were involved. I think it is very appropriate that these groups are recognised because the vast majority of those people spend a considerable amount of money out of their own pocket to participate in these events. Really, the technical work that is required is all that is being paid for.

The City of Greater Geraldton received \$24 600 for bushland restoration and weed control, and \$90 000 for environmental works. It was also involved with the Sunset Beach area, where the beach is eroding and the question is whether the whole housing area is going to fall into the sea. One would wonder why that could not be funded by local government, but these are extra things. The state has to acknowledge climate change, and it is good to see that the City of Greater Geraldton was able to collect the data. I believe that in recent times the sandbags have gone back to protect the caravan park. Hopefully, that will give it another 10 or 12 years before we see further problems.

It is great to see this ongoing commitment, particularly for the groups I am involved with, including the Northern Agricultural Catchments Council. That group has been very successful. There are a whole lot of groups within it that are working towards achieving good outcomes for those communities. With that, I conclude my contribution.

HON DR STEVE THOMAS (South West) [12.19 pm]: It did not seem appropriate to have a conversation about natural resource management without a contribution from the sitting far-right-wing environmentalist in the chamber, and that is me! The far-right-wing environmentalists are a very small and select group that has had a few quite notable Western Australians over the years, including Sir Charles Court, who had an environmental bent, as well as some fairly right-wing politics. I would go into some detail, but I have very limited time.

This is not a bad motion. I do not necessarily agree with the congratulatory part, but I do not feel the urge to take great issue with it. I will make some comments about how we have got to where we are with natural resource management, because it is undoubtedly the case, as a few members have mentioned today, that the funding for natural resource management has declined considerably over various years. Let us look at where this came from. The current natural resource management program around Australia was, in effect, the result of the sale of Telstra.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan: I think I said that.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: Yes, that is right, but I will go into a bit more detail. It was, in fact, the result of the sale of Telstra. To get the legislation through the Senate, John Howard, in orchestrating the sale of Telstra, had to get the votes of the Democrats and it was, in fact, the Democrats in the Senate at the time who decided that, to pass this legislation, they needed a significant investment in a range of outcomes, and one of those was a multibillion-dollar fund for the environment. As happens, as I am sure you are aware, Mr Acting President (Hon Robin Chapple), when a fund is created rather than there being a response to a specific issue, there is usually a fair bit of wastage in setting it up and the initial distribution of funds. An enormous amount of money was made available—billions of dollars—that the commonwealth at the time did not want to simply put through the state governments. One hundred and fifty or so local government areas were created so that the funds could be directed straight into natural resource management community groups.

Hon Stephen Dawson: Were you in the commonwealth then?

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: When it was first set up? No; that was pre-politics for me. Although I was involved slightly in the process, it was pre-election of any form for me. That is effectively what happened. In the meantime, that has shifted, so the multibillion-dollar funding that was available at the commonwealth level eventually dried up. There were hiccups in the meantime. Some of those programs were good and had some very good results. As Hon Dr Sally Talbot has said, the south west has done remarkably well. South Coast Natural Resource Management, which was not always called by that name, and the South West Catchments Council have done some particularly good work on a range of issues. Dieback, for example, has a very strong focus. At that stage, those commonwealth funds were generally put to good use. There was absolutely some wastage. The transfer of the funds from the NRM process into what was then effectively designated as the green army concept under then Prime Minister Tony Abbott was, in my view, a fairly abject failure, unfortunately. It was the victory of the politics of the environment over the practicality of environmental delivery, and that did not work well. I can give members a number of specific examples of where I thought that was quite disastrous, but I am a bit limited for time. That transferred significant amounts of money out of the NRM system through catchment councils into this particular set of projects that had prime ministerial imprimatur.

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Hon Alannah MacTiernan: It was about a flavour of getting the dole bludgers back into work.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: It was perhaps more social policy than environmental policy. I have never liked that as an outcome, and that is why I am a far-right-wing environmentalist, not a left-wing environmentalist.

There was an issue there when it changed. At the end of that, the funding never went back to the original level for a number of reasons. Most specifically, a lot of the regional funds that were set aside from the sale of Telstra eventually evaporated, so the funds then had to come out of the consolidated fund and general revenues. As the minister has said, there was a shift from an environmental focus to an economic focus. When I was the shadow environment minister of this state from 2005 to 2008, the environment was one of the top three issues. We had state of the environment reports and, according to the polling, the environment was one of the top three issues. When I took over that shadow minister role again in 2017, I think it came seventeenth in the poll of issues that are of importance to Australians, so there was a significant shift. I see that there is some shift back. I do not know that the environment is back in the top three, but I think it is regaining some importance.

There is an issue now with the funding for NRM groups, because the original federal model has changed significantly. I think Hon Laurie Graham pointed out that a significant amount of state funding was involved, particularly in 2009–10. I was around in the system at that point. State funding went up to \$30 million in 2009–10. It was a fairly extreme measure. I credit that to the government's principal policy adviser on NRM at the time in 2008–09, who went into bat and wrote, almost against the resistance and abhorrence of the Department of Agriculture and Food, which was the lead agency at the time, a specific natural resource management policy and delivered it to the Department of Agriculture and Food rather than it writing its own. That particular policy adviser went into bat with the minister of the day for a \$30 million budget for that new policy. That was a one-off. That policy adviser, who was, up until the 2008 election, the shadow Minister for Environment, then disappeared into the federal scene for a while and ended up working in federal politics. The following year, that \$30 million disappeared again. That dropped significantly then, so that amount of money was no longer available. There was an enormous investment. I think we have lost both state and federal funding for NRM groups for a range of reasons. It would be easy for me to throw rocks at the current government for not investing more in NRM in this state, but I give it credit for the announcements of increases in the current budget for NRM. Although I agree with Hon Diane Evers that they are modest, they are increases, and that has not happened significantly since 2008–09. It would be nice to get back to that \$30 million a year investment.

Hon Alannah MacTiernan interjected.

Hon Dr STEVE THOMAS: The minister has to look at the 2009 NRM budget, which went directly to the state NRM office. Much of that money went to government departments. We did some investigations into fisheries—for example, fish stocks. A whole lot of interesting things happened out of that process. From a state investment perspective, they were the glory days of NRM. The state NRM office, which had a significant budget in that particular financial year, was able to make some pretty significant achievements—looking at inshore fish stocks, as I mentioned, and herring and whiting stocks to see whether they were being overfished. It also saw a review of management. The review by Garry English at the time, which I was involved with and oversaw, looked at the administration and determined that there was wastage in the system even at that point, and it remains a problem. This is the point I am really going to get to for Hon Dr Sally Talbot. Like the member, I am a supporter of those community groups, because the additional investment in time and energy that is achieved from small investments in those community groups is absolutely of significant value. Where the state and commonwealth in joint management of those activities has not got to the point of being able to get real benefit out of it is in the coordination process; that is, when a community group looks after its particular section of the environment, it picks up a bit of the catchment. If the group involved is the friends of a certain lake or wetland and it pulls out all the weeds and does something with invasive species and tries to get out the feral foxes, cats and dogs and everything else that is in there, if it is not doing that on a catchment-wide basis, the weeds simply flow back down from upstream. Where we did not do it well enough was in the coordination of that process. I would still like to see us do that component of natural resource management better.

I will finish by referring to the comments of Hon Diane Evers. I am a believer that we can have both a good environment and a timber industry. I thought the Acting President was very generous in the largesse of allowing diversity of debate in an anti-logging demonstration, which was not really the point of the motion. In my view, the timber industry certainly does not need to be killed off.

HON DARREN WEST (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [12.30 pm]: I, too, rise in support of the excellent motion put forward today by Hon Dr Sally Talbot acknowledging the great work of the McGowan government in natural resource management and finally getting some serious action in an area in which we have terrific support right across the state. I acknowledge also Hon Dr Sally Talbot's immense interest and hard work in the environment space, especially in natural resource management. It has been great to debate this motion today

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and listen to all the views put forward. There is general agreeance across the house that investment in the environment and in NRM is a good thing for the state government to do.

Today, I want to use the few minutes that remain in the debate to talk about the people involved in the NRM movement. One of the great benefits of being a member of Parliament is the issues we get to immerse ourselves in and the people we meet. I have been fortunate over the past seven years to work with some great people in the environment network and the natural resource management and landcare networks. As a person who has a great interest in this, as a farmer, naturally we have done a lot of work at our place to restore eroded areas of rivers and work in that natural vegetation space. I have met some passionate people who have done a lot of great work over many years. Recently, I was fortunate to meet Elisa Spengler from the Ravensthorpe Agricultural Initiative Network, a group of committed people in the Ravensthorpe area. People would be familiar with the Fitzgerald biosphere and the tremendous biodiversity in that area. To talk about the issues there and how it is pushing as a community to have the Cocanarup reserve side by side with the Fitzgerald River National Park was terrific. They are such a committed group of people. I would not describe Ravensthorpe as a hard left-wing area, to use the previous speaker's talk. It is quite a conservative community, but it is very committed to the natural environment. While I was down there, I took the opportunity to meet with the organisation that runs the Ravensthorpe Wildflower Show. I had no idea that there was such a diversity of plants and natural species in that area. I spoke with Malcolm French, who has travelled the state, and learnt about his experiences in trying to preserve this amazing natural attraction that is a boon for tourism. Malcolm has some great ideas about how we can use our natural environment, our wildflowers and our bush to better encourage visitors from around the world, because other parts of the world have not been quite as proactive in the environmental space and in saving their valuable natural assets. It was terrific to spend a couple of days with Jenny Biddulph from the committee and to see the amount of work and compassion that goes into the NRM and landcare movement. I had the great pleasure of travelling with Ron Richards and Nathan McQuaid to the Cocanarup reserve to learn the cultural history of that area. It had a dark time in its history, but the healing for Aboriginal people in that area has great capacity and great outcomes can be had all round by everyone getting involved in the NRM and landcare movements.

I want to talk also about a few groups that have been successful. I was delighted to send out press releases late last year announcing some of the terrific groups that received funding under the NRM. I will not go through them all because I am down to a couple of minutes to go. Right across the Agricultural Region, Wongutha Christian Aboriginal School near Esperance, the Shire of Esperance, the Shire of Cuballing, the Gillamii Centre in Cranbrook, the Esperance Weeds Action Group and the Wagin Woodanilling Landcare Zone have all received funding from the McGowan government in its investment back into the NRM space. The RAIN project was also successful in obtaining a grant of \$53 000 towards the Uncovering Cocanarup Conservation Community and Cultural Project, which I mentioned earlier. The Gnowangerup Aboriginal Corporation also received a grant. A lot of the grants are going to traditional owner groups and local Aboriginal groups. Aboriginal people managed this land for thousands of years before white settlement and it is great that we are able to call on that expertise and involve those groups in the landcare movement again.

I am very proud to be part of a government that is working hard in this space. I am proud of the efforts of our Minister for Environment and Minister for Regional Development and, of course, the Premier and Treasurer to enable these grants and this investment in landcare and the NRM movement, because that is what it is—it is an investment in our environment, which, in turn, is an investment in our communities, and in turn, is an investment back into our people. People and the environment will long work together. I am pleased to be able to talk about this motion today. It is a great motion. Thank you to Hon Dr Sally Talbot for bringing it forward to us today.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.