

**Division 41: Water and Environmental Regulation — Services 4 and 6 to 9, Environment; Climate Action, \$147 056 000 —**

Mr D.A.E. Scaife, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment; Climate Action.

Ms M. Andrews, Director General.

Ms H. Manderson, Chief Finance Officer.

Ms K. Faulkner, Special Adviser, Business Continuity.

Ms S. McEvoy, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Mr S. Meredith, Executive Director, Environmental Protection Authority.

Mr A. Wiley, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 3 June 2022. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

I give the call to the member for Vasse.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to climate change on page 686 and ask: what is the role of the minister in regard to future climate change legislation?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** This is a very broad question! Climate change, as the member knows, is an issue that I think everyone is starting to address. It is crucial to respond to it. We all accept the challenge. The Western Australian government is initiating, or has initiated under the previous minister, the program of a sectoral emissions reduction strategy to assess ways to reduce emissions in Western Australia. There is going to be a lot of engagement across the Western Australian community. For sectoral emissions in industry types, that process began late last year and continues. We recently, a few weeks ago, addressed a group of industry groups to start off the public part of the process. There will be sectoral or industry groupings to—basically, we are asking the community and industries: What are your challenges? What are your ideas to government? What are your good ideas to reduce emissions? Do you have hurdles in the way that the state government can assist? It is a big body of work and it will be going on until the end of next year. After that, we hope to have a state target—an ambition—for our reductions for 2030 and leading to, of course, 2050 being net zero emissions.

On legislation, the Premier has indicated that he is interested in developing some legislation. From the SERS process and from other works being carried out in government, we can develop some legislation that talks about the way forward and there is a need for clarity for the business community. The community generally, but the business community in particular, need to know and want to know that there is ambition in this area—if they spend money to reduce their emissions, it is something that is going to be required.

In a broader sense, member, I think this is happening with or without the government. I think the government needs to be part of it. Companies that I speak to are actually stepping up, wanting direction, wanting clarity because their own shareholders are demanding a response from those companies to reduce emissions. Shareholders, investors, banks are not going to lend you money to build a coal-fired power station, for instance. There is a real change that sees this issue become not just an environmental issue but also an economic one. For our part as a government, we realise that we have a community leadership role and we need to demonstrate emission reductions, too. We are doing work in that regard.

**Ms L. METTAM:** The minister touched on this, but will the targets be something that are legislated and brought to Parliament? Would it be yourself, minister? What time frame are we looking at for such legislation coming before the house?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** The process of the SERS that we are engaged in now is going to help inform what legislation might be required and the way forward. I think that process would need to play out to some degree. We do not want to rush to legislation before we are actually engaged in the consultation and getting the feedback. We do not know

what good ideas are out there. It is sort of a two-way street whereby we want to engage, we want to offer our insight as a government and we are investing in modelling to help inform that process as well. When we engage with the community and we work out what the ambitions look like, that will further inform us on what legislation is appropriate. I cannot give the member a time frame, but I would think the SERS process is going in; over the end of 2023, we would be reporting back to the community. I would say within that time frame, if we were going to embark on legislation, that would be the period.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Would the minister anticipate that those that the government is consulting with on this legislation would be seeing the draft legislation and, given his comments, is he suggesting that it would be in 2023?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Yes. I think it is more likely 2023. We have an open arrangement with most legislation and particularly this would be important legislation to guide industry and guide to the community. I would see no reason why there would not be consultation and drafts put up for public comment.

**Ms L. METTAM:** How would such legislation fit in with what is being undertaken in this area at the commonwealth level? What would be the relationship between what the state is trying to achieve and what is happening nationally?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** It is an interesting story, because I think things are changing nationally after a change of government. I am confident and optimistic of a reset in terms of the approach to this issue across Australia, but particularly at the commonwealth level. Again, as the commonwealth goes through the SERS process, we will be able to see what happens and that will help us inform our SERS process to know what is going to happen at the federal level. We know what the federal opposition previously had in terms of commitments to 2030 targets. That is helpful to know, but we are waiting to find out more a detailed and full explanation of where the federal government might go to help inform our process. We need to be aware of what is going on at the federal level as well.

[5.50 pm]

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** My question really follows on from the issue of what we are trying to get to with the climate change policy. Can the minister clarify, when the state government talks about net zero, is it talking about net zero from government activities or is it talking about net zero from all industry in Western Australia?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** The ambition, as the Paris Agreement points to also, is across the whole of industry—net zero by 2050. There are some companies out there that are ambitious to achieve that before 2050. The state is currently working on our ambitions in that area. That is the 2050 ambition but there is an important stage before we get to 2050, and that is our ambitions for 2030. If we are going to achieve those, we need to start now, so a lot of work is being done. When we talk about the ambitions of net zero by 2050, it is the entire community, government included.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** How would the government measure the total carbon emissions of this state? Beyond large industry and beyond government, how could it measure the emissions of individual small business or householders, of farms and other dispersed smaller emitters, which collectively could be quite a large amount? It could also be fire practice et cetera. It is not simply a matter of taking, say, Chevron and adding that to what the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation reports from its own sources. How is the government going to actually go about measuring it?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** It is a good question, member. As he said, it is those regulated operators that produce a large amount above the threshold level are measured. But one comment I would make is that the more renewables in the system, the less reliance on what creates our energy source, which would have an impact on ordinary individuals. It is an interesting area but I would call on Sarah McEvoy to perhaps elaborate.

**Ms S. McEvoy:** Thank you, member and minister. The question of carbon accounting, if you like, is an issue that is obviously important not just for Western Australia but throughout the world. We need to have a common kind of understanding of how we measure these kinds of things. The federal government produces national accounts, if you like, for all the various sectors that are measured, including land use, land change, forestry, agriculture et cetera. It also includes transport and energy. When the minister is referring to the sectoral emissions reduction strategies, we would also use those same kinds of divisions of the various sectors that are done. There is a common methodology there, published annually. There are estimations using accepted techniques for the contribution across Australia, including in Western Australia, of carbon emissions.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** What is the total emissions of the state of Western Australia today, annualised?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** It is currently 91 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per annum. That is the current last published figure.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Is that for the entire state of Western Australia? You have measured all emissions in Western Australia and it came to that level.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I will refer to Sarah McEvoy, but that account is an estimation across the board.

**Ms S. McEvoy:** Yes, and it is provided by the commonwealth in annual reporting.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** How far back are the records of carbon emissions measured in that way? Is this the first year or when did the government start measuring it and what is the earliest we have?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I will indulge the question. On reflection, we are sort of ranging further than the context of the budget but, for the member's benefit, I will refer that question to Sarah McEvoy.

**Ms S. McEvoy:** I do not know the first year but it has been done for quite a number of years. It would be done under the United Nations framework for climate change, which is the kind of umbrella body that deals with this kind of thing. It would be going back to the 1990s, but there are estimations that go back before that. They are probably less accurate as you go right back in time.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** One would be tempted to ask a follow-up question of: what is the margin of error in those calculations, or estimations, that the executive director has just spoken of?

**The CHAIR:** If the minister wants to —

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Again, I will use your indulgence, which is outside the budget, too. We have most of the world's scientists agreeing that we have an issue. Whether there is any margin of error, this is something we need to take seriously.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** My question relates to page 686, and it is on the "Native Vegetation Policy for Western Australia". My first question is: who will be on the steering committee driving the implementation of this particular program and will any landholders be brought onto the steering committee?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, member; where is the reference to the steering committee?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** This is a process that has already had very broad and widescale community engagement including from the rural farming communities and many others. It is important to understand this policy is about the way the government handles this issue because native vegetation is spread out across 15 different pieces of legislation and various agencies have an impact on native vegetation clearing. This is about actually having a way of dealing with this issue in a more holistic way, understanding the cumulative impacts of clearing native vegetation and the determination within government to have a more joined-up approach to this issue. We realise that if we are in a silo situation, we are in bunkers and we do not realise that over here native vegetation is being cleared and it is conducted in different policy approaches, then we are really going to lose more and more native vegetation. We want to be able to retain as much as we can. The policy is about having a net gain in native vegetation over time. It is about the government's internal connections in terms of this policy working better, being joined up and being more strategic in our approach as a state government. That involvement, that consultation, has already occurred with the community. This is about how we deal with the issue in government, whether it is a council of regulators or various directors general, and, of course, they are very aware of their agency stakeholders all the time, but they will have a direct involvement in making sure this is a successful policy.

I also want to reflect for a moment that part of this policy involves an initial framework on the wheatbelt. We know there has been historically high massive clearing across the wheatbelt, so it is about revegetating parts of the wheatbelt that have suffered environmentally because of that clearing. There are opportunities for carbon farming and sequestering carbon within the soil in the land and within trees, obviously. We are looking at a way we can benefit from that as well.

[6.00 pm]

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I guess that is what I was getting to. Quite often, as the minister knows, the stewards of our native vegetation are pastoralists, farmers and the like. I personally think it is very important that they be included, just as they have with the Aboriginal cultural heritage regulation changes. They are in amongst that mixture as well. I understand what the minister is saying about how the government is going to handle it, but certainly for inclusion, has the department met with the likes of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association or the Cattlemen's Association or those types of bodies to include them? Is the Department of Agriculture and Food also going to be included?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Thank you, member. Certainly, the Department of Agriculture and Food will have a key role in this. As we develop the framework for our regional basis of looking at broad-scale landscapes in terms of regeneration, that will be another opportunity to reach out into local communities, farming organisations, and pastoralists et cetera. When we had our sectoral emissions reduction strategy peak group, there were I think Pastoralists and Graziers Association representatives and farmer groups represented there. We had a workshop where I was on each table, and I have certainly met and had direct involvement with them on that day. That was the start of a process. These issues are very much linked. The SERS process will have that ongoing engagement and one of the sectors will be agriculture. In terms of the native vegetation policy, certainly there has been that opportunity already and we are continuing with its implementation.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** The minister mentioned that the wheatbelt was chosen as a focus in relation to native vegetation. Does the minister have measurements of how much native vegetation there is in the wheatbelt and also the state as a whole? What is the native vegetation coverage?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** This is the challenge. I might get some advice in a moment. Part of this process is working out what is there, and the member is right: in order to know what we are losing, at what rate, we need a baseline. Work is being undertaken in terms of satellite technology, for instance, and investment in technology where we can look at the broader landscape and work out the type of vegetation in each part of Western Australia. It is important to do that. Development of that technology is part of this policy. In terms of numbers of vegetation for each region or percentage of vegetation we have, it is a difficult one because this is historic since European settlement. What is your baseline? What have we lost from what year? Maybe Kelly Faulkner would—Kelly, do you want to opine in terms of what the member has asked? It is difficult. I am just handballing it over.

**Ms K. Faulkner:** Thank you very much, member, and thank you, minister. I do not actually have the figures with me. There has been historical mapping that has been done and that commenced some years ago through the former Department of Agriculture. One of the benefits of this policy and the roadmap actions is to actually improve on that because it is based on, as I understand, quite old technology with the satellite imagery, and now we have got better systems, better information and better satellites. The intent for this is to actually start and one of the strategies is to focus on the wheatbelt to do that extent mapping and to do the ongoing monitoring as well, so there is more regular monitoring with it.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I have not had time to read the policy as it came out today; I have been doing other things all day. In the draft policy, as I recall, the regions were defined more by bioregions. “Wheatbelt” is probably not a term that actually adequately defines it, because in Western Australia we have the regional development commissions as well. When we say wheatbelt, that includes Jurien Bay and it includes Hyden but they are not in the same environment bioregion. To save me from actually digging out my computer, did it retain that landscape approach rather than a line defined by the regional development commissions?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** My colleague here just gave me a really good answer, and rather than just repeat it verbatim, I am going to let him.

**Mr A. Wiley:** Yes, that was part of the original draft policy. It moved away from that approach on the basis that working on more of an economic definition of a region was a much better way. The feedback that we got through the consultation process had indicated that was a much better way to approach it. Obviously, it has a very defined set of stakeholders and that is the thing. No, it is more on a regional basis rather than bioregion.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Having spent many years battling unjust decisions based on the over clearing of areas hundreds of kilometres away from where my patch of the world is, that actually disappoints me greatly. I will just put that on the record. I would have preferred to have kept it at that landscape approach.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Our interest is for the best outcomes and, as the member heard, that feedback came through consultation and because in economic terms it is better to base it on the economic use of the land because you are dealing with the same group of stakeholders. Do you want to respond further to that, Adrian?

**Mr A. Wiley:** Thank you, minister. I think there is certainly a bioregional approach to the mapping and that translates into some regulatory decision making. In terms of the regional planning exercise that we are undertaking as part of the native vegetation policy, it is much more about bringing a set of stakeholders together, a set of government agencies together, who deal in that region and know the most about that region, and to come up with a plan for managing native vegetation and also restoring native vegetation in that area. To some extent we have got a slightly different approach with the regulatory side of it. This is about coming up with a strategic plan for restoration and the like, so doing it on a regional basis makes more sense.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Within that process, they would still be able to identify different vegetation groups and respond accordingly.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I was very impressed with the carbon emissions tally earlier on and the way that it has been measured. Is the minister able to supply as supplementary information the baseline data that you are working with and what regions, or whether it be economic regions or the like, just so that we can understand where the baseline data starts and where it emanates from?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Member, with respect, it might be conflating issues a little bit in terms of emissions and the vegetation policy. Yes, they are linked but if the member would like some information on emissions, I think some information has been published. Director General?

**Ms M. Andrews:** We are very happy —

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Can you take your mask off, please?

**Ms M. Andrews:** My apologies, member. We are very happy to provide the baseline information that we hold at the moment. In regard to the native vegetation policy, that is particularly what the member is are looking for, native vegetation —

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** It is really about the measurement or where the department started from as far as mapping in what region. The member for Moore pointed out the same thing. Sometimes the wheatbelt is a massive area; sometimes it is the Wheatbelt Development Commission. If we could have some baseline information of the native vegetation, what regions the department is looking at or what it quantifies as the wheatbelt region and how much native vegetation it is are measuring in that to start with.

[6.10 pm]

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** There is this data on the department's website, so it is public information. It might be difficult to comprehend what it all means, but maybe the member would be better at comprehending it than I would. We can supply the member with the information for the link, and then he can look at that himself if he wishes.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 685 and underneath spending changes, the last line of the new initiatives, which is the rebuild of the Australind jetty. The state government has committed \$3 million in funding towards the upgrade of the jetty. There is a bit of frustration locally about an apparent—is this not your area?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** No, it is not, member. Sorry.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Oh. It looked out of place, but it is on the same —

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Sorry.

**The CHAIR:** Further questions or new questions? A new question, member for Moore.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Returning to the issue of climate change—and by the way, where would that jetty fit if it does not fit here? Who owns the jetty?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** So it is water in terms of the minister—Kelly.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Is it the Minister for Water?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Yes.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Okay. There you go. All right.

We move then back to page 686 on the climate change issue and the significant issues impacting the agency. I want to turn to a document that was supplied to us from the Treasurer, the climate change risk management guide. This is the document here. Apparently, it is a guide for government to address risk, our management to do with climate change and to lead to adaptation policies et cetera. It has got the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation on the front cover, so it is obviously a joint document between the department and Treasury. I am wondering how much this document cost to produce and which agency was responsible for its production.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** In terms of cost, it was done with internal resources. There was no outside consultant or anything like that. It was done within the capacity of the government and the department itself.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Is it intended to be a document that helps guide Western Australia in its unique environment?

**The CHAIR:** This question is a long way from the budget, member for Moore.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** No, it is actually on climate change.

**The CHAIR:** No, do not argue with me about the ruling, member for Moore.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Are you saying the Australind jetty is more relevant?

**The CHAIR:** Member for Vasse! If the minister is willing to answer it, he can, but we are a long way from the budget papers now.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** The member for Moore is always trying, is he not? I know the point he is trying to score here, but the point is that it is not about the Western Australian natural environment, which is distinct and special from other jurisdictions; it is about the process within government. State governments are quite similar and there are lessons always to learn from other jurisdictions and the way governments respond to challenges.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Further to that, is the minister aware that it basically ripped off a New South Wales document here, I think? The total number of pages, which are similar, is written here. I do hope that we are actually going to have some original thought if we are going to tackle climate change, because our industries are different in Western Australia. If we apply the types of philosophies that New South Wales might apply, we may have very poor outcomes for our state and our economy. I implore the minister to actually look for Western Australia rather than just take documents off the shelf and try to push them onto the government.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Member, I can only repeat what I have said. This is not about dealing with the Western Australian economy or the Western Australian environment, as distinct and special as we are; it is about the processes within

government. I think it is a smart move to go to other jurisdictions and learn what they have done. I have to say, is Matt Kean still the environment minister over there?

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** No.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** In New South Wales?

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** No, he is not.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** He is the Treasurer now and Minister for Energy. The former environment minister of New South Wales and the current Treasurer and Minister for Energy is a chap by the name of Matt Kean—I am sure the member is a big fan of his. He is very progressive. He is a bit of a lone voice on that side of politics and he has a lot of good ideas. I think he would have come up with some very good things. I am not ashamed of getting advice and good ideas from wherever they come from and I think we need to do that. We are part of a global community. As special and unique as Western Australia is economically and environmentally, there is nothing wrong in looking around at how other jurisdictions have handled it. This is about the internal processes of government and the way the government responds to this challenge.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Very good.

**Mr S.A. MILLMAN:** I refer to page 687 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the Murujuga rock art monitoring strategy. Can the minister please provide an update on the implementation of the monitoring program for the Burrup Peninsula?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Absolutely. The member would know that the Aboriginal rock art on the Burrup is many tens of thousands of years old. It is significant internationally—globally—and it is a very special cultural asset for not just the traditional owners in the area, but also Australia and Western Australia. There have been a number of years of a lot of work and dedication to looking at whether there is an impact on that art from the emissions in the area. The member will know that there are some processes that go on on the Burrup that emit material, so we want to make sure that we protect that rock art. There is probably the most exhaustive of its type of process ever undertaken in the world to be able to measure these emissions and get baselines to work out whether there is any deterioration or change so that we get a very early warning if there is an issue and then we can act very early.

The most important thing about this, I think, is that the local traditional owners are at the very centre of this process. I have been up to the Burrup and I have seen the monitoring stations that have been installed, and they are significant pieces of technology and they are recording all sorts of data. As a result of a stakeholder reference group that engaged all stakeholders and examined the process, we have a wider area—50 000 hectares of land—that is now being monitored. The very good thing about it is that young Aboriginal rangers, employed by the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation, are actually part of that process. They are going out to these stations, maintaining them, taking readings, making sure that they are operating.

This is a fantastic project. We obviously in Western Australia have a balance of industry and a lot of heritage, whether it is natural heritage or cultural heritage in the environment. We need to be very careful that we get the right balance and protect valuable assets. This is one of the most valuable assets you can imagine. So the process has been exhaustive and the monitoring is starting. I think the last of the monitoring stations are going in towards the end of this year and then we will start to get that data next year and it will be monitored and assessed. The Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation will be at the heart of that process. I think it is a model of how to monitor these situations and protect valuable heritage. It is good story. We need to be on alert. We need to ensure that we have the earliest possible alert if there is an issue. Of course, there is monitoring the operations up there as well, and those are restricted in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, and that the appetite for further restrictions and changes is always developing. The other question is: what impact, if any?

[6.20 pm]

**MR R.S. LOVE:** I refer to budget paper No 2, volume 2, at page 687. I think something has gone wrong with the numbering here. I want to talk about the Environmental Protection Authority approvals situation, and for some reason my numbers jump around in this book, so it does not work. However, I just want to know what the average wait time is for EPA approvals at the moment and whether it has been coming down. I know the government invested money in the Streamline WA program. Could the minister give me an update on that program and the numbers of recruits that the department has been able to get in there, and whether there is an appreciable difference in the approval time line?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Sure. This is a challenging area, because with the strength of the Western Australian economy and the handling by the government of COVID and the economy generally, we are getting a lot of proponents come to us with projects. We are getting historic high numbers in terms of projects seeking approvals. As the member mentioned, the Streamline process had a \$120 million investment in the 2021–22 budget, and I think the aim was to employ 175 or 150—I think we have got it up—it is probably going to be closer to 175, extra FTEs, and that is

across government. A lot of those positions have been filled. I think within DWER, the proportion is 70.5 FTEs for that department alone. There is a challenge, as the member would know, as the labour market is very tight. These people are very skilled and their experience is in demand, and what we find is, quite often, our own officers are being attracted to the private sector to be able to put those applications in. They are very highly sought after. It is a real challenge. There is a range of things we have done. One of them was a new graduate program for DWER. Recently I was at DWER's headquarters in Joondalup and got to meet about 12 new graduates. These are the brightest and best from our universities across Australia, and there is a real appetite to work in this area because a lot of these people are very keen to do their bit for the environment and they see working in this area as a great aspiration and making a meaningful difference.

A huge amount of work is also being done within government to work out ways that we can increase efficiency of the approvals process, whether it is agencies talking more, being in contact, and sharing resources, and also focusing on where we need to increase our resources to get those key crucial projects out of the way that are big projects and big job creators. There is a range of initiatives; I could go on. We are also reducing the burden on the private sector in terms of it reporting to us. Having less bureaucracy actually frees up the resources of our staff to be able to put into the approvals process as well. The member might have noticed that recently—this was well received by the business community—60 per cent of the licence requirements were either done away with entirely or had reduced reporting burdens. That meant that often a proponent, which operates a situation whereby there is no change from year to year, was required to report each year. We have changed that so that it is not an annual event that they have to go through. There are also changes in scheme amendments being referred to the Environmental Protection Authority. A lot of minor scheme amendments end up in the EPA. They are inconsequential, but they are nevertheless required to be looked at it, which requires time. We have cut, dramatically by half, first scheme referrals to the EPA.

There is a lot going on and I have a long list of initiatives. It is a challenge. We are finding that even with the increased burden of approvals coming into the system we are keeping the rate of approvals similar to the productivity of the department, similar to what we have had in previous years. Although the number of approvals coming in the door has increased significantly and we often have fewer staff, we have managed to keep the same amount of approvals as previously, admittedly being less of a proportion because more is coming through the door. I think the agency and across government we performed incredibly well, but it is a challenge. We are doing everything we can. The money is there to employ people and we have largely done that, but there also initiative in recruiting staff from interstate as well. All stops are being pulled to address the situation.

**MR R.S. LOVE:** I think the part of the question that I asked then—I did not actually find my place back again; there is a random page from this section in another section, which has thrown me completely—was if the minister could provide some idea of the average wait time or how long applications are going. I know not all applications are the same, but there has to be some sort of metric to measure these things. Could the minister also provide the current numbers of staff, even by way of supplementary information? I expect that would be the best way. I note the minister said it had recruited 70-odd people, but I understand that as soon as they are recruited, others are leaving. The net situation is not quite so rosy. It is not a “gotcha” thing, but I just want to know and get an understanding of what is the actual situation is inside the EPA at the moment in terms of staff and the number of vacancies it has at the moment.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I will just go through that. To be clear, 70.5 FTEs was the extra provision to the agency, and various parts of the agency contribute to the approvals process and there are some numbers there. I might hand over to Shaun Meredith.

**Mr S. Meredith:** Thank you, minister. I thank the member for the question. To answer his first question about the duration of approvals, it is of course very variable. It depends on the complexity of the proposal. It also depends on the number of changes that proponents request and the type of proposal or the location, in many cases, too. It is very hard to define an average proposal. But typically, we might say for a large major proposal it takes anywhere between 18 months to two years to get through the full process. That is the time frame and that has been the time frame that we have been working on for many years. That has not changed, as the minister mentioned, despite the challenges we have been facing over the past few years.

With regards to FTE, inside the particular group that I work with we currently have about 34 FTE working on those proposals, but more broadly across the department we have a range of specialists in biodiversity and air quality who also participate in those assessments. The actual numbers of FTE that are working in environment impact assessment, on those assessments across the department, is in the mid-70s.

[6.30 pm]

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** How many vacancies are there in that area? Are many positions unfilled?

**Mr S. Meredith:** Of the two different types of areas I mentioned, in the area that serves directly the EPA services team, we currently have in the order of about 10 vacancies that we are looking to fill. We have employed a strategic

**Extract from *Hansard***

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Thursday, 26 May 2022]

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Mr R.R. Whitby; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Reece Whitby; Mr Shane Love; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Simon Millman

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HR or recruitment consultant to help us fill those. That is the person who is working interstate, as well as across government to find suitable employees to do that. We are also plugging some of the gaps that we have in assessment with consultants as well to make sure that we can continue to meet those time lines. That is how many FTE we have in that particular area. More broadly across the department, I cannot give the member a total FTE across those areas, but no significant hold-up is occurring within those assessment areas at the moment, from air quality to terrestrial branches, for example.

**The appropriation was recommended.**