

**Division 41: Water and Environmental Regulation — Services 1 to 3 and 5, Water —**

Mrs M.R. Marshall, Chair.

Ms S.F. McGurk, Minister for Water.

Mr A. Jones, Director General.

Ms E. Briggs, Deputy Director General, Climate Change and Sustainability.

Mr C. Shaw, Deputy Director General, Approvals.

Mr D. O'Reilly, Deputy Director General, Strategy and Performance.

Ms H. Manderson, Chief Finance Officer.

Dr S. Gallacher, Chief of Staff, Minister for Water.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof 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 be examined only 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 noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

Are there any questions?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** There certainly are, chair!

**The CHAIR:** The member for Cottesloe.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** If we could kick off with spending changes on page 673 of budget paper No 2, a line item in the spending changes table, almost halfway down, refers to compliance resourcing, with around \$5 million this year. Hence, in terms of compliance, we note that it is associated with and refers to that. Could the minister please outline the purpose of that initiative?

[11.50 am]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I can. Ensuring compliance with the state's environmental and water resource legislation is fundamental to enabling community as well as investor confidence in our regulatory framework. It is also fundamental to implementing streamlining and other bureaucratic reduction reforms. The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation is managing an increasing number of complex, high-profile and contentious compliance issues of state significance that have the potential to cause impacts to several environmental factors and pose a risk to several sensitive environments, water resources and public health. Cost-recovery funds from compliance and enforcement activities will be utilised by the department in a net-debt-neutral approach to deliver an additional 12 FTE and associated operational expenditure for compliance activities. The department is focused on increasing the capability and effectiveness of compliance and emergency response activities. These additional resources will allow a more proactive approach to the important tasks of dealing with unlawful environmental and water impacts, as well as impacts to the community. Additional resources will also allow post-approval assessments such as management plans to be prioritised, ensuring that projects can begin operating in a timely manner.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Is my understanding of the minister's response clear? This is about inspectors physically going out to industry, the community or wherever to ensure that people are complying with water regulations. Did I understand that part of the increase in FTE was also about working out ways of simplifying the regulatory compliance burden, if you like, for industry and the like?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will see whether there is an agency response that Chris Shaw wants to talk about. I found a bit more detail here. The member asked about the \$13.8 million. There is \$8.3 million for 12 permanent compliance and enforcement FTEs, and \$2.4 million for the operation and maintenance of existing compliance technology. As I said, I referred to the post-approval assessments as well, but I will hand over to Chris Shaw to see whether he wants to add anything.

**Mr C. Shaw:** Thank you for the question, member. Yes, there are definitely elements of making our processes simpler. As the minister said, we are particularly looking at our post-approval area; once a project has its major approval, the proponents might have to do things like management plans to address particular key risks. The

compliance and assurance area does the work around that with those proponents to ensure that they can be out there doing their projects effectively.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 673 of budget paper No 2 and the line “Understanding How Climate Change Impacts on Western Australia’s Water Resources” under spending changes. I wonder what the requirement is there. Obviously, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation has an excellent record, I think, in understanding water-use needs and the appropriate place to get water. I wonder what additional activity this role will carry out.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Thank you. There has been a lot of discussion and awareness about this matter, particularly over the last couple of months, as we started to experience a warmer future for our state and a further drying of the south west of the state, as climate scientists predicted we might. The out-of-season weather and bushfires in November last year and WA just having had its warmest summer on record are stark reminders that we are experiencing the acute effects of climate change right now, and the impacts to water resources are likely to be widespread and profound. This new communication and research initiative will deliver sought-after guidance on how to apply climate projections for the water sector, and it was established in collaboration with several climate and water research organisations across the country.

Investment in the initiatives over the forward estimates will improve the base knowledge of climate change impacts on our state’s water systems and will equip the water sector with consistent and user-friendly guidance and messaging so it can adapt to climate change impacts at the required pace and with reduced costs. In 2024–25, the initiative’s team will publish the first comprehensive document on WA’s climate and water resources, produce real-world examples of how to use our climate projections and deliver a simple data-access hub to enable diverse users to efficiently access the current recommended climate projections. These will be available in a website that will be a one-stop shop for useful guidance and tools.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Minister, what physically will this be? Will we contribute to those other research organisations? Will we have a body or bodies on the ground that work in this area within the department? Will we be funding research at universities? It is not sheep stations, but it is part of a sheep station!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will hand over to Emily from the department to talk about this. In fact, I think I indicated when I was answering this that resources will be developed by the department and made available for Western Australians—people working both within the industry sector and in associated areas such as research, various aspects of industry or the environment—to access some of this information. I will hand over to Emily to talk about the work that has been done here.

[12 noon]

**Ms E. Briggs:** Thank you, minister. Yes, that is absolutely correct, as the minister set out. Through this work, we are working collaboratively with other leading organisations such as universities, the Bureau of Meteorology and other jurisdictions to pull together that best practice information and what it will look like for the community as that one-stop-shop website. People will be able to download a guide that gives them that sort of step-by-step strategy on how to start to look at the impacts of climate change on water. Users like local governments, businesses and community groups could start to use these materials to look at the projections for what water resources could look like in different scenarios in the future and then, importantly, use that information to think about how to adapt and build resilience to climate change.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Sometimes we do not utilise our own resources. A botanist at the University of Western Australia, Professor Pauline Grierson, has done some absolutely outstanding work on the history of rainfall in the state. I suggest that it is the best scientific work that has been done to look at that. The long and short of her research is that it just happens that European settlement corresponds with the wettest period in Western Australia in the last 400 years. For extended periods in that 400-year period, rainfall was one-third of what it was when the British arrived. By the way, she is a big believer in man-made impacts on climate, but the truth is that in recent history, the state has been vastly dryer than since European settlement. Outside the impacts of climate change, her research shows that there are decadal long periods—up to 30-year periods—of extreme drought like we are experiencing this year. I think Professor Grierson is an outstanding Western Australian and would be a great contact for the department. Regarding the part that we were talking about, are FTEs in the department associated with that or is this more an activity that is being funded, such as the website and the like?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will ask Ms Briggs to answer that question.

**Ms E. Briggs:** I believe for us it is a mix of resources—FTE and the department, and then funding agreements with our project partners who help deliver some of that credible science and information. Some of the funding also goes towards building that online portal. It is a combination.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 678 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2 and service 1, “Water Information and Advice”. The water information listed in the budget is quantity, quality, location et cetera. Is that information publicly available or is that information simply retained for the department’s own use?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will hand over to Ms Briggs again.

**Ms E. Briggs:** Yes, a range of different information is available publicly online. We have various different types of information, such as water allocation plans, water allocation plan evaluations and a range of different public consultations. We have a wide range of different types of information. Some of it will obviously be internal as we are working through it and using it to inform future plans, but once it has been through that process, the lion's share is available publicly online.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Just to be clear, is the outcome of that research and work publicly available for people to view?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will ask Ms Briggs to speak to that. Some of the information under the heading "Water Information and Advice" in the budget paper is obviously, by its nature, publicly available, but some of it is not. For instance, water licences are not publicly available. Some of the data that informs that or others might be commercial-in-confidence. I will ask Ms Briggs to make any other comments.

**Ms E. Briggs:** I would just build upon that to say that it is absolutely right. Aside from the licences, which the minister has already tackled, the department is obviously doing a lot of research and development and a lot of groundwater investigation. Although that is through the investigative process, we will be collecting that data and information and using it internally, but when we pull it together and bring it into final facing documents, such as allocation plans, those are of course publicly available online.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 679 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2 and "Water Planning, Allocation and Optimisation". I assume this is the correct section. What efforts are being made to identify and quantify sustainable new water resources? I will cut to the chase on this one. I have had feedback from growers, particularly in the Carnarvon area, that water allocations are affected by currently available water resources, but their belief is that there are substantial water resources to the east of Carnarvon, obviously—the west is wet, but salty—that are not being utilised or are not intended to be utilised to provide additional water for the horticulturalists there.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I am trying to find the right information around this because a lot of work is done in this area. I am making sure that I give the member an accurate picture. Some of the work on accessing our water supplies is done through the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and some is done through the Water Corporation. Allocation planning is done under this department, but was the member talking about Carnarvon and inland?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes. The minister is probably familiar that Carnarvon water users are pretty active and they like to get into her ear, but there are groundwater resources that are already utilised. Part of that is used for the town and part is used for horticulturalists when the river is not flowing and they have utilised the water that they are allowed to take from the riverbed. An assertion was put to me, however, that there are quite substantial groundwater resources further east that are not available. What effort has been made to identify those? Has any effort been made to identify those and could those be utilised? This will cross over into the Water Corporation.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** That is right; I think so. If the member is asking what water plans apply in areas east of Carnarvon and the like, it is difficult to have all that information to hand.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I am happy to ask a question on notice.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Yes, perhaps the member can ask a question separately. I am happy to get him that information. I have been Minister for Water for about 18 months and I understand that these are issues for some sections of our communities, whether in the goldfields, Exmouth or the great southern. The geography, infrastructure, industrial and community needs are all very different and the opportunities for new water sources are very different across all those areas. If the member specifies an area, I am happy to follow that up.

[12.10 pm]

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I do not want to paraphrase, because I am not quite sure how familiar I am with the complexity of Carnarvon's water situation, but perhaps the question can be framed as: is any active work being done by the department on groundwater investigations to prove up additional resource in the Carnarvon area that would be for the use of the horticultural industry?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I could take that question as a supplementary, but I actually think a question on notice would be helpful, because we can then put a bit more context around the water planning that applies to that general area, and also take the question in the context of what else is occurring within the Water Corporation, not just for groundwater, because it could be that there are a range of different water supply options available for that area.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** This is an exciting question. The minister will have guessed this one; she will be well briefed. Obviously, the minister is very aware that there is a lot of public discussion at the moment about the Coca-Cola bottling plant. I apologise, chair; I know you are about to grab me! I am looking at page 676 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2 and water planning, licensing et cetera. I refer to recent public concern in the media about the Coca-Cola

bottling plant at Karragullen. Part of that public discussion has been that the department has said that this is a matter for the council to resolve and deal with. Apparently, in a radio interview this morning, the Deputy Mayor of the City of Gosnells was discussing this matter. The council had looked at its original documentation, and, apparently, according to that person, the original permission to proceed with that bore was given by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, so it was that department's initial responsibility.

Can the minister comment on the government and the department's responsibility for that matter? I suspect this could come as a surprise, but is the minister aware whether that that is the case?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I am good, but I am not so good that I can listen to the radio and be here at the same time! No, I am not aware of the details. I would caution against whether we are talking about the same projects or the same water sources. The member might be aware that some commercial companies that access groundwater or spring water for commercial purposes are in proclaimed areas and are operating under licences; others are not. I do not know the particular circumstances that the member is talking about and whether the then Department of Water, or whatever iteration it was in the early 1990s, gave advice on that matter.

There has been a lot of discussion about Coca-Cola and its operations in Roleystone. In that instance, there was a consideration by the local government to try to limit not only the take in terms of the water extraction, but also, importantly for the local community, the number of truck movements. When the local government tried to limit that, I think it was actually Hon Graham Kierath, who was the Minister for Planning and Heritage at the time, who overturned the desire of the local community and said that there should not be those limitations. As I am advised, that gives further restrictions on what we can do with our planning tools to try to restrict the amount of water that is taken by Coca-Cola.

Importantly, though, we are working with Coca-Cola and also with its peak body to understand the extractions that occur in this case of Coca-Cola and the Roleystone location that has been the matter of particular attention. As I said, it is in an unproclaimed area; therefore, there is no requirement for the bore to be licensed or the take to be measured. However, there have been some discussions between Coca-Cola and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, and we are working hard to make that information public. That will give the community some comfort that some transparency will apply in that case. Obviously, this has been very difficult for the community in such a dry and hot summer.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Is the department actively involved in monitoring or receiving monitoring reports of the impacts on the groundwater table in that area?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** For the areas that we are talking about, if that area is not proclaimed, no. If they are proclaimed areas, there will be a water plan that applies to the entire groundwater system, and licences are then applied for and granted in accordance with that plan. Not only will people pay for their licence, but also there will be a limitation on how much they can take, and measurement will occur. But if an area is not proclaimed, there is no monitoring of extraction in that area, as I understand it.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Is the minister considering whether it would be worthwhile to differentiate between commercial users that are selling the water and, for example, horticulturalists in those areas who are extracting water for horticultural use?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** There is no capacity under the current legislation for me to do that. If an area is proclaimed, as I said before, any extraction would be licensed and then monitored. If the area is not proclaimed, none of those rules applies. That is one of the challenges that exist in the case of people's awareness in a season like we are experiencing now, just coming off the back of summer, when horticulturalists and orchardists in particular are really feeling the impacts of climate change. It has been really difficult for them to watch Coca-Cola pulling out good-quality water and taking it off to its plant to bottle it. But it is difficult for us to proclaim that area and then license or charge for that water without impacting the horticulturalists.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes, absolutely. I think it is a vexed issue in the sense that I am sure the horticulturalists would like to limit the take of the commercial users, but, equally, probably would not be too keen on having that area proclaimed and becoming subject to those limitations themselves.

Is Coca-Cola required to report the amount of water it takes from that bore to government in any form, or, because it is an unproclaimed area, does it not have to report the water it takes from that bore?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** My understanding is that it does not, but I will hand over to Mr Shaw to give some more detail.

**Mr C. Shaw:** Thank you, minister. That is correct; there is no statutory requirement for Coca-Cola to report to us. That said, we are working closely with local governments, which have the closest regulatory controls over these projects, to provide advice and obtain more information when we can voluntarily.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I am conscious of the time. I refer to page 678 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2 and the table under "Water Information and Advice". I am looking at the last line of that table, which has the average cost

per water measurement site managed. I am interested in what is involved in that task, given that it is a reasonably significant sum.

[12.20 pm]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Is the member referring to note 4 on the average cost per water measurement?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** These sites are essential for monitoring factors impacting on water quality and availability across WA. Access to reliable and current information about the quality and quantity of water resources is a core input to decision-making by government and water-dependent businesses to enable the growth and development of our state. Stakeholders access water information and data to support investment and business decisions. This information also supports accurate water resource management decisions and advice. To service this need, the department measures or holds water data for more than 150 000 groundwater and surface water field sites, verifies and stores the data and makes the data available as water information. Regular or periodic field measurements are essential to maintain up-to-date data and verification. Storage and accessibility of the data are essential in making the data available as reliable information.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The north Wanneroo licence reductions are due to come into place in 2029. As part of that, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation was suggesting a range of activities, such as training activities for farmers in efficient water use and also, potentially, consolidation. Can the minister say whether the government is determined to progress with the 10 per cent reduction in water allocation in that north Wanneroo area? What progress has been made in terms of the measures the government announced it would take to help with this transition?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Just to correct the member, this will take effect in 2028. The *Gnangara groundwater allocation plan* was released in June 2022 as part of new measures to protect precious groundwater resources impacted by the effects of climate change. As I said, the plan was released in June 2022. As the member mentioned himself, we have seen the impacts of climate change through reduced rainfall since 1980. Increased groundwater abstraction has also seen watertables fall by up to 10 metres—a 1 000-gigalitre loss of aquifer storage equivalent to the metric of a thousand Optus Stadiums full of water. We know how much groundwater has fallen by since that period. The release of the final 2022 plan followed several years of extensive stakeholder engagement and consultation and over six years of detailed scientific assessments and groundwater modelling. The allocation plan for Gnangara and the alignment of the garden bore sprinkler roster with the scheme sprinkler roster will save 70 gigalitres of water each year. I also mention that the Water Corporation is reducing its baseline abstraction by 27 per cent. As the member said, the entitlements for most other licensed groundwater users will reduce by 10 per cent. That will go ahead.

The state government committed \$11.5 million over four years to support the horticultural industry, local government and garden bore users to adapt to this reduction. As of April this year, funding agreements with all nine eligible local governments for the Gnangara waterwise council grants program have been finalised and payments have been approved for projects to help those councils reduce their groundwater use. Under the Gnangara horticulture water use efficiency grants program, led by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, over half a million dollars' worth of projects were approved for efficiency grants, with the state government contributing half of that—\$243 000. Additional money is being provided in vouchers for growers to obtain expert advice on water-use efficiency. Money is also being made available to the nursery and gardening industry of WA to improve the uptake of the Australian plant production standard best practice certification and accreditation. I will leave it at that. To answer the member's question, it is going ahead in 2028. We are making funding available to the industry, and particularly to individual growers to help them understand and reduce their own water use in the lead-up to that reduction.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** In relation to that money for advice, I have been pretty actively involved with the growers in that area and many of them saw that as almost a deliberate insult—I know the minister was not the responsible minister—in the sense that they do not deliberately waste water and many of them have world-beating technology. The Trandos brothers' seed stock plant, for example, has an amazing level of technology. Has there been any uptake by growers of the vouchers for advice on more efficient water use? Have they actually been utilised by growers?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** As I said, over half a million dollars has been made available to growers, with the government providing \$243 000 of that. We are looking at how to make any unused grant allocation that has not been taken up more accessible for growers. For instance, we had feedback that some of them lease properties so there is no incentive to co-contribute, so we were asked to look at reframing the grants project to make it more available. We want to get the money out there. I understand that some might feel very confident in their water-use technology. When we were down in Manjimup recently, we visited an avocado farm that had instigated some drip technology over the last couple of years. It has reduced its water usage in areas in which that drip technology has been incorporated by up

to 30 per cent. Technology is emerging all the time and there are some real opportunities for growers to not only reduce their water use, but also save money, which I am sure would be welcome for any producer.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I refer to the note on the rural water planning program on page 678. I am just trying to get an understanding of the quantum of that program and what it is actually doing. How does it relate to the rural water grants and how does it then relate back to what was the farm and pastoral water rebate scheme? I am trying to understand what still exists out of that original program. Is it just the planning money?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** No. Under the rural water planning, again, some very practical assistance has been given. As we know, this comes at a time that has been very challenging for the agricultural sector in all its forms. First of all, there was \$11.5 million over four years, from 2021–22 to 2024–25, in state and commonwealth funding for agriculture area dams. The commonwealth government contributed \$3.6 million in 2023–24, with the state government contributing the balance of \$7.8 million. The program is continuing in 2024–25 and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation is seeking further support from the commonwealth to continue the program. These two important programs have increased non-potable strategic off-farm water supplies—for example, to meet firefighter water needs in the dryland agricultural areas. The community water supplies partnerships program has provided more than \$4.3 million for 59 projects over 37 local government authorities since 2021. On 13 May this year, I announced that the community water supplies partnerships program will be extended to more regional communities in the south west and great southern. The \$1.5 million expansion is part of the \$8.6 million Cook Labor government funding to help farmers manage the impact of drought conditions.

[12.30 pm]

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** As I understand it, those projects are all off farm. They are community projects. I have talked about the farm and pastoral water grants scheme. There used to be a program through which people could get funding assistance to do a water plan for their farm business, and then there would be funding in a co-contribution model with the state government to implement the planning. People could not get the grant unless they had done the planning. I understand that the grant funding was removed by this government sometime in the last term. I want to clarify, outside what the minister just announced for farmers in the south west, which I think is repurposed funding from the old southern forests program, whether funding is available for people who own farm or pastoral businesses, for example, who may be experiencing dry circumstances at the moment to improve, on scheme or off scheme, their water self-sufficiency on farm.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I know the member has asked about this a couple of times in the Legislative Assembly. Obviously, the program of water carting for water deficiency declarations is in place at the moment for Salmon Gums and Grass Patch. That assistance is available. I was talking about being in Manjimup at the Winfield's family avocado farm with the local member and the Minister for Regional Development. We announced the southern forests infrastructure support scheme in the Warren–Donnelly region. That is \$10 million for horticultural producers to improve their farms' water security. That is where I heard the example about drip irrigation, which that farm adopted early on. I think the member is talking about the pastoral water grants scheme.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** It was for farm and pastoral businesses.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** That closed in 2017 but was refocused on community-based projects. The member is right about the on-farm program, but the money was not taken away; it was put into community-based projects. I have been out in communities where people have been able to see the benefits of the community-based projects. As the member is very well aware, the Dry Season Taskforce has been convened to look at opportunities for our government to assist regional communities during these challenging dry conditions. That work is still underway.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Thank you, minister. That is great support for farmers in the horticultural area. It is a slightly different way of approaching it from what we were trying to do, which was through the southern forests pipeline project. I understand that has been abandoned. We are all very supportive of creating on-farm opportunities for those businesses. I am particularly talking about broadacre farmers who have animal welfare issues. The minister has talked about some of the community water programs. We ran them in addition to providing support for businesses to improve their self-sufficiency on farm. Given we have drought conditions and dry seasons across a large part of the agricultural industry, for broadacre farmers in particular, has there been any consideration of bringing that back? If not, why is this something that the government resists, given that it has shown support for farmers in the great southern part of the state through direct on-farm grants?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** The \$10 million for that area is not to be sneezed at. It is a significant amount of money.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Yes, it is.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It was an acknowledgement that it is the food bowl, in many respects, for our state. There was a lot of debate about the previous southern forests programs, including the dam proposal, for which the previous state government made money available. We are not taking away that money, so that is good. There are allocations

for farm water supply planning schemes, which is a current DWER program. It is a rebate to commercial broadacre farmers to fund an audit of their water supply. A list of auditors and information are available on the DWER website. I think that is important. It is important to note that that support is available. Again, an \$8.6 million funding package to help farmers through the drought conditions is not insignificant work that has been done to make sure the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation is working with farmers in different regions to understand their needs. Having direct government funding for on-farm supply measures is one thing, but helping to build up the understanding of government agencies to work with individual farmers and their industry bodies to understand how we adapt in the face of climate change is really important and something we are very committed to doing as a government.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** My point is that the government's reallocation of southern forests funding for direct on-farm grants in that area shows there is no ideological opposition to providing support for individual businesses to improve their self-sufficiency and efficiency in water use, which I think is a great outcome. At the moment, the water planning funding is still there from the previous farm water and pastoral grants but not the bit so that individual farmers can then partner with the government to improve on-farm efficiency, in addition to the community water supply program, which I am fully supportive of and we increased funding for when we were in government. It was all done when we were in government. We have an acute issue at the moment. I think it is a little bit short-sighted to take away one of those avenues to assist farmers who might be on scheme, which is very expensive water, or off scheme, where the water supply does not exist, to ensure that they are managing that resource as efficiently as possible. By linking with those businesses, the government can have some influence over policy, as the minister said, in the southern part of the state.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I was a bit frustrated because some of this happens across the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, and the Water Corporation has separate programs. I was reading the notes on these programs this morning. Ongoing renewals for wheatbelt farmlands water supply mains have been in place since 2015. Under the Water Corporation's work, the objective is to reduce the risk of water supply interruptions to regional towns and rural properties.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** That is a different program, minister.

[12.40 pm]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It will also minimise the risk of water mains bursts closing. A total of \$44 million has been invested by the state government on this program since 2015. Part of this project is to replace longer lengths of above-ground pipes et cetera. Under the previous government, from 2014–15 to 2016–17, probably partly when the member for Central Wheatbelt was the minister, \$6 million was spent on the program. Under our government, in a single year, in 2021–22, \$8 million was spent. The remainder of that \$44 million has been spent under our government. It is not the case that we are ignoring these communities or ignoring the challenges they have. We are very committed, with the challenges we have with our state's geography, to providing reliable water services to these communities.

In February this year, the member for Central Wheatbelt released a statement headed "Wheatbelt Power Infrastructure Must Improve". She is reported in that release, dated 8 February, as saying —

"For example, when I was Minister for Water the previous Government, we invested over \$32 million allocated to upgrade the farmland water supply, reducing leaks, and worked to improve reliability for customers who regularly experienced water supply issues.

We could find only \$6 million of that money. As I said, it was \$6 million over three years, but we have exceeded that amount in just one year. Between 2014 and 2024, a total of \$44 million has been spent to improve their water supply reliability. Direct grants to farmers are one thing. Making sure that we provide good scientific advice to farmers and their peak bodies and getting infrastructure to those areas are challenges, but they are challenges I believe we are meeting as a government.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Can the minister confirm that under the repurposing of the southern forests funding that goes to farmers in the south west, there are direct grants to farm businesses?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** That is right.

**The appropriation was recommended.**