

WATER — INTENSIVE IRRIGATED AGRICULTURE

3371. Hon Robin Chapple to the Minister for Agriculture and Food representing the Minister for Water:

Noting the Minister's joint media announcement of 21 August 2015, *Land tenure boost for irrigated agriculture* and subsequent coverage in *The West Australian* entitled "Land Tenure Deal to Drive Investment", I ask:

- (a) is the Government considering more than 10 million hectares of Western Australia land for possible intensive irrigated agriculture;
- (b) if no to (a), what is the correct figure for area under consideration by the Government for possible intensive irrigated agriculture;
- (c) of this area, how much is currently under native vegetation;
- (d) how many hectares of native vegetation would need to be cleared to achieve the irrigation area the Government is seeking to create;
- (e) has the Government completed any studies or assessments on the conservation significance of this large area of native vegetation; for example its biodiversity and threatened species habitat values;
- (f) if no to (e), when will those studies be done, at what cost and by whom;
- (g) if yes to (e), will the Minister table those studies;
- (h) if no to (g), why not;
- (i) given the large area of native vegetation clearing involved, and the large volumes of groundwater involved, will the proposed conversion of these areas to intensive irrigation be referred by the relevant government department or Minister to the Environmental Protection Agency for assessment as a strategic proposal;
- (j) if no to (i), why not;
- (k) will any proposal for conversion be required to comply with the native vegetation clearing principles set out in the *Environment Protection Act 1986*;
- (l) if no to (k), why not;
- (m) over what timeframe is the Government planning for this conversion of millions of hectares of public land to intensive irrigated, and possibly freehold land to occur;
- (n) has the Government completed any economic analysis of this potential large scale clearing of native vegetation in terms of either its carbon emissions impacts or its impacts on the regional tourism industry;
- (o) if no to (n), why not;
- (p) if yes to (n), will the Minister table those analyses;
- (q) if no to (p), why not;
- (r) is the Government aware of studies done on the carbon sequestration status of areas such as the Great Western Woodlands showing that these rangelands and pastoral ecosystems store carbon at a level of around 60 tonnes, on average, per hectare in soil and vegetation;
- (s) is the Government concerned that the conversion of up to or more than 10 million hectares of native vegetation across Western Australia's rangelands could equate in total to hundreds of millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, which is many times greater than Western Australia's current total annual carbon dioxide emissions;
- (t) if yes to (s), what does the Government intend to do in order to ensure this massive carbon dioxide emissions outcome does not occur;
- (u) has the Western Australian Government advised the Federal Environment Minister, Hon Greg Hunt, that it is considering a proposal to create hundreds of millions of tonnes of additional carbon dioxide emissions via this irrigated agriculture proposal;
- (v) if no to (u), when will Hon Greg Hunt be advised;
- (w) when will the Government refer this proposal for assessment under the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act);
- (x) does any of the 10 million or so hectares under consideration by the Government for intensive irrigation fall within any of the below categories and, if so, in each case, what area, in hectares, is involved:

- (i) former pastoral properties purchased by the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) for transfer to the conservation estate;
  - (ii) current conservation reserve of any kind;
  - (iii) timber reserve, sandalwood reserve or state forest;
  - (iv) Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) or CALM, DEC, DPaW proposed conservation reserve, e.g. Red Book or subsequent recommended areas;
  - (v) drinking water catchment area;
  - (vi) national heritage-listed areas, such as the Fitzroy River;
  - (vii) the Great Western Woodlands;
  - (viii) areas identified by Tourism Western Australia or the tourism industry as having significant and strategic tourism and aesthetic values, e.g. widely promoted regional wildflower tourism destinations; and
  - (ix) areas known to be at risk of serious and repeated flooding as mapped or otherwise documented by the Department of Water or other responsible state or federal government agencies;
- (y) how much per hectare and in total has the Government budgeted in financial costs, subsidies or assistance for the conversion of this 10 million hectares of public land to freehold and/or intensive irrigated land;
- (z) how much per hectare will the Government charge or recover on behalf of the Western Australian public for the conversion of 10 million hectares of public land to freehold and/or intensive irrigated land under this proposal;
- (aa) how much per megalitre will the Government charge for access to and use of publicly owned groundwater to support the area proposed to become intensive irrigation land;
- (bb) has the Minister received advice on the potential for this freeholding of public land to be in contravention of National Competition Policy;
- (cc) if no to (bb), why not;
- (dd) if yes to (bb), will the Minister release that advice;
- (ee) if no to (dd), why not;
- (ff) what legal protections will the Government put in place to ensure the public is protected from liability if areas identified by the Government for conversion to freehold and/or intensive irrigation subsequently fail due to flooding, inadequate soils, insufficient sustainable water supplies, in quality or quantity, attack by known pests and diseases or lack of adequate supporting infrastructure;
- (gg) does any of the 10 million hectares of potential irrigation land rely on the construction of new dams on any rivers or other major watercourses; and
- (hh) if yes to (gg), which rivers or other major watercourses, by region, have been identified as having potential dam sites?

**Hon Ken Baston replied:**

- (a)–(hh) The potential to develop up to 10 million hectares of land across Western Australia for irrigated agriculture was identified in the publicly available State Water Strategy Irrigation Review Final Report, July 2005.

The State Government is not developing any of this land itself, but it is endeavouring to unlock private sector investment across the state through the Water for Food program.

The primary objective of the Water for Food program is to identify sustainable water resources, irrigable land areas and irrigation technologies that can enable Western Australia's fresh food and animal protein production to double its contribution to state and regional economies by 2050.

Any irrigated agriculture development will need to comply with all the well-established local, state and commonwealth government statutory approvals processes including environmental approvals and native vegetation clearing.