

**Division 65: Agriculture Protection Board of Western Australia, \$1 134 000 —**

Mr P.B. Watson, Chairman.

Mr D.T. Redman, Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Mr R. Delane, Director General, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr G. Wilson, Acting Assistant Director, Business Services, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr S.A. Mitchell, Chief of Staff, Office of the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Mr S. Helm, Policy Officer, Office of the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Mr I.D. Rotheram, Senior Policy Advisor, Forestry, Natural Resource Management, Office of the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIRMAN:** The member for Gosnells has the call.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** We are aware, of course, that the Agriculture Protection Board is set for big changes—in fact, its days are numbered—but biosecurity in Western Australia remains as pressing an issue as ever. Can the minister advise us on the number of full-time equivalents working on biosecurity this financial year and for the coming financial years?

[8.00 pm]

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I will have to take that question, which is asking for that sort of detail, on notice. I do not have the detail with me now. I am happy to take it on notice and provide a response to the member. I assume that information will be provided by way of supplementary information. I take it that the member wants to know how many people in the agency are working in the area of biosecurity. For what years does the member want that information?

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** For the current financial year and the four years of the forward estimates.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Does the member want me to predict how many people will be working in the area of biosecurity in the four years of forward estimates?

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Yes, and for the current financial year.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Does the member really want me to predict the number of people who will be working in the biosecurity area?

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** I imagine the budgeting is done on that basis. Wages would be a big component of this budget.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** The member is referring to a speculative area. In other words, decisions that government makes down the track are based on the resourcing for those years and its priorities. I am not prepared to put on paper now what I think the number of staff working in biosecurity will be in a forward estimates perspective. I can provide that information for the current year.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** The current year and the next year.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Is the member happy to see what information we can provide? The forward estimates is really a formula. It is just predictive if the member is looking at just the numbers.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Sure, but it would be based on the trend over the past few years.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** The member is looking at the agency's resource, and there has been a shrinking over time of the resource. That occurred even in the Labor Party's term in government. For me to provide an absolute figure will not necessarily reflect the priority that this government puts on biosecurity. It depends on the total resource and other demands that the agency has. I am not prepared to do that.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** That is for the minister to decide, but the public of Western Australian wants a commitment from the Barnett government to this very important issue of biosecurity. The minister should be able to give an indicative number relating to the staffing of biosecurity over the next few years.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** It is also one-dimensional to be reflecting on staff numbers as being the measure of the state's response in the area of biosecurity. I think the member would recognise that.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** It is one indicator.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Part of the regulation changes in the questions that the member asked previously were around industry-funded schemes. Those regulations are designed for industry to take ownership and control and, indeed, make decisions on whether it would choose to invest in biosecurity.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Will the minister provide the information by way of supplementary information?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I will come back to that.

Hence industry would take control of the biosecurity directions it takes. The department might play a lesser role when industry picks up some of that role. It might be that industry wants to pick up on new initiatives, which the department might choose to assist with. Again, it is speculative to look in the forward estimates for numbers of staff that are going into a particular area. I guess I am not prepared to put that on paper. I am prepared to get the current year's figures for the number of staff working in biosecurity.

It has just been pointed out to me that the Agriculture Protection Board does not employ any staff. The member's question is not relevant to this division.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Or staff working in the area of biosecurity.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** That said, I am happy to provide the current numbers for people in the agency working in biosecurity. It is speculative to predict what it will be in the out years against other priorities when we do not know what those priorities will be.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Does the minister think that there is not a need for the capacity to detect outbreaks that might be a risk?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Of course. The total amount that is spent on biosecurity is \$37 million.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The information that the minister has been requested to provide by way of supplementary information is the number of people in the agency working in biosecurity for the 2009–10 financial year and the forward estimates. Does the minister want to provide the information as it relates to forward estimates?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I am prepared to give the figures relating to agency staff working in the area of biosecurity for 2009–10. I am not prepared to speculate on the forward estimate figures.

*[Supplementary Information No B21.]*

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** To complete my answer, the agency currently spends \$37 million on biosecurity. The agency remains committed to biosecurity. As these industry-funded schemes come into place, industry will take a greater role in some of them. In fact, there are only three that would be captured under that now. If industry chooses to pick up on others, it would be another matter. The three industry-funded schemes that are currently in place are for skeleton weed, and that scheme is largely industry-funded now; bedstraw, which government plays a significant role in supporting; and footrot, for which government has money allocated across the forward estimates. I have outlined the trends. If industry wants to pick up another one, such as lice, it can choose to do so.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** I have a further question. Is the minister prepared to concede that he is, in effect, privatising the control of biosecurity management in Western Australia?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** No, I am not. I will take as an example skeleton weed. It comes under an act. In essence that act is used to raise a levy on a tonne of grain to then support the control of skeleton weed. Historically, the department has had a role to play in that. In recent times it has played a lesser role, including in the time of the previous Labor government. It comes under an industry-funded scheme.

Again, when there is greater benefit to industry rather than to the public, it is reasonable. I am on the public record as saying that it is reasonable for industry to pick up a significant proportion of those costs. If we go back in history, we can see that there has been strong support from the public purse for some biosecurity areas.

It is very important for this state and the agency to ensure that we focus on border security and market access. From an agricultural perspective the focus should be on ensuring that we remain free of pests and diseases that are not in this state now. That is certainly an area we are paying a lot of attention to.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Using the minister's example of skeleton weed, surely we need people in the agency who are in a position to administer that program? While we perhaps have the goodwill of landholders who are prepared to be involved in eradication and detection programs, we still need people in a government agency to administer those programs. They must be impartial, with no self-interest and no concern about what impact a levy might have on the industry. We still need people who are impartial—public servants—working hard on these things. That is the basis on which the minister can say either yes or no to the position he holds on privatisation.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** The agency will always play a role in advising and supporting directions that industry might choose to take. In some cases it might be the science or research that supports positions it is taking in looking after, in this case, skeleton weed. I challenge the member's point if he is saying that it should be government funded rather than industry playing a role in dealing with the biosecurity issue for which it gets the lion's share of benefit

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** My question was about the administering of programs, detection and having people who are impartial. If we had a bovine spongiform encephalopathy-type outbreak, would the agency be reliant on the industry to manage that? Surely the experience from overseas is that we must have government officials who can be active on such problems.

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** The premise of these funding schemes is that when industry puts its dollar up, it decides where it spends that dollar. For skeleton weed there is a committee that comprises almost entirely industry representatives. It makes the decisions about where the money is spent. Because it comes under an act, I have some responsibility in signing off on some things. Under the industry-funded schemes, if industry puts in the dollar, it makes the decisions about where that dollar is spent.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Does the minister have confidence in industry to explain to the public that there is an outbreak of disease that would be damaging to the industry? Does the minister believe that would ever happen? Surely the truth here is that we must have government officials who are prepared to make the hard call and announce an outbreak of a disease that could be damaging to the future of an industry?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** There is some overlap with what the member is talking about. I used three examples—skeleton weed, bedstraw and footrot—for which current programs are in place and which come under industry-funded schemes. Those are not threats that will bother people living in Perth. Obviously there is a range of biosecurity risks that go beyond agriculture that would have an impact on the public and areas outside agriculture. European house borer is one of those. It does not have an impact on agriculture, but we do not want to see it in areas beyond those in which it is contained, because it will have a significant impact on homes that have not been treated and the cost of fumigation would be substantial. The government will always take a role in managing the areas that have a significant public benefit. In terms of responding to incidences, I think bedstraw is a good example. The government picked up the tab right from the word go, because it was an issue that had the potential to have a significant impact on the grains industry of Western Australia. The government did not leave the industry to languish and to fumble around as it determined what it should do. It went in and started to deal with the problem. It provided an acute response. With some of those areas, such as the three I mentioned, there is an increasing role for industry to play through the funding schemes and, hence, it will have a greater decision-making role in determining where the money is spent. We will regulate for all regulated pests and diseases.

[8.10 pm]

**Mr R. Delane:** It is important to note that as far as I am aware, there has never been any suggestion of outsourcing or privatisation of the regulatory or policy responsibilities of this biosecurity agency or any other biosecurity agency. There are operational functions and if industry is paying to meet a regulatory requirement, it usually wants to have a higher degree of say in how that requirement is met. The example the minister referred to was the skeleton weed program. The department used to largely carry out all the operational functions. A significant number of those operational functions, such as searching for skeleton weed, are carried out by private contractors. That is an industry judgement. It can do it more efficiently than departmental officers. It allows us to focus on our core activities. The same thing applies in other areas. Sometimes for interstate exports, industry is able to use quality assurance programs—the interstate certification assurance scheme—to meet the requirements for interstate export itself, rather than have departmental officers come out to inspect to make sure it is doing everything right. That may be privatisation in the member's eyes. It is about industry being able to meet the regulatory responsibility. There has never been any suggestion of moving the regulatory responsibility, the decision as to which pests and diseases are regulated or what responsibility any businessman, property owner or individual must meet, out of an organisation such as the Department of Agriculture and Food.

**Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE:** Does the minister have every confidence in the system to be a self-regulated and funded industry with a detection system that exposes things that are damaging to industry? I refer to Ovine Johne's disease. If there is an outbreak of that in a farmer's sheep flock, is he or she likely to expose such an outbreak on that farmer's property? If inspectors do not make declarations that certain properties are contaminated, if we do not have that government level of action, is it not the case that we will have a system in which secrecy prevails?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** Government is not walking away from that space. The tenor of the member's question suggests that we are walking away from regulating what should happen and who picks up responsibility. We are not walking away from this space. If an outbreak is going to have a significant impact on the industry, the

agency will initiate an acute response. We already have agreements on a national level and a national response in place for a range of diseases and pests. Part of the regulations that are still to be drafted relate to dealing with some of those other responses as far as the state is concerned; hence, the level of consultation with industry. We are not walking away from that space. We are right there. There are, however, three industry funding schemes coming on that will have industry playing a greater financial role and hence a greater decision-making role.

**Mr A.J. SIMPSON:** I refer to the first dot point under significant issues impacting the agency on page 800 of the *Budget Statements*. The dot point refers to the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007 and states that industry-funded schemes are being established to effectively manage pests and diseases. Can the minister update us on the progress that has been made with those regulations?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I highlighted a little while ago that the Agriculture Protection Board is inundated. Again, a piece of legislation is before the house. Hopefully it will expedite that so that there is no duplicity in what we need to resource. The easy part of the bill was putting the legislation in place. The hard part is the regulations. We are putting a priority on the industry funding scheme component; hence, we have been engaged with industry for some time. We have a range of committees in place to advise government about using industry money to deal with biosecurity risks faced by the respective industries. We are quite a way down the path. I am hoping that the industry funding schemes will be in place by the end of this financial year.

**Mr A.J. SIMPSON:** There are many apple orchards in my area in the hills. The apple scab would be a similar situation. The growers have set up a price per kilo fund that will assist with its eradication. Is the minister talking about a similar thing with that legislation?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** The member is talking about the APC act.

**Mr A.J. SIMPSON:** Is it a federal act? I am a bit confused. Is the minister talking about industry regulations?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** There are two pieces of legislation. As I understand there is the APC act and the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act, which is what the regulations to raise funds specifically for biosecurity work come under. Presently the APC act does not have the scope to incorporate broadacre as a funding mechanism to raise funds for good industry outcomes. The member talked about the apple scab issue. The apple industry is using the APC mechanism as a way to raise funds to deal with its biosecurity issues. That comes under a different act.

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** I refer to the fourth dot point on page 800 of the *Budget Statements*. It states that landholders continue to suffer production losses from feral animals and weeds. In my electorate it seems as though other government departments are not playing their part in dealing with blackberry infestations and cottonbush, which have become endemic. A lot of those weeds are on Water Corporation and Department of Environment and Conservation land. The prevailing winds from the Darling Scarp blow the weeds straight back onto farmers' paddocks. They are subject to penalties if they are found to have any noxious weeds on their properties. What can be done to encourage other departments to deal with this problem in concert because it is almost as though they have given up?

**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I fully appreciate the challenges the member is talking about. The premise of declared plants and animals is that the responsibility for control comes back to the landowner. If the landowner is a government agency, it carries a level of responsibility in that regard. Again, different levels of declaration are put on various pests. The member talked about a couple of pests that are endemic through a lot of our waterways, particularly blackberry. I am not familiar with the other one he talked about. They are certainly a challenge. Even my other agency, the Forest Products Commission, has had dealings with land under its control. I can only highlight the challenge. From a whole-of-government perspective there is certainly an interest in dealing with that. It crosses over with local government and landowners, which will typically criticise those around them as some of the sources of those infestations.

[8.20 pm]

**Mr M.J. COWPER:** There is one particular case involving one of my orchardists in Dwellingup whose property backs onto the state forest. A waterway runs through his property, and he has cleared all the blackberries from that waterway, but it is almost an annual occurrence now because on the other side of the fence, which is the responsibility of DEC for all intents and purposes, there is huge devastation. In the past he has sprayed on that land, which is not his. That raises implications such as insurance issues and what have you, so he is not inclined to do it. It is also a very expensive exercise. I would like to see explored, perhaps through some sort of memorandum of understanding, an arrangement whereby landowners can perhaps get access to go on land that directly affects their land, given they are downstream, so they can use some relevant means of dealing with blackberry infestation and get rid of it. In essence, they are fighting a losing battle. I have spent an enormous amount of time dealing with not only DEC but also local government and the Department of Agriculture and Food in Waroona. I do not see much movement in that area.

**Extract from *Hansard***

[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 2 June 2010]

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Mr Chris Tallentire; Mr Terry Redman; Mr Murray Cowper

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**Mr D.T. REDMAN:** I get asked questions reasonably regularly, and I certainly had a lot as a backbencher in my electorate, around similar issues with people being concerned about particular pests that are declared. Of course, they have formal responsibility but are concerned about others who may not take that responsibility seriously. I have no easy answers other than to say I believe that it is in the interests of everyone to work in a collective way. If we deal with the issue in one area and infestations come from outside that, we are at a loss to get an outcome over time. I do not have an easy answer for the member other than to say it is a challenge.

**The appropriation was recommended.**