

Division 43: Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions — Services 1 to 10, Environment; Climate Action, \$472 037 000 —

Mr D.A.E. Scaife, Chair.

Ms A. Sanderson, Minister for Environment; Climate Action.

Mr M. Webb, Director General.

Mr P. Dans, Deputy Director General.

Mrs A. Klenke, Chief Finance Officer.

Dr F. Stanley, Executive Director, Conservation and Ecosystem Management.

Mr J. Foster, Executive Director, Regional and Fire Management Services.

Dr M. Byrne, Executive Director, Biodiversity and Conservation Science.

Ms W. Attenborough, Executive Director, Zoological Parks Authority.

Mr A. Barrett, Executive Director, Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority.

Mr C. Barnes, Senior Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. It is the intention of the chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee, rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information she agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 1 October 2021. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice through the online questions system.

The member for Moore.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to spending changes on page 705 and under the new initiatives is the line item "Fitzroy River National Park (Stage One)—Implementation of Indigenous Land Use Agreements". I would like the minister to outline to me what that expenditure will achieve. In shoring up those Indigenous land use agreements, will there be an effect on pastoralists or those wishing to undertake any irrigation in the Fitzroy area?

Ms A. SANDERSON: Fitzroy River National Park forms part of the Plan for Our Parks initiative, and it is around 236 000 hectares along the Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers. The implementation of joint management arrangements over the new park has now commenced, which is a great outcome along the Fitzroy and Margaret Rivers. That includes the delivery of 7.5 FTE Aboriginal ranger positions for the Gooniyandi and Bunuba people. Additional ongoing recurrent funding of \$1.896 million per annum will provide training and employment opportunities for Aboriginal rangers, joint management support positions and capacity to facilitate effective on-ground operations, achieving conservation outcomes in the park as well as social and economic aspirations of traditional owners. In terms of irrigation, the Fitzroy River plan is still out for consultation and is still in development.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Does the minister mean the consultation is about the park's effect upon it or is it not affected by the park?

Ms A. SANDERSON: There will be no effect.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I refer to note 3 under "Explanation of Significant Movements" on page 709, which states —
The 2014–2023 Forest Management Plan (the Plan) commenced on 1 January 2014.

My understanding is that it will end in 2023. Is that right, minister?

Ms A. SANDERSON: That is correct. The current forest management plan will end at the end of 2023.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can the minister please explain why the FMP will end in 2023 and what consultation the minister or her department had with the native timber industry?

Ms A. SANDERSON: As the member is aware, the FMP is a statutory instrument and is determined in 10-year terms. It was determined that it would end at the end of 2023 as per the plan. It was not a decision of government to end it at 2023; they are 10-year plans that are set in place. The last plan, which was put in place in 2014, will end in 2023. The next plan will end 10 years after that. They are 10-year plans. That has prompted the policy decision from the government. A critical component of the development of that plan is setting the policy direction for it and then the department can diligently go about the consultation around the development of the 10-year plan.

The government took a policy decision to end native logging in our south west forests to start the process of the next FMP. I met with people in the timber industry prior to that announcement, but, essentially, they are stakeholders of the Minister for Forestry and he has engaged extensively with that industry.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The minister is saying that she or her department will undertake consultation about the next step for the FMP, which will last 10 years. Is the minister saying that there will still be logging of native forests under an FMP once struck after 2023?

Ms A. SANDERSON: No; I did not say that. I said that the current plan will end at 2023. The department will engage in consultation. It will be for around 12 months and be very thorough. The department will consult with industry, stakeholders, the broader community and traditional owners. I think a new and emerging aspect of the new FMP is the south west native title settlement and the engagement and ownership, if you like, of those native title groups or the aspirations they have around the forest and economic development. The policy decision is clear: there will be no commercial logging of native forests in the next forest management plan. The softwood estate is being expanded. The timber industry is being restructured to be on a more sustainable footing, with a softwood estate. Ecological management of the forests—thinning—will continue to support the forests in a drying climate. Overpopulation of replanted forests has made it very difficult for sufficient growth in some areas, so ecological thinning will occur. But there will not be native clearing, if you like, for commercial native logging purposes.

[9.40 pm]

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The next FMP will have thinning in it, but what will happen in terms of thinning? Will native trees that are part of thinning be sold commercially? Is that part of the consultation?

Ms A. SANDERSON: Yes, all those outcomes are yet to be determined—as to what it will yield and whether anything is even useful. If it is required to be done, we want there to be a use for it. There will still be some requirement for firewood, for example, and artisan furniture makers will still require access to timber, but it certainly will not be commercial logging as we see it now.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can the minister explain native forests? We often hear about old-growth forests and how we do not log any old-growth forest in this state; is that correct, minister?

Ms A. SANDERSON: That is correct.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Native timber in the timber industry under the current FMP is native timber, but is it regrowth timber that has been put there over time? I would like an explanation. We hear a lot about native forests. I have discussions with a lot of my friends about how native timber is harvested and replanted.

Ms A. SANDERSON: Chair, I will defer, but first I will say that the native forests in the south west consist of karri, wandoo and jarrah. Those three species together are unique. That unique biodiversity makes our south west forests internationally important. A young tree can be 60 years old. There are mixed coupes of karri. Two-tier karri has old growth and younger growth when it has been selectively logged. That does not meet the old-growth definition, if you like, which is strict and firm, but there are definitely old-growth trees there, and our aim is to protect those old-growth trees. Although under the strict definition we do not log old-growth forest, logging of individual old-growth trees occurs, and that is what we will bring to an end. I defer to the director general. It seems that I have covered it.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: To be clear, let us separate jarrah, marri and karri.

Ms A. SANDERSON: Wandoo.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Yes, and wandoo. I am trying to remember all these types of woods. When people think of native woods, they think of coupes of jarrah that have not been touched before. There is confusion when we talk about old-growth forests. I want clarification that jarrah in those coupes is regrowth; they have nothing to do with native or untouched vegetation, if that makes sense. Is jarrah untouched vegetation? People may believe that when people come in and clear these coupes, it is native vegetation that has never been touched before. I just want clarity on that.

Ms A. SANDERSON: No. The simple answer is that it has probably been felled before.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is the confusion out there when people hear about these policies. It is a policy about timber that has been logged before. I just wanted to make that point. Perhaps karri trees are a little different because they

take longer to grow, but the majority of them had been put there because they start to die—perhaps someone adjacent to the minister can confirm this—after 90 years. When you are out in those forests, you can hear them fall over and crack because they start to die after 90 years.

Ms A. SANDERSON: It is correct to say that the majority of jarrah could well have been used or felled before. But the timber industry in this state is 120 years old, if not older, so a number of trees that have been replanted are significantly old trees. They are habitat. They form an important part of our biodiversity. They support other commercial operations now. There is that argument, but it is not one that I accept, because whether a tree is 40 years old or 100 years old, it is important for its ecological and habitat values and as a carbon sink.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I understand that the member for North West Central was a parliamentary secretary to the minister responsible for the Forest Products Commission, so he has some idea of the issues. I have made representations in the past to government on behalf of people on private land who want to engage in forestry and who get caught up in native vegetation clearance laws. There seems to be a misunderstanding that all vegetation that is native is in its natural state even when it has been interfered with, cleared and too many stems grow on a hectare. There would need to be a lot fewer stems to rebalance a forest to the condition it was in 300 years ago. I have made that argument on behalf of private landholders who needed to engage in forestry. It might have been better at this point to direct the policy to end all native logging into a direction that would have wound down native logging over a period of time, to allow time to work through some of the issues and, as the minister said, to clear some areas and thin them out so the forest could be managed to get it back to equilibrium. Maybe that should be done by a forestry industry that still has some legs and while there are still some foresters and some way of using timber.

I wonder whether it is not time to take a breath and to make sure that we keep our skills base to undertake the management of the forest. I note that the implementation of this year's forest management plan includes a target of 141 persons, which is up from 126 full-time equivalents. The task of managing the forest will need people to be employed. Should we not keep a degree of communication and industry participation in the commerciality of the forest long enough to bring it back to the state that the government wants it to be in?

Ms A. SANDERSON: The forestry industry under this government will thrive and grow. A restructure is being undertaken. We are growing jobs in the forestry industry and we will not lose those skills. We are growing those skills by investing \$350 million in the softwood plantation. That will grow the industry. We are shifting the industry onto a more sustainable footing. I am very comfortable with our policy position. It is absolutely the right position for the state. It is the right position for the industry. It is going to be painful for a number of operators in the native timber industry, but there will be transition. Those skills will not be lost. The forests will require ecological thinning, and funding will be provided to ensure their ongoing management. We are very cognisant that we cannot say that it cannot be logged and then walk away.

[9.50 pm]

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Bushfire management is one.

Ms A. SANDERSON: Bushfire management, pest control and thinning will all be worked through under the forest management plan. That is the time to take a breath, as the member put it. That is when we can take a breath and do the consultation. The government's job is to make decisions. We made a clear policy decision, and it is absolutely the right decision for the future of the state and for the forest industry. Doing anything else would be dishonest to that industry and the timber mills that have been trying to get out of that industry for years. The timber mills are suffering and struggling because the trees are not growing as they should and the mills cannot get the yield they need to meet their contracts.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The softwood plantation strategy will cost \$350 million. I know about the issues with the softwood contracts and that the government cannot fill those contracts because of the impact of force majeure events and so forth. In addition, softwood plantations have clearly had an impact on water levels. It takes 25 years before a plantation can be harvested. Where will the softwood plantation be located? That was the issue when we were in government. We could not find anywhere to plant it. Given that the black cockatoo is an endangered species and the issues with the water supply around the Gngangara mound, the government is very limited in where softwood plantations can be grown. Does the government have a strategy for taking farmland or putting the softwood plantation in the middle of the city or somewhere up north? Has the government identified land that is suitable for a softwood plantation?

The CHAIR: If the minister wants to indulge the member, that is fine, but I have a question in my mind of whether the question is about the implementation of the softwood management investment, which is perhaps the purview of the Minister for Forestry. However, it is a matter for the minister whether she wants to respond.

Ms A. SANDERSON: It is a matter for the Forest Products Commission to determine where to purchase the land for the plantation, if required.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The reason that I ask that question of the Minister for Environment is that, ultimately, she is the minister who will approve where these softwood estates will go. Surely, in developing the strategy to change the direction of the timber industry and by announcing the \$350 million package, which the minister supports, the government has some idea of where the softwood will actually be planted.

Ms A. SANDERSON: The Forest Products Commission will work with the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and private landholders to determine the best possible locations. The member is correct that the water requirements are challenging, but this could also add enormous value to agricultural land. The details about that need to be asked of the Minister for Forestry.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Going back to when we were in government, we spoke to private landowners who potentially would take up a contract. I think the minister said that 11 000 hectares of land was potentially available in the private sector to plant the timber. That falls extremely short of trying to fulfil the existing contracts that are in place, let alone develop a growing industry. Surely, the government has some idea of the number of hectares that will be required. Will that \$350 million provide the community with 60 000 hectares, 100 000 hectares or 200 000 hectares for a softwood plantation? Surely, the government has a figure in mind of the number of hectares that are required. The Minister for Forestry would not have come up with this idea without consulting with the Minister for Environment.

Ms A. SANDERSON: That is a matter for the Forest Products Commission.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: How can the government promote a policy when it has no idea of the number of hectares that are needed to fulfil the contracts of the softwood industry and also grow the industry, as the minister has said, and convert the native industry to the softwood industry? Surely, the government has a figure in mind of the number of hectares that will be needed to diversify—if that is the right word—the industry and enhance the softwood plantation industry.

Ms A. SANDERSON: Those figures exist, but the member is asking the wrong minister.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I thought an announcement was made at the time of the number of hectares.

Ms A. SANDERSON: The figure was around 33 000 hectares at the time, but the member is asking very specific details about where the plantations will go.

Mr R.S. LOVE: As a final question on this, the implementation of the forest management plan has some cost implications for the budget that I think go beyond that which exist under the current plan. How did the government settle on the final figure in the forward estimates when it has no idea what the implementation of the new plan will cost? It would be a good thing to consider at the moment, because I would have thought there would be a cost to the change in the process.

Ms A. SANDERSON: The figure of \$4.2 million is in the budget to undertake the forest management plan. We will probably seek to bring some of that forward in the midyear review so that we can get cracking. That will then determine the cost in the forward estimates for what is required. There is an acknowledgement in cabinet that ongoing funding will be required to manage the forests.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a new question. Under the heading “Funded By” in the table on page 719 is the line item “Drawdowns from the Holding Account”. That is an explanation of where certain funds are sourced. What is in the holding account? Does that account hold offsets from the clearing impost? What is the holding account?

Ms A. SANDERSON: I will defer to Amanda Klenke.

Mrs A. Klenke: The holding account is a common account that all government agencies have. Depreciation and the like go into that account and it can be drawn on. It is nothing to do with an offset account.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I happily thought that I had found the account where the magic pudding—the environmental offset program—was located. Where are the moneys from that program held?

Ms A. SANDERSON: Offsets in part V are managed through the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Are they not held by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions?

Ms A. SANDERSON: No.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Does the Minister for Environment go to the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation when she has identified a parcel of land for the purposes of land acquisition for conservation? Is that the process? The minister said previously that DBCA negotiated the purchase of the land.

Ms A. SANDERSON: The member is referring to two separate things. There are offset accounts under part V, which is managed by DWER. When land is identified to be purchased, such as a former pastoral lease that is to be brought into the crown estate, that is done by DBCA, but that is not an offset account.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Where does the money come from? The land is bought for a reason.

Ms A. SANDERSON: In the interests of giving the correct answer, I will defer to Ms Klenke.

Mrs A. Klenke: Thank you for the question. We have restricted cash, so if we get funding for a specific offset, that is accounted for through our restricted cash.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you. I have one last question, because I think we are about ready to go. I refer to the government initiatives on page 705. The third paragraph is about the Streamline WA reform program. The last sentence says —

The funding will ensure that the Department manages the sustained upswing in private sector projects and investment by the Government in major capital projects, to ensure timely and efficient approvals.

What part does DBCA play in making such approvals?

Ms A. SANDERSON: It provides expert advice on biodiversity to the Environmental Protection Authority services and the EPA board.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Does it not actually make a decision?

Ms A. SANDERSON: It is not part of the approvals process in that sense. It is not a decision-maker, but it provides important, expert advice. It is obviously a significant part of that process and it is limited in number, so we needed to make sure that we provided it with the necessary funds and resources to enable it to continue to do that work at an increased rate.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Do I have time for one last question?

The CHAIR: If the member is very, very quick.

Mr R.S. LOVE: On the same page, there are two joint management proposals for the Badimia conservation reserves and Thundelarra Conservation Park, and also a reference to the proposed Buccaneer Archipelago marine park, which will receive a substantial amount of money for the implementation of the Indigenous land use agreements, or the joint management agreements. In each of the parks that have a joint management undertaking, will there be a substantial cost to the department in initiating and managing that situation going forward?

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, that was not quick enough, member for Moore.

The appropriation was recommended.

Committee adjourned at 10.00 pm
