

Division 39: Water and Environmental Regulation, Services 1 to 3, Water, \$94 511 000 —

Mr R.S. Love, Chair.

Mr D.J. Kelly, Minister for Water.

Mr M. Rowe, Director General.

Mr W. Millen, Chief Finance Officer.

Ms S. McEvoy, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Dr N. Goyal, Executive Director, Science and Planning.

Mr P. Brown, Executive Director, Regional Delivery.

Mr G. Gilbert, Executive Director, Corporate Services.

Ms N. Arrowsmith, Chief of Staff, Minister for Water.

Mrs P. Pedelty, 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 he 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 Friday, 31 May 2019. 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.

I give the call to the member for Cottesloe.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Minister, I refer to page 571, budget paper No 2, volume 2, point 10. At a public meeting on 5 May the Minister for Agriculture and Food, along with the failed federal Labor candidate for Pearce, promised \$700 000 of state funds for an investigation into improving water supplies for the north Wanneroo agricultural precinct. When I was looking through the budget—this is an open question—I could not see that money listed anywhere. Can the minister tell me where that money is listed within the budget?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am very pleased that the member asked me that question. The provision of water for that area of Wanneroo has a long history. The member will recall or should know that the previous government advised growers in that area that they would face a 25 per cent cut in their water allocation. A 25 per cent cut for those growers was a very big deal. If we go back and look at *Hansard*; that was what they were told. When we came into government, the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation was still working hard on this issue, and we encouraged it to do so. Now, because of the hard work done by the department, it looks as though a 10 per cent cut is all that is required. If the member's government had been re-elected, by now those growers would be facing a 25 per cent cut. Because of the work that we have done, all that is potentially happening is a 10 per cent reduction.

The question is: are there any other potential water sources to supplement the growers in that area? I will say two things. Federal Labor committed I think \$700 000, or \$750 000, or \$500 000—the member knows more about it than I do. That was a commitment from federal Labor to explore the use of recycled water for those growers. That was a federal Labor commitment. We all know the election result, so that commitment from the federal opposition falls away, unless, of course, the new Liberal government will actually provide some financial assistance. The member would be well aware that the federal Liberal–National government has squandered millions of dollars on the east coast supporting or propping up growers in the Murray–Darling Basin. It has given hundreds of millions of dollars. Barnaby Joyce gave away money for water as fast as he could. Very little money has come to WA. Before the election, we wrote to the federal Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources and said, “You give all this money to people on the east coast.” This is all necessitated by climate change. If the groundwater is not there because of a decline in groundwater, we have to do something and adjust the allocations. We have asked for financial assistance and the Minister for Agriculture and Water Resources, David Littleproud, wrote back and gave us no joy that there would be any money from the federal Liberal–National government to support those growers. The member knows the election result. I suggest that if he is concerned about those growers, he asks that WA gets at least some assistance

in the same way that his federal counterparts have been throwing away money to growers on the east coast. I do not understand why the previous Liberal–National government in the state never asked for money to deal with this issue.

[9.30 pm]

Dr D.J. HONEY: This is a pretty direct question. The minister’s colleague the Minister for Agriculture and Food, alongside the failed Labor candidate for Pearce, indicated that the minister and his government had already committed \$700 000 to a study for additional water supplies. The failed Labor candidate for Pearce was committing another \$500 000 —

Ms J.J. SHAW: Is that really necessary? How petty and pathetic.

The CHAIR: Member for Swan Hills, I call you.

Mr D.J. KELLY: How did “Big” Nick go?

Mr V.A. CATANIA: How did “Big” Bill go?

Dr D.J. HONEY: The failed Labor candidate for Pearce promised —

Mr D.J. KELLY: “Big” Nick—big dud.

Dr D.J. HONEY: It is a pretty straightforward question that the minister has not answered.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Sorry, member for Cottesloe.

Dr D.J. HONEY: The Labor candidate promised another \$500 000. The Minister for Agriculture and Food said the government had already committed \$700 000. This is not a trick question. I could not find it in the budget and I am trying to find it in the budget because it is an important issue for the people in that area.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Member for Cottesloe, I suspect that the Minister for Agriculture and Food was referring to money that might be available through the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development budget. I am not the minister and this is not the place to give those details, but I will give the member the heads-up that that might be where the money might be available from, if those comments were made. I was not at the meeting, and, incidentally, the Liberal member for Pearce, Christian Porter, did not bother to show up at that meeting. If the member has questions about what the state Minister for Agriculture and Food said at that meeting, he really needs to address that to her in other parts of the estimates hearings.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Thank you. I will check the Department of Agriculture and Food budget. Minister, what other work is the department doing to identify alternative water sources for the north Wanneroo vegetable growers?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Again, I am really pleased the member has asked that question because he has been making some quite ill-informed comments about the possibilities in that area. I have seen his tweets saying that we are essentially releasing high-quality recycled water into the ocean and that we should be using that directly for growers or pumping it into aquifers for later use by growers. Both those statements show a lack of understanding. At a number of wastewater treatment plants we discharge into the ocean, but that is treated wastewater. That water is not of a quality that we could make it available in that form to growers. It simply would not meet health standards. We could not pump it straight into the aquifers to be taken out by growers, as the member has suggested. That would be pollution because, again, it is not of a quality that could be used by a grower and we drink the groundwater. We would be pumping wastewater into the aquifers and polluting our groundwater.

To get that water to a usable quality, we have to treat it again. The member should be aware that the groundwater replenishment program at Craigie involves filtration and reverse osmosis to get it to drinking water quality. It is then pumped into the aquifer. We have spent more than \$100 million on getting that water to a quality that we can pump it into the aquifer without polluting the groundwater. I think the member said in the local paper that we are wasting all this high-quality water and he has tweeted about it. It is completely —

Dr D.J. HONEY: Point of order. Can I get clarification? I have asked a very simple question of the minister and I am getting an enormous amount of hyperbole, which is taking up valuable time.

The CHAIR: Members, there is no point of order. Minister, please keep your answers as short as possible.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Sure. The member asked me what work we have done on alternative water sources.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What is the government doing?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I can tell the member that we have looked at the two options he has suggested—taking recycled wastewater and giving it straight to growers, and pumping that water into aquifers for growers to use at a later date—and both would be grossly irresponsible. They could not possibly happen. We could not get a licence to do that. It would be pollution on a grand scale. We are looking at what it would cost to treat wastewater from, say, Alkimos to get it to a standard at which that it could be used by growers. That work is preliminary. It would come at a cost. It would be at a significantly higher cost than what many of the growers would expect to pay. That project using recycled and treated water from Alkimos, for example, would be viable if the federal government were to

kick in the funding for it, the same way that it has done elsewhere—for example, in the Murray–Darling Basin. There are alternatives, but they all come at a cost.

[Interruption from the gallery.]

Mr D.J. KELLY: With the greatest respect, the member should give up on those grossly irresponsible proposals and work with his federal and Nationals colleagues to get us some of that water money that they spend in the Murray–Darling Basin and get it spent here in WA.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I suggest that the minister consults his department and experts in the area to understand it. If there is gross pollution from treated wastewater going into the ground, is the minister aware that secondary treated wastewater is being put into the ground just next to the Kwinana wastewater treatment plant and from the Gordon Road wastewater treatment plant in Mandurah? Is the minister saying that that is causing gross pollution of the groundwater in the Kwinana and Mandurah areas?

Mr D.J. KELLY: No. What the member was suggesting in Wanneroo —

Dr D.J. HONEY: They are straightforward questions.

Mr D.J. KELLY: No, I am not. Those projects all operate under licence, under strict —

Dr D.J. HONEY: It is secondary treated wastewater.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I saw in the member's tweet that he is suggesting that in Wanneroo we pump that treated wastewater into the aquifer and allow growers to pump it out.

Dr D.J. HONEY: It is exactly what is happening at Gordon Road and Kwinana.

Mr D.J. KELLY: He wants us to then allow them to pump it out. We use those aquifers for drinking water. I ask that the member do a bit more research before he starts making grandiose claims that there is all this water out there that can simply be diverted. The member has only been in the Parliament for two years.

[9.40 pm]

Ms L. METTAM: Three years.

Mr D.J. KELLY: It feels like two years. If the solution was that simple, the previous government had eight and a half years to implement it, and it never did.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I refer to the details of controlled grants and subsidies table on page 581 of budget paper No 2. Given the proven popularity of the uptake of the former farm water rebate and pastoral water grant scheme, will the minister use some of the expense savings to reinstate these programs?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I cannot find it; it is not on the grants table. Which line item is it? I have page 581.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I am looking at the details of controlled grants and subsidies. I am saying that the government has removed the farm water rebate and pastoral water grants scheme from that table, and I am asking whether the minister will reinstate it.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I will give the member the latitude. There were two elements of what we did for farmers. There was a program under which we gave them up to \$750 for farms to do an audit to identify what the farmers could do to make their farms more water resilient. That program has probably been in place for 20 years. It paid \$500 for the first visit, and \$250 for the second visit, to get an audit done. Then, an additional grant could be applied for to get that work done. We put these things in place to encourage people to be water wise on their farms, if you like—to get the message out. It is a subsidy that was provided by the government to get the message out to farmers that they need to make their farms water resilient. With most of those programs, whether they be subsidies for solar panels or the like, once the message is well and truly out there the subsidy is no longer necessary. The government took the view that that program has been there for a very long time. Farmers are well aware that it is their business to secure the water on their property, so the question is whether there is a need for the government to continue to subsidise private businesses, providing a business input that is well understood. We took the view that after 20 years that message had well and truly got out there.

We still wanted to encourage people to do it, so we actually increased the subsidy for the audit from a maximum of \$750 to \$1 000. If farmers wanted to find out the best practice to make their farm drought resilient they could get an audit, and they would receive more than they did before, up to \$1 000. I asked today how many of those audits had been taken up in the last 12 months. We used to do about 200 a year, but so far there have been just five this financial year. I am a bit surprised that we are still offering farmers \$1 000 to get the water audit done on their property, and the take-up has been extraordinarily low. I suspect that the message is out there, and farmers know that they need to be taking responsibility for water resilience on their own farms, as any business would. The government made a decision that after 20 years the need to continually subsidise this no longer existed. It was no longer necessary to provide a subsidy to get the message out; it was well and truly out there.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Thursday, 23 May 2019]

p446c-449a

Chair; Dr David Honey; Mr Dave Kelly; Ms Jessica Shaw; Mr Vincent Catania; Ms Libby Mettam

Ms L. METTAM: I refer to service 1, “Water Information and Advice”, on page 574 of budget paper No 2. The first paragraph reads, in part —

... the provision of data and information on the quantity, quality, location of and demand for water across the State. The information also underpins policy advice for consideration by Government and supports other government agencies and stakeholders in their planning for future economic growth and urban and rural development.

Can the minister confirm that it is the role of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation to coordinate the identification of sites in Western Australia that might be contaminated by firefighting foam?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Contaminated sites come under the environment portfolio, under the contaminated sites legislation. It is not an issue for this part of estimates.

Ms L. METTAM: So it does not come under the minister’s portfolio?

Mr D.J. KELLY: It is not my portfolio responsibility; it is a matter for the Minister for Environment.

Ms L. METTAM: In estimates this evening, the Minister for Emergency Services indicated that issues such as that came under the Minister for Water’s portfolio. Is that not the case?

Mr D.J. KELLY: I do not know what the Minister for Emergency Services said.

The appropriation was recommended.