

Division 15: Primary Industries and Regional Development —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr D.T. Punch, Minister for Regional Development.

Ms H. Brayford, Director General.

Mr P. Isaachsen, Deputy Director General, Industry and Economic Development.

Ms M. Carbon, Deputy Director General, Sustainability and Biosecurity.

Mr P. Gregson, Manager, Funds Management.

Ms C. McConnell, Deputy Director General, Primary Industries Development.

Ms L. Williamson, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr B. Mezzatesta, Executive Director, Operations and Compliance.

Ms M. Teede, Chief Executive Officer, South West Development Commission.

Mr C. Berger, Chief Executive Officer, Kimberley Development Commission.

Mr J. Gardner, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Great Southern Development Commission.

Mr C. Syers, Principal Fisheries Management Officer.

Mr P. Spalding, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Mid West Development Commission.

Mr R. Cossart, Chief Executive Officer, Wheatbelt Development Commission.

Mr T. Palmer, Chief of Staff, Minister for Regional Development.

Mr A. Buck, Senior Policy Adviser.

Mr G. Grounds, Senior Policy Adviser.

Mr A. Skinner, Senior Policy Adviser.

[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.

I call the member for Roe.

[4.20 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 213 of budget paper No 2 and “Help Grain Growers to Better Manage Risk”. There is an allocation of \$300 000 in the previous budget and \$100 000 in the next two budgets. Obviously, the initiative recognises risk. What has it delivered to growers, given seasonal conditions and market volatility?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It has upgraded the 3G-enabled weather stations ahead of Telstra’s planned shutdown of the 3G mobile cellular network. It also commenced a 4G upgrade in July 2023 and successfully completed that upgrade in January 2024. It is essentially linked to improving access to live weather data and providing grain growers with the ability to make better management decisions to improve productivity, efficiency and profitability. It is based on the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development’s ownership and operation of a network of 191 automatic weather stations, of which 63 were identified as only 3G enabled.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I notice there is no funding in the furthest two out years. Will this program be over once we get past 2026?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes, the program will be completed.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Will there be any similar type of program for livestock owners?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: No, I am not advised of any proposals in relation to livestock at this point.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to the bottom of page 213, paragraph 4, and biosecurity threats. I was fortunate to have a briefing along with a couple of other members last week on the polyphagous shot-hole borer, which is actually very concerning. Firstly, we appreciate the opportunity of that briefing. I must admit, I learnt a lot. I learnt that this pest is a real threat to our tree canopy, especially in the metropolitan area at this stage. Is there any concern at this point that it may spread to regional areas as well?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I will refer to Ms Carbon to respond.

Ms M. Carbon: Thank you, minister. The polyphagous shot-hole borer has a very broad range of potential host trees; more than 500 species are potential hosts to date. That includes urban canopy and amenity trees, but also some native trees, and potentially some production trees, including avocado, for example. There certainly is the opportunity for this pest to spread beyond the Perth metro area into our regional areas. We are running an eradication response. Part of that eradication strategy is to contain it to the Perth metro area to allow us to eradicate it there.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Obviously, the concern is that, as I understand it, one type of tree is the major host—I cannot quite remember the word for it—and I understand that that tree is located in the likes of Hyde Park, Kings Park, Perth Zoo et cetera. There are then other lower ranked species that can also host the shot-hole borer. What percentage of the tree canopy in the Perth urban area could potentially be lost? Obviously, to eradicate the pest, we need to take the tree right out.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Thank you. I will refer to Ms Carbon again.

Ms M. Carbon: Thank you. We do not have a complete picture of the proportion of the urban canopy that could be impacted at this time, and that is largely because we are still determining what some of the hosts may be. When pests move into a new environment, as this one has done, they tend to find new hosts to infest, and we are certainly finding that new trees that have not been infested elsewhere in the world are being infested here. That is an ongoing piece of work. Work has been done nationally to look at the likely distribution of the pest; that is quite broad across the southern half of Australia, but that is an ongoing piece of work for us.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: What is the budget allocation for this? I understand that obviously it is developing as we go along. Is there a budget allocation?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I would like to refer that to Ms Carbon as well as it is related to a national program.

Ms M. Carbon: Thank you, minister. Western Australia is currently delivering a three-year national response plan for polyphagous shot-hole borer. The approved budget for that three-year program is \$41.29 million. That cost is shared across all Australian governments, so commonwealth, state and territories.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I note that the member for Cottesloe has just come in; he was also at the briefing on the shot-hole borer. Is it possible for the minister to outline for the record those nine or 10 different species that were mentioned in that presentation that are the most susceptible, I suppose we could call it, to the shot-hole borer?

Ms M. Carbon: I can certainly try. I am not sure I will get all 10 correct. The main amplifier host, so the host in which the polyphagous shot-hole borer really increases in numbers, is the box elder maple. We are managing that risk by removing any box elder maple with any level of infestation, as well as any box elder maples that are not infested but are within a certain proximity to infested trees. Other trees that are preferred reproductive hosts include coral trees, Moreton Bay and Port Jackson figs and London plane trees.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the minister enlighten us on the melaleuca variety as well? I know there has been an issue in the Lake Claremont area, which was also quite concerning, and I believe there were some delays there. Is that species—paperbark trees and the like—also quite susceptible?

[4.30 pm]

Ms M. Carbon: We have infestations in melaleuca, or paperbark, trees. We are still quite early in understanding what that means for the species and how susceptible the species is. To date, we are seeing that infestations in native trees like paperbarks are occurring where we have heavily infested exotic host trees. That could, of course, change and is something we are monitoring very closely.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Obviously, a large budget is spread over the commonwealth. As I said, I was quite shocked by the advertising campaign and the potential damage the infestation could do, and I congratulate the department on the proactive work it is doing. I wonder what part of the budget will be used for advertising, or is there a projection for advertising to increase awareness in the general population of Perth and beyond?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I will defer to Dr Carbon.

Ms M. Carbon: An element for the response plan in the budget is for communications and engagement. A public awareness campaign is already underway, and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development is engaging very closely with local government, community stakeholders, arborists, and the nursery and garden

industry, for example, to help extend that messaging. The overall budget, including the communications and engagement budget, is determined nationally. That is something that we revisit regularly. We will be revisiting that probably in mid-2024 to determine whether we think the strategy and the budget are adequate to achieve eradication.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am certainly very grateful for the briefing. Dr Carbon and her colleagues gave us a very clear picture of that. I will honestly say that I was horrified by the extent of the spread of the polyphagous shot-hole borer. It was explained to us that it is essentially over the whole metropolitan area now. I will put this in two parts. I was mightily impressed by the officers who gave the presentation and their dedication to this task. I am not quoting them in any sense whatsoever, but I gained the very clear impression that that area could do with a far greater effort. From what I saw in that presentation, I find it hard to believe that we will not see the spread of the polyphagous shot-hole borer outside the metropolitan area and into the agricultural regions. I wonder whether the minister believes that the investment in this area is sufficient. From what I saw, we have seen a dramatic and increasing spread of the insect, despite the outstanding efforts of the officers who are involved in dealing with it. Basically, they just seem to be outnumbered by the enemy. Perhaps the minister could comment on the resources put into it, please.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: On behalf of the staff, I appreciate the member's recognition of the incredibly hard work the team does. I will refer to Dr Carbon, who is across these issues, to detail any spending changes in relation to it.

Ms M. Carbon: It is certainly the case that there is a risk of this pest spreading beyond its current range and moving into the agricultural areas. As I said, the decision-making on funding for any national biosecurity response is made nationally, across all Australian state and territory governments, as well as with any industry cost-sharing partners. In the instance of the polyphagous shot-hole borer, there are no industry cost-sharing partners, so it is fully government funded. When we determine response plans and review them nationally, the first question we look at is: is it actually feasible to eradicate the pest? That is not a funding question; that is a biology question. Obviously, the response plan and budget for polyphagous shot-hole borer was set two years ago and was based on the data that we had at the time for the Western Australian infestation. They are now being revisited with the data we have to date. Currently, we have a national group of technical experts who are looking at whether it is technically feasible to eradicate it. Once that determination is made, we can consider the budget for achieving it and determine whether the budget needs to be increased for the eradication to be successful.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: In addition to those comments, I would add that the Cook government has strengthened the state's vital biosecurity system with \$22.47 million, and that will particularly focus on incident emergency responses, of which the polyphagous shot-hole borer is a part. There is a strengthening of the entire system but, clearly, there is a focus on the shot-hole borer.

Dr D.J. HONEY: As we learned in the briefing, although there is an Australian response, this is actually a Western Australian problem. As the former member discussed, if it looks as though this pest can infest melaleucas, the great majority of Western Australians would be utterly horrified to think that we could potentially see a severe degradation of our melaleuca trees across the state, which I suspect would be inevitable if it spreads. I recognise that that has to be determined, but it struck me that this budget needs to go up by an order of magnitude. I know that sounds dramatic, but I think most Western Australians would support that if they thought this was a threat to native trees. Melaleucas, in particular, are very important to Aboriginal people, obviously, but also, I think, to non-Aboriginal people alike. They are an iconic tree species in Western Australia.

What is the timeline for the reassessment of the need? I am not trying to be too dramatic, but it strikes me that as every day goes by, the chances of containing this pest diminish.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: There will be a reassessment at the national level within the next few months. It is planned for midyear, and I do not think the urgency is lost on any stakeholder.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Thank you, minister.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I will talk further on biosecurity but perhaps a little bit differently. I note service area 6 "Agricultural and Fisheries Biosecurity and Integrity". I want to ask a question about the current practice of support for regional biosecurity groups throughout the state. As the minister knows, landowners are levied if the Minister for Agriculture and Food considers there is support for such a levy, and then funding is provided to biosecurity groups by the department. I have been trying to find where that might be in the budget documents. I wonder whether the minister could point me to where the support for those groups is located.

[4.40 pm]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is located on page 212 under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007.

Mr R.S. LOVE: What amount is contributed to it?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: In 2024–25, it is \$3.475 million.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Is this the money under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That is the recognised biosecurity group funding. There has been some discussion about changes to the funding mechanism, who may have to pay the levy and to whom the funding might be given. Specifically, I believe that local governments have been lobbying to be able to have a levy in their local government area and use the corresponding government co-contribution to work on their own issues. I want to get an understanding of what the department's policy is going forward, as it stands at the moment.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I will refer that to Dr Carbon.

Ms M. Carbon: Under the Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act, any operational area in the state can be rated. That rating is matched by the state government. Under the act, that money can go to a recognised biosecurity group, which is any community-based organisation that meets certain requirements and is recognised by the minister as undertaking biosecurity activity to support their local communities and industries to manage widespread and established pests or other pest and diseases. There is no limit on whether that could be another type of organisation.

The Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act has recently been reviewed by an independent panel and that review is currently being considered by government. Given that, the department is not currently supporting the development of any new recognised biosecurity groups while that work is in progress.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The response was that no more groups are to be formed. Will the minister give his assurance that the current groups will continue to be funded, as they have been in the past?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: We are not aware of any new groups at this point. It is part of the review and those groups that are funded would continue to be funded.

Dr D.J. HONEY: On page 212, at the bottom of the page under spending changes, it refers to the “Magnium—Magnesium Refinery”. Obviously this is under spending changes, but what funds are allocated to that across the budget and forward estimates, please?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: This is a zero-carbon magnesium refinery that can produce up to 120 000 tonnes of magnesium metals per annum. It is being considered for construction in Collie as part of our Collie Just Transition program. In the 2024–25 budget year, \$1.334 million is allocated to it.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Minister, I am actually going to see the pilot plant in Melbourne next week. I am very excited about this project. I was sceptical at the start, but I am very interested in it. Could the minister explain what that funding is being allocated for, please?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Sorry, could the member repeat that? I got distracted.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Could the minister indicate what that additional funding is for? To avoid duplication of questions, when does the government anticipate a final investment decision for that project? I appreciate that it is not the minister's project.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: We are expecting that to be completed in 2024–25 when the business case, essentially, will be of a sufficient level to enable the Magnium Australia board to make the final investment decision.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 111 of budget paper No 3. The paragraph on the “Voluntary Fisheries Adjustment Scheme—West Coast Demersal Scalefish Resource” states an additional \$1.6 million has been allocated to the voluntary fisheries adjustment scheme, which is the buyback of entitlement. Is the minister actively seeking to buy back more commercial entitlement with that scheme? If so, what will be done with the entitlement that is bought back?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: That scheme has now closed. Its intent was to enable the continuation of the fisheries within the demersal scale fish area, initially. It was a transfer within commercial but quite a few people wanted to sell their contributions so we had an additional buyback. It was a total of 38.5 tonnes. To ensure viability of multiple fisheries, 18.5 tonnes was used to facilitate adjustments within the commercial fishery and 20 tonnes was in addition. Of that, 10 tonnes was temporarily allocated to the recreational sector and 10 tonnes was temporarily reallocated to the charter sector to support both of those sectors in what is a difficult period in managing the sustainability of those fish.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 111 and shark hazard mitigation. Over 2025–26 and 2027–28, \$17.3 million has been allocated. There is a little matter I wanted to ask about in that. Page 213 also outlines that there will be payments of \$5.656 million in 2025–26, \$5.761 million in 2026–27 and \$5.865 million in 2027–28. That is under spending changes. The ongoing works for the shark mitigation outlined elsewhere shows a different number. I am trying to work out how to reconcile those two numbers. I think it shows \$4 million a year in the existing scheme. Is that spending change in addition to allocations that already exist? Is there some sort of sharp increase in the total amount to be spent on shark mitigation?

[4.50 pm]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The state is operating a very comprehensive shark hazard mitigation strategy; in fact, it is so comprehensive that other states are looking to us and learning from the work we have done. Of course, it reflects a range of strategies to improve confidence and safety when entering our oceans. It includes things like the partnership we have with Surf Life Saving WA for helicopter patrols, beach patrols and drone patrols. It also includes support for personal shark deterrents and the use of technology. It includes support for shark barriers and the beach emergency number—BEN—signs framework that has been very, very effective in helping first responders to respond rapidly to injuries on the beach. There is a controlled grant that is essentially a grant for our helicopter patrols with Surf Life Saving WA and recurrent funding for the department for shark hazard mitigation. I will ask Mr Mezzatesta to give the member some more detail on that to provide him with the fullest answer possible.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Before he does, can I just point to what I was trying to get at so that he can perhaps provide an explanation in his answer? I refer to the line item on page 226, “Shark Hazard Mitigation Services”. Payments of approximately \$4.7 million run through the forward estimates. On page 222 there is a line item “Shark Notification and Response System Upgrade”, which has already had money spent on it and is budgeted for the coming year. On page 213, spending changes of a bit over \$5.5 million a year over the forward estimates are outlined. I want to get an understanding of how all that sits together and what the total amount is.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is a combination of grants, recurrent and capital funding, but I will ask Mr Mezzatesta to give the member the details.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I think the minister has summed it up pretty accurately, but to add to the answer, we are looking at three elements in the budget papers. One is the asset investment program, which is for capital works. That allocation refers to us building a new shark notification system. The system that we have been operating for more than 10 years needs to be replaced. That is a piece of capital works and it is independent of the other two items that were referenced.

The recurrent spending changes are on page 213 and include two elements. Firstly, they include the moneys that we, as an agency, pay to third parties such as to Surf Life Saving WA, deterrent rebates and payments to local governments to install beach enclosures. The difference between the controlled grants and subsidies number and the spending changes is the money that is used internally by the department to do things like white shark tagging and maintaining receivers up and down the coast.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you. The deterrent devices have been outlined in discussions. Is the government still offering those? Could the minister give me some idea what those devices are? What various things are covered by that rebate? How many people have taken up the offer of help to obtain a deterrent?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: They are still available. One is a personal deterrent device and the other is related to surfboards. I will ask Mr Mezzatesta to give the member the technical detail.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: There are effectively three devices that we currently provide rebates for. Two are for divers only, the RPELA and FREEDOM7 products. The third product fits to a surfboard and actually provides protection through the surfboard. I think the number of rebates claimed is just short of 10 000; I think it is about 9 500, currently.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 213 and the third paragraph under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, which states, in part —

Primary industries is Western Australia’s second largest export sector ... Investment in research and development underpins growth, production and profitability of the State’s primary industries.

Why is there nothing in this budget to support WA sheep farmers in light of the federal government’s decision to end the live sheep trade?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Member, we have made our position on the live sheep trade very clear to the commonwealth government. It is a commonwealth decision. The commonwealth has offered an industry support package. The Minister for Agriculture and Food has made it clear that, in her view, the commonwealth government should be doing more to support our farmers and she is actively working in that space. This is an evolving space, but the minister has made it clear that the commonwealth should accept responsibility for the impact of its decision on our farmers. We support our farmers entirely and we have made our position clear to the commonwealth.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Given that the Minister for Agriculture and Food was quoted as far back as April 2023 as having said that she knew the live export industry was going to end and that she could not do anything about what the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Senator Hon Murray Watt, wanted to do, was there no opportunity in this budget for the minister to allocate some further funding? I agree with the minister that the commonwealth funding package is totally unacceptable.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Firstly, member, we have a very, very active Minister for Agriculture and Food. The previous minister was equally active, investing—as the member knows—in expanding processing facilities to support the industry. The current minister has been overseas and the mutton sector in the UK, in particular, is a very significant

market. She has been out there, supporting our farmers, and making very clear the quality of product we have to offer from Western Australia. The minister is actively engaged in looking at new market opportunities to directly support our farmers. We did not get a cessation date from the commonwealth government until recently. We now have that date and, as I have indicated, the minister is not satisfied with the support package that has been offered by the federal government. She will be actively working to get a better outcome for our farmers.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I beg to differ on the previous minister's activities. Yes, she may have helped the processing sector but she was also actively engaged in closing down live exports. Be that as it may, the government made a submission to the panel tasked with shutting down that trade. Can the director general tell us from where the information was supplied? Does the minister think the information in the submission was based on the support package make-up for WA? Minister Watt basically said it was.

[5.00 pm]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Firstly, it is very sad that the member for Roe would be so critical of a minister who has worked very hard for this state, and at the federal level, over many, many years, who is not here to defend herself. I make that comment. The member for Roe took the opportunity to make a throwaway comment, and I totally reject it. However, I respect the importance of getting the detail on this issue. I will ask Ms McConnell to provide additional detail.

Ms C. McConnell: The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development has a range of staff working in sheep, economics and bioeconomic modelling. We have drawn on the experience of our staff. We are talking with the sheep industry to develop the modelling that was part of that submission. Our submission was put in well before the response of the federal government or the panel. We had no contribution in terms of how the federal government developed the package. It certainly considered our modelling as part of that submission.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Does the minister foresee that the WA government will support those affected in the live sheep trade, including those in the supply chain, with a package, given that Canberra has shut down the industry?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: As I have indicated, commentary from the Nationals WA is often quite disingenuous. The Cook government has and will continue to advocate very strongly with the federal government for Western Australian farmers about what is a federal government decision that we have said publicly and frequently is not necessary. The commonwealth has made the decision. The commonwealth has a responsibility to support those farmers affected and to make sure that we have appropriate options to enable those farmers to continue. Our minister here is working very hard to open up new market opportunities. She will continue to do that and she will continue to advocate with the federal government on behalf of Western Australian farmers in relation to the decision the government has made.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I would like to acknowledge the work of Mr Cossart on the dry season advisory committee and the work that is being done to help people get sheep out of WA and give support to farmers and people in the supply chain in challenging times.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Can the minister run me through the "Transforming Bunbury's Waterfront—stage 3" program on page 217 of budget paper No 3? With a massive \$47.6 million being spent in Bunbury this year, and \$19.6 million the year after, can the minister explain how much that program was originally budgeted for and how much it is budgeted to cost the state?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is a very good project, member, that will transform the future of the state's second city and enable the people of the south west and Bunbury to have the waterfront that they deserve. Of course, it is a project that I started when I was CEO of the South West Development Commission, which is a very good development commission, indeed, and is continuing to carry this project. It is a three-stage project. I do not have the initial figure for the Bunbury waterfront project, but it was in the order of \$67 million. As the member knows, the initial works involved the transformation of Koombana Bay and moved on to the reconstruction of Jetty Road, which enabled it to be strengthened and carry additional berthing points. The current stage is subject to completion of environmental review and will see the development of a new breakwater and dredging of Casuarina Harbour to enable the harbour to become a safe harbour and provide for marine infrastructure on the land side. It is a very comprehensive project, and it is proceeding.

Mr R.S. LOVE: When I look at the budget papers, the south west crops up a bit. Over the page, reference is made to a conference that will be hosted by the South West Development Commission. All these wonderful things are happening in the minister's electorate. What is the process that allows for some sort of clarity over the minister's role as the local member and the minister responsible for those expenditures? Does the minister excuse himself from cabinet when these things are discussed? What goes on? Similarly, does the development commission talk to Hon Don Punch as the local member or the minister? I am curious to know how it all works.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is probably similar to when Minister Grylls was the member for Central Wheatbelt and the Pilbara. Of course, every minister is very cognisant of their electorate responsibilities and ministerial duties. That

is why we have a very robust budgetary process and Expenditure Review Committee process, unlike, I might add, that of former Liberal–National government members, who frequently walked out of cabinet when decisions were not going their way or they disagreed with a position. As we found out from the Langoullant report, decisions were often made without robust business cases and on the whim, it seems, of members of the Nationals WA. It would not take very much to look at the degree of expenditure that went into National Party electorates when it had control of royalties for regions, rather than an appropriate cabinet and expenditure review process.

These projects are all subject to business cases. They go through an Expenditure Review Committee process that comprises multiple ministers—I am not a member of the Expenditure Review Committee—and those decisions are then ratified by cabinet. Our budgetary process is very different from that of the National and Liberal Parties, which managed to get the state’s finances into an operating mess. It borrowed money to pay for operating expenses and ran up debt to very high levels, purely on the back of funding operating expenses, not asset investments, which improve productivity in Western Australia.

To cast any nasturtiums that I might disabuse my role as minister with my role as the local member is very disingenuous. Once again, the National Party creates misinformation and distortion even though it was party to the series of decisions that left the state’s finances in an extraordinary mess in 2017, a mess that we have had to spend a considerable amount of time restoring.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The minister could have simply outlined the process of excusing himself; instead, we have had 10 minutes of wasted commentary.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I told the member, but I thought I would add a bit of background seeing that he was not in cabinet during that government.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to page 225 of budget paper No 2, “Carnarvon Flood Mitigation Works—Stage 2”. I am sure that the minister is aware that growers north of Gascoyne River, and growers who are not protected by the main flood mitigation protection wall that protects the town, say that they have been substantially more affected by floods than before the work commenced, and there is reasonable evidence of that. I have had significant discussions with growers, as have my colleagues who are here. Although the flood mitigation works have done a good job of protecting the town, they have acted to divert much more water onto some growers, and they are much more heavily affected. Those growers feel that either other mitigation needs to be done or there should be recognition of additional impact. Although some have benefited, they are fewer in number, but they have been impacted more dramatically than their operations. I wondered whether there have been any ongoing discussions with those growers to understand their concerns. From my view, they seem to have a good basis, but, equally, have there been any discussions with those growers to either work out a compensation plan or otherwise help mitigate the impact on them?

[5.10 pm]

Mr D.T. PUNCH: In relation to the consultation part of the member’s question, I defer to Ms McConnell.

Ms C. McConnell: After the last floods, a working group was set up. It was a joint group made up of local producers, local government, ourselves and the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation. That group has been looking at the consequences of that flood and its impacts. Some of the outcomes of that work have been to undertake further mapping to understand levees, land levels and flood levels and the impacts of those. That work is still happening. The shire has also been successful in getting some commonwealth funding to assist with some of the community development as a consequence of that flood. I am not aware of any compensation packages at this time.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What is the timing for coming to some conclusion to that? I appreciate that it is not a trivial matter; I know it is not a simple thing that you can snap your fingers on. Equally, the growers who are impacted obviously have their hearts in their mouths every time they see heavy rainfall inland. What is the anticipated timeline of the completion of this investigation phase?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I will defer to Ms McConnell again.

Ms C. McConnell: We are still waiting for the results of that study to come back to us. I anticipate that that will be concluded this year but I cannot give the member a further timeline at the moment.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I wish to clarify that. The government anticipates receiving that study. Will that study be shared with the growers if it is received this year or will that study be kept confidential to government?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Yes, it will be kept confidential or yes, it will be given to the growers?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Yes, it will be shared with relevant stakeholders.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I thank the minister for that clarification.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to paragraph 6 on page 214 of budget paper No 2, which states —

Commercial, recreational and charter fishing are all significant contributors to the State’s economy ... particularly in regional locations.

I note the minister’s recent trip to Esperance—I will give credit where credit is due—when he spoke in front of a rally of 250 to 300 people in front of the shire offices.

Dr D.J. HONEY: You’re supposed to criticise him!

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: No. The minister fronted the crowd, so well done.

Given his recent trip to Esperance—I gather he also met with the likes of some commercial fishers and so on—is he not convinced, given the generally pretty rough weather conditions near Esperance and the south coast, that the fishery is a self-sustaining fishery, not a lot of commercial fishing goes on and, basically, there is no need for a south coast marine park?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: It is incorrect to draw an inference that a marine park is about fishing sustainability. The two are quite separate issues. Marine parks set aside areas for a particular use. In the case of sanctuary zones, they set aside areas that are comprehensive, adequate and representative of ecosystems so they can be preserved for future generations—essentially, intact ecosystems for the future.

As the member knows, a process of community and stakeholder engagement was conducted by the DBCA that led to the development of draft management plans. I gave concurrence to the release of those plans for the purpose of public consultation so that all stakeholders, including recreational and commercial fishers, could view the proposals and form a view about whether they supported it or whether they should be varied so that those conversations could be had. The Minister for Environment, who has lead responsibility for this process, extended that consultation period to last for a period of four months. Consistent with requests from the Western Australian fishing industry sector and the shire, that consultation period commenced post-Christmas. That is the period that we are in at the moment. Given my responsibilities, I am encouraging recreational and commercial fishers to engage with those plans and lodge submissions in a considered and respectful way. That has been the message all the way through.

I note that a lot of misinformation has been put out that contributes to people’s anxieties. In the case of Esperance, I encourage people to go down to the office and talk with people directly or contact the DBCA directly with questions and get clarification of what is proposed.

In relation to the fishing sector, I understand that both peak bodies have now put submissions forward or are finalising submissions. I will certainly be looking at those with a great deal of interest for their perspective on fishing. At this point, it is a matter for the submissions to come back and for the government to consider that process. I encourage recreational and commercial fishers and other stakeholders to lodge their submissions in a considered way so that we get meaningful information that can inform decision-making.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I have a final question on this matter, and this is a genuine question. Given that \$60 million or \$70 million has been allocated in the budget for the south coast marine park, does the minister feel that the genuine submissions that have been put in by genuine people—recreational fishers, community people on the south coast—will be directly taken into account or will the government just steamroll ahead with the south coast marine park without taking them into account?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I think language like “steamroll ahead” is very unfortunate when there is anxiety out there. I have said publicly—I have said it in the media—that the government takes consultation very seriously. I take consultation very seriously. There will be a diversity of views expressed by recreational and commercial fishers. They do not always agree. There will be a diversity of views expressed by each of the fishing communities. There is often competition between different fishers. There will be a diversity of views from people who have very strong conservation values. At the end of the day, decision-makers have to weigh all that up and come out with a decision that is in the best interests of the Western Australian community.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I want to ask a couple of quick questions on some projects because I know officers from the development commissions are here and I really want to give them a go.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: At great expense, I might add, member!

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to the line item “Community Resource Centres” on page 220 of budget paper No 3. The table shows an amount of \$13.9 million in recurrent years, falling by \$100 000 in each of the following years. Given the great value of these resource centres, does the minister think it appropriate that the amount of funding allocated to them will not increase over the coming years of the forward estimates?

[5.20 pm]

Mr P. Isaachsen: As it currently stands, there is no indexation of the royalties for regions amount provided to community resource centres. But if the member looks at the spending changes earlier in the budget, there is a line

that reads “Regional Traineeship Program”. That is additional funding of \$600 000 put into the community resource centre program this year to enable the traineeship component of that program to remain at \$2 million. We needed to do that because we indexed the contracts that went to community resource centres. Effectively, the budget for community resource centres in the financial year has been increased by \$600 000. That may be something that is done in future years as well.

Mr R.S. LOVE: This has been controversial. On page 317, there is still \$15.4 million in the southern forests irrigation scheme to be spent. Can the minister tell me the status of that? Where is it headed? I know there have been many backwards and forwards discussions and some division around it. Can the minister give me a run-down of that scheme?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The balance of those funds has a couple of components. We are currently investigating options for a Doppler radar to support the horticultural sector in that area with improved predictability of rain events. There is also provision for monitoring programs in terms of stream flows and system improvements in relation to the management of irrigation and waterways. Defining that is yet to take place because it is a work in progress.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: At the bottom of page 220, it refers to the “Mira Mar Landslip”. I know the minister will ask me to refer this to the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage. It is listed in the royalties for regions budget. Given it is now three years since that landslide, is there any chance of an update on how close we are to finalising the acquisitions? Mr Gardner might update us. This is a genuine question.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I absolutely understand the member’s interest in this matter. The advice I have received is that completion of purchase of all properties is now complete. There was a process of negotiation and, in my view, that was a very fair process. That has now enabled the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage to start tendering for works to stabilise the area. It needed to complete that first section that was associated with acquisition of property. Once the department owns the land, we can then proceed to undertake works to stabilise. As the member knows and, I think, appreciates, it was a very anxious time for those property owners. I think there was goodwill on all sides to arrive at a solution that supported those property owners effectively and made sure they were safe and that then allowed for commencement of works to stabilise the area.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Has the acquisition of all the properties that were part of that situation basically been completed, or is it almost completed?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: I am advised that it is almost completed. My understanding is that it has been completed, but there is not a difficulty in relation to the land acquisition that is proceeding. It might be a settlement issue.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Page 218 refers to “Primary Health Centres Demonstration Program”. That represents the remnant of funding that was originally allocated for the Mullewa Hospital redevelopment. I refer also to statements made by the Minister for Health that she is actively seeking funding for the Mullewa Hospital redevelopment now that it does not have sufficient budget. Is the minister aware of the need for funding for that hospital? Has it been brought to the attention of the Minister for Regional Development, given that all the original funding was sourced from royalties for regions?

Mr D.T. PUNCH: Could I ask the member to clarify the reference? There is a bit of confusion about the reference and the link to the hospital.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The reference is to “Primary Health Centres Demonstration Program” on page 218. That program was for the redevelopment of old wheatbelt and midwest hospitals like Pingelly and Cunderdin hospitals into health centres. Under the program, the Dongara Health Centre was upgraded. Mullewa was one of the hospitals cited. An amount of \$6 million was attached to it back in 2017. It has drifted along ever since with no development. The hospital has fallen into rack and ruin and nothing has been done.

Mr D.T. PUNCH: The advice that I have received is that of all those hospitals or health centres the member mentioned, Pingelly was completed and operational in May 2018 and Cunderdin hospital in September 2018. Dongara achieved practical completion in May 2023 and is currently under a defect liability period, with final completion by mid-2024. The Mullewa community hospital project is on hold pending confirmation of additional funding to progress to tender stage. Additional funding is being sought. I think the member would need to refer the question about where that funding is being sought to the Minister for Health.

The appropriation was recommended.