

GASCOYNE FLOODS

Statement

HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral) [9.49 pm]: I rise tonight to give an account of the Gascoyne floods that occurred between 18 and 20 December 2010; and of course as recently as last week there was flooding in the Gascoyne again of some 7.1 metres at Nine Mile Bridge. The December floods were the result of extremely heavy rains in the catchment, with 260 millimetres to 300 millimetres of rain falling. That amount of rainfall is quite common across the catchment, but it has never before been recorded as being of such strength in such a short period of time.

The flood peaked at Nine Mile Bridge in Carnarvon on 19 December at 3.00 am. It reached I think, 7.8 metres, which is a record, bearing in mind the flood level last weekend was 7.1 metres. It was close, but the first flood cleared out the riverbed and ensured that the next flood did not have quite the same effect, even though the volume of water was greater. On 20 December, I flew with the Premier, the Minister for Agriculture and others to Carnarvon to inspect the flood in full flow. We were able to fly around and see it flowing to the north into Lake McLeod, for those who are familiar with the area. It was only one sandhill away from there. It then flowed to the south over the Nickol Bay flats and the old riverbed. The town is protected by levee banks; however, volunteers worked tirelessly throughout the night to make sure any weaknesses in the levee banks were built up. Knowing that the flood was coming, they had already collected a lot of soil to put inside the levee bags so that they could continue to fill and cart them during the night and build up the height of the levee banks. After his visit, the Premier declared it a natural disaster area. That triggered the Western Australian Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements, which apply to all natural disasters throughout Australia. It has to be signed off by the Premier and the Prime Minister.

On Thursday, 23 December, with members of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Vince Catania, MLA, and representatives from the Department of Agriculture and Food and the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, I visited Carnarvon again to meet the shire and growers to discuss funding availability. We met about 140 growers who were involved. I have to say that we also attended a meeting at the shire, which was a recovery committee run by the shire. I give full praise to the shire president, Dudley Maslen, and the chief executive officer of the shire, Maurice Battilana, who did an excellent job. On both occasions we visited the Fire and Emergency Services Authority control room, which was running very smoothly. Many volunteers had spent long hours checking on the welfare of people not only in the town but also in the scattered outer areas. I think they were in contact with some 100 pastoralists. Interestingly, on the Thursday, three days after the peak of the flood, we were able to drive across the riverbed but we were not able to go over the bridge. We built this magnificent new bridge but the road to the bridge was under water. It was amazing that we could drive across the crossing. I thought that was somewhat ironic.

On 29 December I was able to revisit Carnarvon and inspect some of the damage. One of the major sites of damage was Tom Ursich's plantation, which was severely denuded. To put it simply, when a flood occurs in Carnarvon, the water comes down the river, and floods over the banks to the north and down to the south onto the Nickol Bay flats. The actual river level then drops suddenly, as had occurred during the three days we were able to drive across the crossing. All the water then flows back in, and that is when the damage is done. When the assessors looked at Tom's plantation, they estimated that some 40 000 cubic metres of soil had gone down the river. To give some idea of the volume of the soil lost, it would have reached about my height and covered about five acres. We are still looking at that plantation, and I believe discussions are ongoing. That is one plantation that is always washed out. The government needs to consider taking that out of the equation and turning it into a spoon drain for returning water in the future.

The flood damage was very evident at service stations, caravan parks and homes. On 10 January I travelled with representatives from the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Indigenous Affairs and Vince Catania to Gascoyne Junction, where we met representatives from the shire. I was told that there are some 1 800 kilometres of road in the Gascoyne Junction, including 1 100 floodways. To anyone who says small shires do not have anything to do; they may be small in population, but I assure members that they have the tyranny of huge road distance.

In Gascoyne Junction we viewed the damage to the hotel; it had been totally destroyed. Of course, the hotel is no stranger to flooding; many times it has had water up to the top of the bar, but never to the top of the ceiling. The accommodation units and everything had been totally washed away. It had survived many floods, but this one actually flattened it.

We then travelled by road to Bidgemia station, where we met with representatives of 12 pastoral properties; they, of course, had suffered huge losses in infrastructure. On the way to Bidgemia, interestingly enough, we saw large

denuded areas on both sides of the river we travelled along, and I believe it probably would have flooded out to about 20 kilometres wide. It was interesting that buffel grass was probably one of the few things that held the soil and stopped it from flowing right away.

At Bidgemia, the infrastructure that was lost included an aeroplane, vehicles and a huge amount of hay; and the old homestead was washed away. The mud homestead that people had been living in had been crumpled, and the engagement presents of the young couple who had been living there all went down the river. Hundreds of kilometres of fencing, and the cattle yards, were lost. A lot of stock was being handfed close to the homestead because of the drought, and the stock was very vulnerable when the floods came. Also, 750-kilogram bales of hay, which had only arrived that day, became torpedoes in the water and rammed into buildings and just flattened them.

Mooloo Downs station is approximately 140 kilometres east of Gascoyne Junction, and it has been in drought for four years. The people there had spent the day drafting 300 weaners, ready to be trucked the next day for agistment. Later that afternoon, it started to rain and their spirits were lifted because the drought was about to break. They went up to the homestead and took the top off a good bottle of wine, as you would after four years of drought—the wine was probably still good—but five hours later they were down at the yards, knee-deep in water, letting the cattle go. Unfortunately, the cattle yards were right on the banks of a creek, and the cattle had to literally swim the creek to get to any form of high ground. Needless to say, they put the top back on the bottle, and their excitement, as the day turned into disaster. Their homestead was deluged when 260 millimetres of rain fell overnight. Of course, a lot of emotion was evident, as many of these calves had been hand-reared by the womenfolk. The calves had names and characters, and those who had fed them could only stand by and watch them go as they were washed down the river. I saw a photograph of a weaner—a young beast, I suppose you would call it—with its head caught in a tree, hanging above the riverbed after the water had subsided. It was dead, of course, but I believe the picture told the story.

In January I flew to Murchison and met with the shire councillors and the chief executive officer. I understand that that shire has some 2 000 kilometres of road and 50 bridges, so apart from the road damage, of course, they were absolutely delighted with the rain.

I am running out of time, so I will have to continue this speech at another time.