

WATER LICENCES

745. Dr D.J. HONEY to the Minister for Water:

I refer to the consultation the government is currently undertaking for plans to introduce dam fees of up to \$6 668 for licence renewals for struggling farmers.

Given that the government's currently proposed plan is to charge farmers for the use of their dams on a cost-reflective basis, can the minister please explain the methodology by which this fee will be determined?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for Cottesloe for the question. In the budget we announced that fees will be introduced to cover the cost of issuing water licences for the mining industry and the providers of public water supplies. Currently, when issuing or renewing water licences, those licences are provided for free. The taxpayers of Western Australia foot the bill of about \$14 million for those services. People in the mining industry—BHP and the like—get that free of charge and we all pay for it. In the budget we announced that we would introduce licence fees on a cost-recovery basis for those industries. We also said that we would begin to consult with the community about whether a cost-reflective arrangement should also apply to other beneficiaries of water licences. That is what we are currently doing, we are talking to the community and sections of industry about whether those costs should be borne by the people who receive the benefits of the water licences or whether the costs will continued to be borne by the general community.

I am very concerned. The member for Cottesloe does himself no credit with the question that he asked and referring to these as “dam fees”. I heard him on radio the other day saying that if people have multiple dams on their properties, they will have to pay multiple fees and that they could end up with fees of up to \$66 000. It is completely incorrect. Currently, 96 per cent of dams in Western Australia do not require a licence and they will not be affected if any decision is made to introduce fees for water licences. The whole premise of the member's question, which is that this is about dam fees, is patently disingenuous. When people come into this place, and, ultimately into public life, they have to be able to go to bed at night knowing that they have acted with integrity and been honest with the people of Western Australia. If the member is going to portray what we are doing —

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr D.J. KELLY: If the member is going to portray this —

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Mr D.J. KELLY: Mr Speaker, I am trying to answer the question.

Ms M.J. Davies interjected.

The SPEAKER: Leader of the Nationals, I call you to order for the first time.

Mr D.J. KELLY: If the member is going to portray this as dam fees, I would say that he is being completely disingenuous and is doing himself no credit. We are trying to deal with a situation in which the government provides a service to some members of the community for free and other members of the community then have to pick up the cost. That means the money, the \$14 million, that we spend on administering the water licensing system is money that we cannot spend on other services.

In this question time we have heard the member for Churchlands trying to chastise the Minister for Mental Health for the fact that he claims that we are not spending enough on mental health services. The Leader of the Nationals, again, chastised the Minister for Health for saying that we should be funding men's sheds. A laudable principle is that we have to ensure that those positive services are properly funded, but we cannot do those sorts of things or domestic violence services or schools or hospitals if we are providing free services to sections of the community that can in fact afford to pay for them.

We announced in the budget that water licenses for the mining industry and providers of public water supplies will now be provided on a cost-reflexive basis. I think BHP and Rio Tinto can pay for their water licences. I think most members of the community would agree with that.

Mr D.T. Redman: What about the agricultural sector?

Mr D.J. KELLY: As far as the agricultural sector is concerned, member for Warren–Blackwood, it is a conversation that we want to have with other sections of the community, as to whether or not they can make a contribution to the administrative cost of providing water licences. We need water licenses. We need to be able

to ensure that when someone applies for a water licence, we need to know whether we are going to grant it, that the water is in fact there, that it is there in the long run —

Mr D.T. Redman interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Warren–Blackwood!

Mr D.J. KELLY: The member could have asked the question.

The issuing of water licences in an environment in which we have a drying climate, especially in the south west, is not a tick-and-flick process, as the member and some others have sought to characterise it. Typically, water licenses are for 10 years, for example. A water licence that was issued 10 years ago, when it comes up for renewal, we cannot just say that we sent out a renewal notice—tick, flick and it gets granted again. We want to be in the position in which we can give members of agricultural and horticultural industries security knowing that they will have water availability going forward. Part of that is making sure that we have a robust water licensing system. All we are doing at this point in time is having a conversation with the community about whether other sections of the community could make a contribution to the cost entailed with the issuing water licences.

Member for Cottesloe, I hope we can have a constructive debate on it. I thought one of the tenets of the Liberal Party was that people should have to pay when governments provide a service, so I hope the member will engage in this debate sensibly and step back from the rhetoric that was embedded in the question he asked originally.