

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B — Wednesday, 23 May 2018]

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Chair; Mr Shane Love; Mr Reece Whitby; Mr Bill Marmion; Dr D.J. Honey; Mrs Jessica Stojkovski; Mr Mark Folkard; Mrs Lisa O'Malley

Division 40: Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions — Services 1 and 3 to 10, Environment, \$354 644 000 —

Ms M.M. Quirk, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Environment.

Mr M. Webb, Director General.

Mr P. Dans, Deputy Director General.

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

Ms M. Marsh, Acting Executive Director, Corporate and Business Services.

Mr M. Neilson, Manager, Strategy and Reform.

Mr D. Forster, Principal 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 parliamentary secretary 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 parliamentary secretary 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 parliamentary secretary's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by Friday, 1 June 2018. I caution members that if the parliamentary secretary 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 Moore.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 569 of the budget papers and the voluntary targeted separation scheme. Can the parliamentary secretary enlighten me on how many persons who have taken up that scheme have been from regional areas and whether that has led to a reduction in total officer numbers in the regions?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will refer that inquiry to Morgan Marsh.

Ms M. Marsh: In relation to employees from a regional area, approximately 17 employees have been from a regional location and it has not affected frontline service delivery.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That is pretty good.

Mr W.R. MARMION: My question relates to page 576 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2. I refer to service 5, "Visitor Services and Public Programs Provided in National Parks and Other Lands and Waters". Is the parliamentary secretary or the department aware of the peer review undertaken by the City of Busselton on the management of the Canal Rocks boat ramp into the future; and, if so, has the department received a copy of the report and on what date was that report received?

[5.10 pm]

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I believe the minister has made a comment on this and that some workshops are being conducted at the local level. I will refer the matter to Mr Webb.

Mr M. Webb: To answer the member's question, yes, the report has been received. I do not have the date.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Has the report provided any new information on risks, including wave height and the frequency of safety incidents?

Mr M. Webb: Not that I am aware of.

Mr W.R. MARMION: The concern is that not very many boat ramps are in the locality, and if the Canal Rocks boat ramp is not in existence, it will have a huge impact on tourism and the operation of people who go fishing in that area. I was wondering whether the parliamentary secretary could enlighten the estimates committee about the

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plans the department might have in providing some sort of boating facilities around the Canal Rocks area. Indeed, if not at Canal Rocks, what would be the closest location for the next boat ramp?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am familiar with Canal Rocks and the type of sea conditions there. The member would appreciate that there is a safety issue, and primarily a concern about human life and launching boats into dangerous conditions. I can refer the member to Mr Dans to elaborate more.

Mr P. Dans: The department is certainly aware of the peer review that the City of Busselton enlisted in response to the department engaging MP Rogers and Associates, coastal engineers, to look at safety issues with the Canal Rocks boat ramp. The department engaged MP Rogers because of persistent concerns expressed by the Naturaliste Volunteer Marine Rescue Group and other frequent users of the ramp that it was unsafe. As the member would be aware, that particular review by the coastal engineers identified significant concerns and risks to the state of the boat ramp in that it was noncompliant with the existing Australian standard. The City of Busselton's report did not shed any new information. It questioned whether the findings of the MP Rogers report would have a flow-on effect to other boat ramps south of the twenty-second parallel in Western Australia. In response to the strategic location of the Canal Rocks ramp, the Minister for Environment has taken the decision that the ramp will not be closed for volunteer sea rescue purposes. It will remain open under some sort of permitted or controlled access methodology for volunteer sea rescue purposes. The department is in the process of engaging a completely new independent risk assessment authority to look at the previous two studies undertaken to basically leave no stone unturned and to look at ways that the risks that have been identified by the two studies and the concerns that have been expressed by RiskCover, the state government's self-insurance arm, and the State Solicitor's Office can be addressed, if there is indeed a mechanism whereby they can be satisfactorily addressed. That facilitated risk assessment process, which will involve key stakeholders, is likely to get underway before the end of the current financial year.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I thank Mr Dans for that comprehensive answer, which is a terrific answer I might point out. Mick Rogers was in my engineering class; he is a very good coastal engineer.

The CHAIR: Member, we are a bit limited for time. Can you restrict yourself to the question.

Mr W.R. MARMION: What I get from Mr Dans' answer, which is good, is that the department is exploring the possibility of how it could have the boat ramp there; obviously, that is important for sea rescues. That opens up the possibility of being able to lock it off in some way so that on dangerous days the public cannot use it, but on days when it is flat—sometimes it is flat; I know Canal Rocks too—it would be good for boats. Can the parliamentary secretary confirm that the department is looking for options like that?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will just make the observation that at times when the ramp has been locked, people have taken bolt cutters to get access to it, so it is quite problematic. If the member has ever been there on a rough day and seen the steepness of it, the member will know it can be quite treacherous. We are examining other options.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to the bottom of page 576 of budget paper No 2. There is an explanatory note that discusses the cessation of royalties for regions funds for the new Kimberley national park and the great Kimberley marine park. Can the parliamentary secretary explain the cessation of royalties for regions funds for that park?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, I can. In fact, Mr Dans might be able to do better than I.

Mr P. Dans: I understand that some of the royalties for regions funds that have been allocated to those particular initiatives, which were initiatives of the former government, have not been able to be fully expended due to complications in entering into Indigenous land use agreements with the appropriate traditional owner groups. As a response to that, those funds have been redirected to other initiatives. That is my understanding.

Dr D.J. HONEY: My understanding is that some of those projects were designed to protect important biodiversity locations. Are there other projects to protect those biodiversity locations?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: My understanding is that those projects had a time frame and the project was delivered. But certainly we have two significant election commitments for the environment in that part of the world—that is, the expansion of the Fitzroy River National Park and the Buccaneer Archipelago. There is certainly very much a major environmental push in protecting the environment in that part of the world.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I appreciate that there are initiatives, but are there going to be any ongoing initiatives to protect the regions that were previously covered by this program?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, as I said. I will let the director general explain further.

Mr M. Webb: The answer is yes. Mr Dans explained that there is some discussion around some of the reallocation of funding away from some projects to newer projects. I am happy to provide that by way of supplementary, if the parliamentary secretary agrees. But I just make the point that it is still a conversation that is currently underway.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I would appreciate that.

The CHAIR: Parliamentary secretary, could you indicate what you will provide by way of supplementary information?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Through Mr Webb, we will provide more details if possible. I will let Mr Webb explain.

Mr M. Webb: As I understand the question, the member is asking for detail around the cessation of the royalties for regions funding previously allocated to the new Kimberley national park and the great Kimberley marine park.

Dr D.J. HONEY: And what follow-up projects will be for that area.

The CHAIR: The parliamentary secretary has agreed to provide supplementary information on the new Kimberley national park, the cessation of the royalties for regions and any ongoing projects.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Mr Webb, is that correct?

Mr M. Webb: For the new Kimberley national park and the great Kimberley marine park. There are two issues.

[*Supplementary Information No B18.*]

[5.20 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I want to ask a question about the Aboriginal ranger program referred to in the second dot point on page 570. An amount of \$20 million has been allocated to a five-year program employing Aboriginal people through direct employment or fee-for-service contracts. What steps will be taken to ensure that this becomes a self-sustaining program? The issue I see is that at the end of five years, it will fall off a cliff if there is no ongoing ranger program. Will steps be taken to ensure that this program is developed and involves elements of self-sustaining income so that employment can continue in the future? Does it have any relationship to the various Indigenous land use agreements that are mentioned at the bottom of that same page; and, if so, would that help to sustain that program?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is a good question. Part of this ranger program involves upskilling rangers, exposing them to employment skills and increasing their viability in the workforce. Contracts are available for fencing, whereby those skills can be attained through this program so that at the end of that period there are opportunities to provide their services. There is an acknowledgement, if you like, that there are very few employment opportunities in some of these areas, but this is about upskilling people to a level at which they can seek other contracts that are available through the government or the private sector. We are very much aware that this is about giving people who sometimes have never been in employment before job skills so that they are able to seek contracts and employment after the scheme.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Could the parliamentary secretary expand on the development of the program? Are the total number of rangers that may be employed already employed or will more rangers join that program in different areas of the state in the future?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will refer that question to Mr Webb for some more details.

Mr M. Webb: This is a \$20 million program and \$8.5 million has been allocated in the first tranche. Part of setting up the program was to have conversations with the Aboriginal groups that will possibly be the recipients of the money to understand the types of projects they would like to undertake. The intention is to look at the way this first tranche is spent, to learn from that, and to have at least one, if not two, additional funding rounds to make sure there is an ongoing commitment to the Aboriginal ranger program across the state.

Mr R.S. LOVE: To be clear, are rangers employed under the program only on land in the control of the department, or is this a wider program?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is not confined to that, but I will let Mr Webb explain.

Mr M. Webb: As the parliamentary secretary indicated, it is tenure-blind, so although some work is done on lands managed by the department, equally there will be work done on lands managed or owned by others.

Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI: I refer to “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 570 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2. My question relates to the creation of Preston River to Ocean Regional Park. Can the parliamentary secretary provide more details on this plan and explain how the investment will benefit the Bunbury region?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Certainly. Preston River to Ocean Regional Park has a significant investment of \$10.5 million in the 2018–19 budget to fast-track the creation of a continuous reserve of almost 900 hectares from the south of Bunbury, west of the Preston River to the coast. The new regional park will secure a much-needed regional open space for the greater Bunbury region. The environment is not intended to be simply locked away, but enjoyed by the community and preserved at the same time. That part of the world has significant biodiversity and cultural values.

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This money will go towards fencing and gates and the construction of walkways, firebreaks and lookouts so that the public can have access and enjoy this natural facility. The funding will also help to fund the 2 297-hectare Leschenault Regional Park, which will extend along the Collie and Brunswick Rivers and westwards across the Swan coastal plain. This is a great news story for people in Bunbury and Collie. As the member is probably well aware, there has been huge growth in that part of the world and particularly south and north of Bunbury. This is about not only preserving a natural environment and making sure that growth pressures do not infringe on the area, but also locking away a vulnerable natural resource for the people of Bunbury and Collie to enjoy.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Preston River broke its banks in 1964 and flooded a lot of Bunbury, the low-lying area in Rathmines, and as a result the government did a lot of remedial work, including changing where the mouth entry —

The CHAIR: Is there a question, member?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Yes. The Chair cut me off, but I was going to say, the government changed the location of the mouth of the Preston River through remedial works. Will the department change the actual location of the Preston River to create this new park?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will find out. Was that one of the member's early engineering jobs?

Mr W.R. MARMION: No, I was only a little boy at the time.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: No. There is no movement.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: My question relates to the current trends in visitation to national parks in Western Australia, which is referred to on page 570 of budget paper No 2. Can the parliamentary secretary provide us with more details on the trends in camping and related use of our national parks?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member for the question.

Mr M.J. FOLKARD: It ties all this together.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Indeed. There has been a big upsurge in visitation. In 2016–17, it was recorded at 20.73 million visits and visitor satisfaction was ranking at about 92 per cent. There has been a 68 per cent increase in campground bookings since the launch of the online booking system in October 2017 and campground revenue increased by more than 12 per cent from 2015–16 to 2016–17. The member may be well aware of some of these camping locations. Is the member for Burns Beach a keen camper? Even I have been to some of these sites. They include Cape Range National Park; Karijini National Park in the Pilbara; Lane Poole Reserve near Dwellingup, which is very popular; Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park in the south west; Cape Le Grand National Park on the south coast; and many others.

[5.30 pm]

The significant growth in visitor numbers is quite interesting. There has been about a 23 per cent increase in visitors to national parks in the south coast region around Albany. I guess that reflects some of the growing tourism interest down in Albany. It is important that government continues to connect families to national parks. For example, a couple of weeks ago, I attended a nature play event in Joondalup where they were promoting Cubby Town with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. The idea was to attract families to Yanchep National Park and, from there, encourage people to take their children to other national parks around the state.

The last point I want to make about our national parks is the place of origin of visitors—13 per cent are interstate visitors and 10 per cent are international visitors. That means about one quarter of all visitors to national parks come from outside Western Australia. I guess it is part of the natural environment tourist message that the Minister for Tourism is promoting. That figure relates to five million visits per annum made to national parks by visitors to Western Australia. That demonstrates how important our parks are as part of the magnet of attractions that draw people to Western Australia and have a spin-off in promoting tourism in Western Australia, which promotes jobs and opportunities for local businesses. Visitation reflects a pretty good story.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I refer to page 577 and table 6, “Conserving Habitats, Species and Ecological Communities”. My question is about Cockburn Sound. Can the department outline what conservation values are important in Cockburn Sound and what monitoring has been done? I understand seagrass is probably the main issue. Can the parliamentary secretary please outline what sort of conservation work is being done on that?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Will the member take a supplementary on that question?

Mr W.R. MARMION: Sure. The issue will then be those environmental values and the likely impact of any harbour development—it could be an outer harbour, a lithium wharf, or the expansion of the Henderson shipbuilding yard. The issue is: what are the values and what are the likely impacts of future development?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Perhaps given the fullness of the member's question, I will refer it to Mr Webb.

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Mr M. Webb: My understanding is that this activity comes under the auspices of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation and part of the Cockburn Sound Management Council. I therefore do not believe we have anything other than an advisory role in assisting the work.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I should have asked it of the last mob!

The CHAIR: Parliamentary secretary, there will not be supplementary information.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: There is no supplementary.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to budget paper No 2, table 9, "Prescribed Burning and Fire Management", and table 10, "Bushfire Suppression" on page 578. The tables show a combined reduction of 59 people for bushfire management and suppression. That seems to conflict, potentially, with the first dot point under "Fire Management" on page 571, which indicates an additional allocation of \$5.5 million for controlled burns. How is that reduction being achieved? Will it reduce the capacity to control bushfires currently and potentially in the future in our national parks and forests?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: We have a pretty good story to tell about prescribed burning but that is a different issue. I refer this to Mr Dans.

Mr P. Dans: It would be fair to say that the figures in the *Budget Statements* are not at all an accurate representation of the number of FTEs involved in the activity. They are, indeed, a pro-rata allocation of the department's total FTEs across each of the 10 services according to the relative amount of funding allocated to those services. It does not reflect accurately the number of staff involved in those duties on a day-to-day basis. I can let the member know that across the state, the department has in the order of 100 dedicated fire management officers from Kununurra to Esperance and everywhere in between. There are approximately 320 frontline fire fighters who man trucks and are involved in bushfire suppression and undertaking prescribed burning. There are probably another 500 staff who might not specifically have fire management as one of their core duties, but they step up and lend a hand to fire management activities, be it bushfire suppression or prescribed burning, as required. It would be fair to say that there would be something in the order of 800 to 900 individual department employees out of 1 800, so in the order of half, who are involved in our fire management programs throughout any year, be it bushfire suppression or prescribed burning.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Will we see any reduction in the specialists; that is, not general staff, but the frontline and the first 100 staff? I could not quite catch whether it was planning or coordinating staff. Will there be any reduction in that staffing?

Mr P. Dans: I guess, one of our criteria in addressing the requirement to reduce our workforce has been to make sure that we do not compromise the frontline service delivery around the state. As the parliamentary secretary indicated, there were close on 21 million visits. Ensuring our ranger staff numbers are not compromised in our 100 national parks and 20 marine parks around the state is critical. Ensuring our fire management capacity in both prescribed burning and fire suppression is not compromised is critical. That principle has guided our approach to the voluntary targeted separation scheme.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Parliamentary secretary, I did not hear whether there was any actual reduction in the frontline firefighting staff and the 100 FTE nominated in that function.

Mr P. Dans: The answer is no, member.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The prescribed burning last year was a boosted program of prescribed burning under royalties for regions. Has the department sought to continue that boosted program, or has it caught up with the targets first outlined for the royalties for regions program and the prescribed burning task generally?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The program the member talked about was funded through RforR under the previous government. We continued because we saw that it was a good program to continue. That has been running, but we will review the ongoing demands of prescribed burning.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I do not think that answers the question. I was asking whether the department had achieved all the targets set and whether that puts the department in a position in which it felt we were at the optimum level of prescribed burning so that it does not need to continue to boost.

The CHAIR: I think that was a further question, member, you did not say some of that the first time round.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I did say that. If you want to go through Hansard, you will find those elements were in the question.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Thank you, member. This is an ongoing process, and we have achieved the targets we set for prescribed burning. I would like to refer you to Mr Webb for some more detail.

[5.40 pm]

Mr M. Webb: I will make a comment then pass on to Mr Dans. The targets for last year and this year remain 200 000 hectares, which represents 45 per cent of the conservation estate at a fuel age of less than six years. In the last two years, that target has been achieved. The aim is to have a further conversation with Treasury about ongoing support for that program. That is an active conversation that we are having right now. For the current program, my recollection is that we are at 42 per cent of the 45 per cent target. I will seek confirmation from Mr Dans on that figure.

Mr P. Dans: As the director general said, last year we achieved 247 000 hectares in the south west. As the parliamentary secretary and the director general said, our notional target is at least 200 000 hectares. As of this morning, we have achieved 216 000 hectares. As the director general said, at the end of the 2016–17 financial year, 41 per cent of the land we manage in the south west had a fuel age of less than six years. It will probably be slightly better than that at the end of this financial year in a little over a month's time. However, after this week's cold front, I expect that our program will be shut down and that that will be the end of it in the south west. As referenced by the parliamentary secretary, it is an ongoing process. After five years, the fuel will not be less than six years old anymore. To get on top of fuel loads and to really limit the incidence and extent of bushfires, you have to consistently maintain at least 200 000 hectares year in, year out. It would be fair to say that Western Australia has not achieved that in the south west for probably two to three decades. In the old Forests Department days, it was achieved consistently or averaged above 200 000 hectares over a full decade. That is what we are aiming to do. To cast back to the start of the member's question, the Minister for Environment is acutely aware of the funding situation as the enhanced prescribed burning program enters its last year on 1 July and will conclude on 30 June 2019. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the Minister for Regional Development have also been made aware that that program is coming to a close. The issue will be given due consideration in government well in advance of that time.

The CHAIR: Member for Nedlands, did you have a further question?

Mr W.R. MARMION: That comprehensive answer answered my question.

The CHAIR: It was comprehensive, wasn't it?

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to "Royalties for Regions Fund" under "Income from State Government" on page 582 of the *Budget Statements*. This can be answered either now or perhaps the parliamentary secretary could supply this as supplementary information. What programs are being funded in service areas 1 and 3 to 10 are being funded by royalties for regions and what components and percentage of them are being funded by royalties for regions?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The member's request is quite comprehensive. I will refer to Mark Nielson for a response.

Mr M. Neilson: The department is currently receiving royalties for regions funding for 13 projects. They tend to be concentrated in service 5, visitor services, with a component in service 6.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Given the time, I would be very happy to take that as supplementary information if the parliamentary secretary could provide that. I know these other guys have questions.

The CHAIR: Alternatively, member, you can put it on notice.

Mr R.S. LOVE: They have the information there so it is not hard to provide. I am just trying to save a bit of time for everybody.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Yes, Chair; we will take that as a supplementary.

The CHAIR: All right. For the purposes of *Hansard*, parliamentary secretary, can you articulate what information will be provided by way of supplementary information.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: Mr Neilson, can you detail what that would involve?

Mr M. Neilson: We will be able to provide information regarding the projects funded by royalties from regions against services 5 and 6. I understand that there is also a request for information regarding programs that have come to an end. We can provide that information as well.

The CHAIR: Is that for all programs or just under services 5 and 6?

Mr M. Neilson: Just for 2018–19—the current programs that are being funded.

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I will clarify it further. We are going to supply additional information on royalties for regions programs under services 5 and 6.

[*Supplementary Information No B19.*]

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Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY: I refer to the third dot point under significant issues impacting the agency on page 570 of the *Budget Statements* about the creation of a new Fitzroy River national park. What community consultation has been done in the planning for the reservation of this important regional area?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: It is a significant part of the world. The consultation that is being done will feed into an overall whole-of-government management plan for the Fitzroy catchment to ensure the long-term health of the river and sustainable economic development in the region. In March, the Minister for Environment met with his ministerial colleagues the Minister for Regional Development; Agriculture and Food and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and around 80 other people, including traditional owners and representatives from local Aboriginal groups, pastoralists, environmental organisations, government agencies, industry and the wider community. This workshop was the first stage of wide community consultation focusing on the creation of a jointly managed Fitzroy River national park, a land use and economic framework for the Fitzroy River and a water allocation plan for the entire river system. The Fitzroy River catchment has significant cultural, environmental and economic value. Some of the catchment is within the West Kimberley national heritage place. The area has rich biodiversity and Indigenous historic and aesthetic value. A collaborative cross-government approach will ensure the delivery of the McGowan Labor government's commitment to the Fitzroy River to provide a secure long-term future for the region. The proposed Fitzroy River national park will extend the existing Geikie Gorge National Park along the Fitzroy River to the north and along the Margaret River to the east. The minister has reaffirmed his commitment that he will not let the Fitzroy River or its tributaries be dammed. Determination of the boundaries of the new expanded national park and the preparation of the management plan will require extensive consultation about the impact on stakeholders. That will be considered as part of the process. It is a beautiful part of the world and a significant natural asset.

[5.50 pm]

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to page 574 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the table "Outcomes and Key Effectiveness Indicators", in particular the outcome for the cumulative removal of jarrah sawlogs. It appears that this year's budget is 764 000 cubic metres, with an estimated actual just shy of 500 000 cubic metres and an increase next year. We achieved only 382 000 cubic metres in 2016-17. What is driving the shortfall, or what stops us from achieving the targeted cumulative removal of sawlogs out of the forest?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I have been told that it is simply a condition of the market that the demand is not there. It is an issue for the Forest Products Commission, which does not come under this jurisdiction.

Mr W.R. MARMION: I refer to service 5 on page 576, "Visitor Services and Public Programs Provided in National Parks and Other Lands and Waters". My question relates to whale carcasses. Firstly, can the parliamentary secretary confirm whether any whale carcasses are currently on our beaches? Secondly, how many whale carcasses have washed up on our beaches in the last 12 months?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I thank the member for the question. The member might recall the mass stranding at Hamelin Bay, and another whale beaching that was impractical to remove because of the state of the carcass and the advanced rotting of the carcass.

Mr W.R. MARMION: The questions were: are any whales beached right now, and how many whales washed up on Western Australian beaches in the last 12 months?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I refer to Mr Webb.

Mr M. Webb: I am aware of only one carcass in the south west, which is the one that the parliamentary secretary referred to. It weighs approximately 20 tonnes and is in an inaccessible place, and it is not safe for anyone to remove it. It is breaking up. Certainly public safety is an important issue for us. A government strategy or policy on whale carcass removal applies in these circumstances. I am not aware—I am not sure whether Mr Dans is either—of the numbers that have been stranded or the number of whale carcasses that have washed up in the last 12 months. With the permission of the parliamentary secretary, we would need to take that as supplementary.

Mr W.R. MARMION: Is it possible to get by way of supplementary information an idea of the number of carcasses that have washed up in the last three years so that we can determine whether there has been an increase? On a point of clarification, does responsibility for the removal of carcasses depend on whether they are in the water or on the beach? Is there a responsibility issue?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: I am aware that there is cooperation across agencies so maybe another agency is involved if one is still out at sea. I refer to Mr Dans.

Mr P. Dans: In answer to the first part of the question, it would be fair to say that over the last two or three decades, there has been a very, very significant increase in the number of humpback whales going up and down the west coast. The current estimate is in the order of 35 000, whereas two or three decades ago, it was a couple of thousand, or less than 5 000. As a result of that very, very significant increase in the population size, more whales are dying and floating ashore dead than was the case two or three decades ago, most certainly. The state government's policy

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on the removal of whale carcasses is tenure based. If a carcass is in a marine park, a national park or lands managed by the department, we take responsibility for the removal. If a carcass is on lands that are managed by a local government authority, the local government is responsible for the removal and disposal of the carcass. Over the past two or three years, we have provided significant advice to local government by way of DVD briefing material as to how to go about removing a carcass most cost effectively and efficiently so that whale fluids and bits and bobs and the like that attract sharks are not left on the beach. There is quite a clear process and division of responsibilities in place. In very, very remote locations where public visitation is incredibly low, the carcass will be left to degrade and decompose naturally.

Mr W.R. MARMION: When a whale carcass is being removed, are signs put up to advise the public of the carcass and not to use the beaches because the carcass may attract great white sharks?

Mr P. Dans: Absolutely. Local governments in populated areas around the south west of the state right up to Exmouth and even further rapidly deploy signs when a carcass is around. Certainly we do in national parks and reserves that are above the high watermark, and I know that local governments in the south west corner certainly do.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 570 and “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”, in particular the subheading “Joint Management and Visitor Services”. The second dot point on page 571 refers to the Kalbarri skywalk and national park infrastructure project. How much more delay will there be before that project is finished, because it seems to have been going for quite some time?

Mr R.R. WHITBY: The member might be aware that there have been particular issues with this project that have been outside of government control. The contractor, Watpac Construction, has had financial difficulties and that has delayed work. I have been advised that the roadworks are basically done and the only significant work yet to done is on the skywalk lookout and some associated infrastructure. That work has been advertised and contractors can bid on it until it closes this month. We are expecting the whole project to be finished in about one year.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to page 569 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the table “Spending Changes”. There has been a saving of more than \$6 million over the estimates period with changes in the fleet. What is the nature of those changes; in particular, do they include a reduction in the fire suppression fleet?

Mr P. Dans: The department has two sets of fleet for fire suppression and fire management activities. We own our heavy fleet, which in the order of 110 to 115 heavy-duty fire trucks that carry about 3 000 litres of water, and 20 pieces of heavy earthmoving equipment, such as front-end loaders, prime movers, bulldozers and low loaders and the like to move them around. The savings do not affect the critical core fire suppression or fire management fleet.

The appropriation was recommended.

Meeting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm