

Division 13: Goldfields–Esperance Development Commission, \$230 000 —

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I refer to the last dot point on page 177, which was in last year's budget as well and which reads —

The delivery of telecommunications coverage being sporadic, particularly in the South East agricultural region, affects the ability to conduct businesses.

That is still a significant need. Under the regional mobile communications program phase 2, how many telecommunications mobile phone towers will be allocated and constructed in this region? How much will be spent and what is the exact location of those mobile phone towers?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The question being asked relates to the Department of Regional Development and the financial assistance agreement with the Department of Commerce to roll out the RMCP2. There are 85 towers planned across the state in the second tranche. We built 113 towers in the first tranche. There may well be a comment here that Shayne Flanagan can add to that, but if the member is asking for specific information from this development commission region, I can probably source that, but he is probably asking about something that is more appropriate for the Department of Regional Development.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: Can the minister provide that by supplementary information?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Is that specifically for the development commission region, because that is what this is?

Dr G.G. JACOBS: It is referred to in this dot point, minister, particularly the south east agricultural region.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I will provide by way of supplementary information the number of mobile phone towers provided under RMCP1 and that are predicted to be supplied under RMCP2 in response to the question from the member for Eyre on the Goldfields–Esperance Development Commission region.

[Supplementary Information No B7.]

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I refer to the first dot point on page 178. I notice that the preparation of the regional investment blueprint is underway to promote jobs. There has been much discussion in the region about the potential for the release of agricultural land as a part of generating economic activity, including jobs. What is the minister's commitment to that? Is there any funding in this division that relates to the potential for a release of additional land for agriculture in the region?

[11.50 am]

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I will make some comments about that particular project and that idea and how it has come to fruition. In a minute I will ask Shayne Flanagan to make some comments as it applies directly to the development commission. The first I heard of an agricultural expansion proposal was when we had regional cabinet down in Esperance; it was the initiative of opening up some current pastoral land to the north of the line above Esperance and back towards Ravensthorpe—the line between the agricultural and pastoral regions. There was a proposal to have a number—maybe four—of agricultural precincts opened up to the tune of 100 000 hectares each. The current development is along a line that probably gets into some marginal agricultural country, and there is further development up the transport corridor north of Salmon Gums towards Kalgoorlie. I must say that I was a tad surprised by that request. I am not sure that I am fully supportive of the project. I think there is some very marginal agricultural land out there. In putting up this initiative, the Esperance shire was seeking to see whether it could instigate or initiate these agricultural expansion opportunities as part of its commitment to try to drive economic growth in the region. I will ask Shayne Flanagan to comment on how that interacts with the development of the blueprints. As the member can imagine, the blueprint process is locally driven. It is not Terry Redman's plan; it is the development commission's regions plan. All the parties involved in putting that together put up their views and ideas. The board of the development commission then solidifies that into a document, which again goes out for comment. It is finally signed off by me and we use it as a background for where we make future investment. I will ask Shayne, as a relatively new chief executive officer of the development commission, to comment on how it interacts with the blueprint.

Mr S.P. Flanagan: We are in the process of completing our blueprint. We will not have it as a specific initiative identified critically as relating only to agricultural land release. More generally, we will have a key initiative for the development and increased productivity of the agricultural sector throughout the region.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Can I just say that I understand the member for Gosnells' concern and I probably share some of his concerns. We have put work into other parts of the state around agricultural development of crown land and pastoral leases, but that has essentially been where there are water assets and intensive irrigation opportunities in those precincts, which probably does not apply in this case.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I understand some of the minister's concerns; however, some of that agricultural land was previously gazetted and was not deemed marginal. We understand that this process will not happen tomorrow, but it is about re-looking at some of that previously gazetted land that is not marginal and doing rainfall stats and soil stats and getting some preliminary information to make a decision in the future. I am not asking the minister to release 100 000 hectares tomorrow, but we are asking for a process that re-looks at some of that. People north east of Southern Cross say that that area should never have been farmed because it is seriously marginal, so what are we going to do with those farmers? This could be a significant and important resettlement plan, if you like, if, in fact, the studies on that land are rigorous and comprehensive and show the land to not be marginal.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I understand the member's point, I think. History says that since the 1960s, we have not done a good job on where we have cleared and the impact of salinity and a range of other things. There has been some relatively recent clearing down in Esperance, as the member is well aware; he was probably part of that as a child. Even there, the carte blanche clearing has probably created some challenges, not to mention the environmental risks, which would need to be clearly worked through. There is also a political risk to any government. A number of people were issued conditional purchase blocks across areas north of Ravensthorpe and probably even including Esperance, the condition being that they cleared the land and developed it. They were then hit with a clearing ban and were no longer allowed to clear and develop the land, so they were lumped with rangeland that was not able to be developed and essentially became a liability for them. They have been chasing the state for compensation for those decisions, so a range of dangers are involved in progressing this. I understand the member's point about taking the discussion a little further, but it would not be driven through my portfolio. It would likely be driven through the agriculture portfolio and would likely touch upon the environmental portfolios. It is certainly not something that I will be driving.

Dr G.G. JACOBS: I have just a very quick question on the second dot point on page 178 of budget paper No 2 with regard to the Yilgarn iron ore province. There is reference to identifying strategies to unlock the potential of the Yilgarn iron ore province. Can the minister outline the commission's work in identifying some of those strategies to unlock this potential and have this area of Yilgarn developed as an iron ore province?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I will ask Shayne Flanagan to comment; he would be well versed in this matter as the immediate past chief executive officer of the Esperance port and would be very, very close to the opportunities around iron ore.

Mr S.P. Flanagan: I guess this is a big challenge at the moment, given the current price of iron ore, but the commission and the Esperance port have taken the view that the key to unlocking that province is the development of pathways to market and infrastructure to link to the midwest export pathway through Geraldton or Oakajee, or out through Esperance. The commission has been an advocate for the port link project, which is made up of five different elements. The key element for iron ore relates to the alignment definition study for road and rail through Geraldton and possibly out through Oakajee, as well as the incremental development of capacity along the rail line from Leonora to the port of Esperance, and the development of additional export capacity through the port of Esperance, which is part of the multi-user iron ore facility process.

The appropriation was recommended.