

BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

890. Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE to the Minister for Environment:

I refer to today's *Government Gazette* and the minister's proposed weakening of laws designed to protect biodiversity on privately-owned land. The minister is granting permission to destroy five hectares per year per property without any control.

- (1) Has not clearing native vegetation been the major destroyer of biodiversity in the south west and agricultural regions of Western Australia?
- (2) Is it not the case that Western Australian farmers already forgo \$344 million every year from land lost to salinity and that up to 4.5 million hectares of productive agricultural land is currently under threat?
- (3) Given that there are conservatively 4 500 farming business in Western Australia, does this not mean that an extra 18 000 hectares can be cleared each year, thereby exacerbating the situation?

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: I do not want to hear any comments.

Mr T.R. Buswell interjected.

The SPEAKER: Treasurer!

Mr A.P. JACOB replied:

- (1)–(3) In the first instance, I am very proud of the changes announced today, as they meet an election commitment that this government made in the lead-up to the 2013 election from my predecessor the former Minister for Environment, and also from the Premier. These are in the first instance only the regulatory changes. I am foreshadowing again today that there will be subsequent legislative amendments in that space to also fulfil that election commitment.

This change today will reduce the red tape and the administrative burden that is placed on landowners and farmers in being able to manage their own land, which many of them have managed for generations, freeing them up to do what they do best, which for the most part is growing our food. At the same time, these changes will not result in any negative impact on the environment.

Two key changes have been gazetted today. The first is the extension of what has been known as the 10-year rule, which is where landowners who had lawful permission to clear their land had up to 10 years to clear that land; or, if the land had already been cleared and had subsequently regrown, they had a 10-year time frame to re-clear that land.

Mr C.J. Tallentire interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Extending that period to 20 years is quite timely, member for Gosnells, because when these changes were initially gazetted in 2004, there was only a 10-year rule.

Mr C.J. Tallentire interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gosnells, I know that you are passionate about this, but do not shout out again; ask a supplementary.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Obviously, as we roll into 2014, this means that it will apply only to land that has already been lawfully cleared under the existing regulations, which came in under the previous government.

Another key change, and I suspect one that will make a very big difference in farmers being able to manage their own land, is the increase from the one-hectare allowance to five hectares. Farming has moved a long way in the past 10 years. For example, machinery is now bigger. Now farmers will be able to widen the tracks on their land to up to five hectares, and that will enable them to get larger combine harvesters onto their paddocks. Also, GPS is increasingly being used in harvesting and farming operations in paddocks. Obviously where farmers have had rectilinear paddocks in the past, they will need to round those edges so that they can use automated farming machinery in those paddocks. This is all about making life easier for farmers—who I remind members are enabling us to substantially grow our own food—by reducing red tape and encouraging them to manage their own land.

This is only the first step in what will be further amendments to the Environmental Protection Act, by which we hope to remove elements of criminality in and around this area.