

MINING — ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

47. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Minister for Mines and Petroleum:

I refer to the Auditor General's eleventh report that reveals the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety has reduced planned inspection programs by 60 per cent or more over the last five years—programs designed to ensure that mining operators comply with conditions to minimise the environmental impacts of their activity. Was this a deliberate policy decision of the McGowan Labor government or has it once again been asleep at the wheel?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON replied:

Firstly, I want to thank the Auditor General for her work because she plays an important part in Western Australia on behalf of the people of Western Australia. I appreciate the briefing that she provided to me before she tabled the report so that I had a clear picture of what was contained in the report.

I point out to the member the same thing that I mentioned to the Auditor General: the environmental approvals that we provide are different from the environmental approvals provided by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation. All mines end up closing and are rehabilitated to a final landform at the point of closure. That means that there can be some things that go wrong in terms of perhaps exceeding the boundary of an approved area, but in the end, there still has to be rehab to the agreed approved final landform. Even if an inspection is not done in any year, it is not actually the end of the debate because, at the end of the mine, the mine has to be rehabilitated to whatever has been agreed to between the department and the developer. Often, let us say in the case of a bauxite or a sand mine, the final landform is as close as possible to the original landform because we are removing only a very small amount of the material on that site. But of course let us say, for an open-cut goldmine, the final landform is going to be a lake because it will not fill the large void from an open-cut goldmine. Our environmental regulation obligations are different from those of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation when it might be protecting the community from a spill by some pollutant. It is a very different environmental obligation. Part of the environmental obligation might be about the final form of the tailings storage facility to ensure no acid leach from the tailings. That is done at the start of the project, and then it is monitored over time. Again, it is not the same risk as the risks managed by other agencies.

In discussion with the industry, we were asked by industry—because Western Australia is so successful in the mining industry, there are more projects than ever before in the history of Western Australia—whether it could take resources from its environmental regulation monitoring and apply them to approvals. I thought that was a good idea and I agreed to that. I pointed out to the Auditor General that she did not include that in the report. I would have thought it would have been valuable for the community to understand that this was not a failing by the department, but, rather, a policy decision of government because the environmental risks we are dealing with are still being properly managed. They are being properly managed at the approval stage and they are being properly managed throughout the process, but, more importantly, they are properly managed at the point of closure of the mine. Western Australia has the world's best mine closure planning process because we require the mine closure plan to be included with the mine plan. That means when the mine opens, they have to tell us what they are going to do for the mine closure. Every five years when the mine plan is updated, we require an update of the mine closure plan. On top of that, we have the mining rehabilitation fund, which is effectively an insurance policy against the failure to meet the obligations companies set out for themselves.

Yes, we did deliberately add resources to the approvals process because we have had the most successful economy for mining anywhere in the world. I will give the member more statistics on that: we have the largest number of projects, we have the largest number of employees and our share of exploration activities nationally has gone from 50 per cent when I became minister to now 65 per cent. Not only are we at a record level, but also our share of mining in Australia has increased since I became the responsible minister. That is all completely opposite from what the member and her friends said in 2017 when they spent three hours saying that the mining industry would collapse in Western Australia if I became the minister.