

KIMBERLEY FLOODS — CLIMATE CHANGE

Statement

HON DR BRAD PETTITT (South Metropolitan) [6.22 pm]: I rise today to speak about three interconnected things—the recent devastating floods in the West Kimberley; the science linking the floods to global warming; and the support for fracking in the Kimberley, which will of course be a huge source of greenhouse gas emissions. I want to acknowledge those in the Kimberley who helped me pull my speech together and make this statement. I also want to acknowledge the enormous personal, social and economic impact that the recent unprecedented floods have had, especially on vulnerable First Nations people and other communities in the West Kimberley.

In discussing the floods, I want to start with a very good article in *The Conversation* titled “Disastrous floods in WA—why were we not prepared?” Toni Hay and Courtney-Jay Williams state in the article —

Indigenous communities are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Yet, current Australian disaster risk management approaches fail to consider the needs of Indigenous communities, such as housing shortages and reduced access to medical services. This leaves them vulnerable to disaster events like flooding. Most towns and communities in WA have no climate adaptation plans in place.

The article asks some really important questions around when we are actually going to start taking some of these climate impacts seriously for the First Nations communities in these areas. Of course, for many years, climate scientists and government agencies, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the CSIRO, have warned that global warming caused primarily by the extraction and burning of fossil fuels is changing our climate. In fact, the Bureau of Meteorology’s most recent *State of the climate 2022* report states —

The intensity of short-duration ... extreme rainfall events has increased by ... 10 per cent or more in some regions and in recent decades, with larger increases typically observed in the north of the country.

It further states —

As the climate warms, the atmosphere can hold more water vapour than cooler air can. This relationship alone can increase moisture in the atmosphere by 7 per cent per degree of warming, all other things being equal.

The latest example of extreme weather in the Kimberley caused by global warming will impact the region and its communities for many years to come. The science shows that these devastating floods are likely to be followed in the near term by further extreme weather events across the Kimberley, including more record flooding. There were a lot of conversations after the floods. The Minister for Emergency Services, Hon Stephen Dawson, said at the time that this was a once-in-100-year event. Unfortunately, it is likely that such events will happen far more often than once every 100 years. In fact, it is more likely that they will occur every decade.

That brings me to the next key point I want to make. It is good that we saw a recent commitment by the state government to legislate a target of net zero emissions by 2050 and the recent statements by our environment minister that —

“Climate change is the greatest challenge of our lifetime. We need to take decisive action this decade.

I welcome both those things. Despite WA being the only state with rising emissions, we have heard some good announcements, such as the closure of Collie’s coal-fired power stations this decade. That will hopefully see our emissions come down. The closure of the coal-fired power stations will bring down emissions by about six million tonnes a year, from memory, but if we do that whilst opening up new gas reserves in the Kimberley, such as Browse basin or the onshore Canning basin with fracking, we will see the emissions jump up extremely. We can reduce emissions by six million tonnes by closing the coal-fired power stations, but Canning Basin alone could release between 13 billion and 21 billion tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Australia’s whole emissions target to keep us at 1.5 degrees is 5.5 billion tonnes. I wanted to make the contrast between that and coal because it is so extreme. Climate analysts have done some really good work in that space.

The devastating Kimberley floods not only are evidence of the more severe climate events that will be caused by fossil fuel burning, but also highlight the fact that planning for development in the Kimberley has to be completely re-thought. For example, if large-scale irrigated agriculture had been established along the Martuwarra Fitzroy River, as advocated by some in industry and some government agencies, it would have been completely destroyed by the floods. Likewise, the proposed fracking wells and other pipeline infrastructure, such as wastewater dams full of contaminated fracking water, would have been flooded and the pipelines swept away. The floods up there were a big reminder of the kind of future we want for the Kimberley. Hopefully, it reminds us that we do not want a future that will double-down on climate change by upping emissions. We need to seriously consider adapting to those issues and enabling communities to respond. I do not think that gas is going to be a part of that. The Kimberley floods should

be a wake-up call that a gas-based, business-as-usual model has been swept away. These floods are just the latest sign that new polluting fossil-fuel projects must not be approved in this area.