

POLYPHAGOUS SHOT-HOLE BORER

Statement

HON NEIL THOMSON (Mining and Pastoral) [5.33 pm]: Tonight I want to raise a matter that I think is important to the all the Western Australian community, particularly those in Perth. My intent in raising this matter is to see whether we can get some movement on this specific issue for the sake of our Western Australian environment. On 20 March 2024, I asked a question about the polyphagous shot-hole borer, which is a pest that is impacting our urban trees in Western Australia. Not many people know much about it. There is a quarantine area in Western Australia. Some news about it is being reported by the media. I know that some work is happening in Hyde Park and a few other areas in the city to deal with the trees that are affected by this very dangerous pest.

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It is not dangerous to humans but it weakens the trees and will have an impact on our urban environment. We know that Perth has had a major problem with the loss of tree cover in the urban environment, which is having a big impact on our urban community in terms of the heat island effect. That could accelerate quite seriously as this pest starts to have effect. I am seeking some more information from Hon Jackie Jarvis, who no doubt is working very hard on this issue. I hope, and am certain they will be, that the staff at the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development are working hard to resolve the issue.

I met with Dion Johnson from Parks and Leisure Australia (WA), the peak body that engages with local government and park managers around our urban parks, and Giles Pickard, representing the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and they raised some concerns about the level of transparency around the impact of the borer. Obviously, with the right intent, they are worried about the fact that people in Western Australia are not fully aware of this pest and that there is still movement of vegetation throughout the city. One would not really know unless one has become aware that we cannot move vegetation material outside the quarantine area. We know that with pests and diseases of plants and animals, like any pest or disease, we need to respond with quarantine controls and go hard, go fast and go early. That is the answer to this because that is the only way it can be stopped—if it can be stopped. I was involved in this area in the early part of my career. In fact, my master's degree was on the control of the spread of pests and diseases. I studied that at university. Sometimes we are unable to eradicate a pest or disease, so a better scenario is to control and build awareness of it.

From the answers given by the minister, there is a prospect of eradicating this disease, and I think it would be good to know how. I refer to question without notice 224. Perhaps the minister could be so kind as to look, and also have her office look, at the *Hansard*. Maybe a briefing could be provided to Parliament or publicly at some time, as I have some matters that I want to raise on this issue. Part (3) of my question asked how the pest entered Australia, and the answer was that it was unknown how the pest entered. The pest was first detected in East Fremantle, so there is a high probability that it came through the Fremantle port. In that situation, there is a case for undertaking some analysis of the quarantine controls, because we clearly have a vulnerability there. It is important to present that more transparently. Question (4) asked —

What is the existing budget to control and eradicate the borer?

The response was —

This is a three-year, cost-shared national response plan, with an associated budget of \$41.29 million.

From talking to Mr Johnson and Mr Pickard, I know they feel that the resourcing has been inadequate. They believe that the response of attempting to identify any infestation by viewing trees from the ground is inadequate for large iconic trees in the metro area, and they feel that more should be done. There is also concern that DPIRD is not supporting local independent trials of alternative responses at this point. That issue was raised by the industry. I note the three-year response, but it appears that it will end on 6 August 2024. What are we going to do beyond that and how are we going to be able to deal with this so that we make progress with this terrible situation in Western Australia? There are a few questions there.

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The fifth part to my question without notice asked, “Can the borer feasibly be eradicated in Western Australia?” That is a very important question. I raised this matter with people from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development earlier before asking the question without notice, and they were not sure whether it could be eradicated. In fact, some potential feedback to industry was that maybe it could not be. Looking at the way in which the pest has been managed, it would appear that the department is not taking a hard, fast and early approach to eradicating the disease. We know that when disease can be feasibly eradicated, it is better to go hard, fast and early to deal with it and not let it spread, because the longer the disease is in the community, the more likely it will end up becoming impossible to eradicate.

Industry has got back to me and asked whether there are any known or suspected cases via sampling of the pest found outside the published quarantine zone? What does DPIRD measure to determine a successful eradication? Is it deemed successful when there is total eradication of the disease, or just containment and control? That is a very important point. There is no clarity in the community's mind, apart from the fact that most people do not know about it. I am sure that many members in here are not fully aware of the issue. We should be looking to find more clarity around the approach that is used and to get the community mobilised behind an eradication program to get on top of this issue. This will help to save the iconic old trees and our canopy cover and allow us to get on with the job of creating the green city that we all aspire to. What are the measures? I hope that we can have more transparency on reporting in this area. The quarantine zone has increased over time, so what measures are in place if the response plan has been inadequate to restrict the spread? Let us have an honest conversation about that. There is a feeling that not enough information has been provided. DPIRD might have a lot of information, but it is not coming out to industry.

The sixth part of my question 6 asked, "What percentage of urban trees will be impacted by the borer?" The answer was that this is undetermined. That is really inadequate. Perhaps this is a range or an understanding, and has any work been done to determine the impact on the state's biodiversity? Has work been conducted to determine the impact it will have on the state's urban tree canopy? That is what is in the back of the mind of a lot of people who are starting to become aware of this problem.

My final question asked about the impact of native flora and banksia woodlands in particular. The answer, in part, was that native trees are not considered natural hosts of the polyphagous shot-hole borer. I suppose that question was batted away, but there is a view that it affects some native trees. Industry is certainly saying that it knows that endemic and native species have been impacted. Does DPIRD have an understanding —

Hon Jackie Jarvis: I am happy to organise a briefing for you. All you have to do is ask.

Hon NEIL THOMSON: I am asking about this in the Parliament because this is really important. I know that the minister does not like this issue in the public domain, but I am asking her to take note of these things and provide more transparency for the Western Australian community.