ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY STANDING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Water Licensing and Services

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
THURSDAY, 31 JANUARY 2008

Members

Mr R.C. Kucera (Chairman)
Mr G.A. Woodhams (Deputy Chairman)
Dr J.M. Edwards
Mr M.P. Murray
Mr A.J. Simpson

Hearing commenced at 10.27 am

TALLENTIRE, MR CHRISTOPHER
Director, Conservation Council of WA,
c/- 2 Delhi Street,
West Perth 6005, examined:

McKIERNAN, MR STEVEN
Water Policy Officer, Conservation Council of WA,
c/- 2 Delhi Street,
West Perth 6005, examined:

Dr J.M. EDWARDS (Acting Chairman): I thank you for coming in this morning. As this is a hearing, I need to read a statement to you and get you to answer a couple of simple questions that I am sure Chris has certainly done before and Steve may have as well.

The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. So, if you could both answer these questions for the purpose of the record. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mr Tallentire: Yes, I have.

Mr McKiernan: Yes.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

Mr Tallentire: Yes, indeed.

Mr McKiernan: Indeed, yes.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Did you receive and read an information for witnesses briefing sheet regarding giving evidence before parliamentary committees?

The Witnesses: Yes.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee today?

Mr Tallentire: No.

Mr McKiernan: None.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Thank you. We have received your submission. Before we start, do you wish to propose any amendments to your submission?

Mr Tallentire: There are no amendments to the submission.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Are there any other statements you want to make in addition to the submission?

Mr Tallentire: Just a very brief introductory statement to say that the Conservation Council, through its strategic planning processes, has identified water as being a top priority area for the conservationists that we represent - some 80 affiliated groups across the state. The concern that people have is about our water resource management and how that interrelates with climate change

and also biodiversity protection, all of which is very much in the minds of conservationists and, I think, the general public in Western Australia. We see that the issue of licensing is critical to that water resource management. There are opportunities before us to really progress things such as security of title so that we can get better water resource management across the state. Steven, do you want to add any points to that?

Mr McKiernan: No; I think as we progress, our submission will be further fleshed out.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Starting with the state water plan, do you have any general comments you want to make about that and where licensing fits in from the plan?

Mr Tallentire: We are happy with the general direction in which the state water plan is going and we see that the licensing aspect to that will be critical. The regional water plans will be an essential part of it as well.

Mr McKiernan: As we filter down into the statutory water management plans, which are the next cab off the rank after the regional water plans, it will be crucial that we account for every bit of water allocation within those particular catchments and sub-catchment areas of groundwater and surface water management areas. It is critical that any allocation of water in those areas is, first of all, registered, licensed and then, preferably, metered. There is a clear push within the state water plan for that to filter down to those statutory water management plans.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Would your philosophical base underpinning that be the notion of sustainability stewardship?

Mr McKiernan: Yes; sustainability is the basis for the state water plan, as far as we interpret it. However, it not only looks at the consumptive uses of water; it is also, primarily under the state water plan and the National Water Initiative, to actually examine the environmental uses of that water and the costs of extracting or intercepting water from an environmental perspective. We need to take into account groundwater-dependent ecosystems and the environmental water requirements of vegetation, flora and fauna in water-dependent ecosystems. We see the state water plan as the ideal means in which to do that. Licensing forms one part of water resource management, so as we progress through this morning's submission, we will see that water resource management needs to have a much higher profile than just focusing on whichever water licence regime that we come up with in Western Australia.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: How would you see what you refer to in your submission as "full environmental cost recovery" being applied?

Mr McKiernan: We see that as not only looking at the cost of water for consumptive users, but as water systems or catchment areas get closer and closer to full allocation, we see there is a requirement for increased costs because, basically, we will have consumptive users on a knife edge looking for and needing an incentive to go towards increased water use efficiency. They will require data upon which to back that up, particularly as they are trying to manage their water use in a climate system that is undergoing chaotic change. We need to take a precautionary principle approach to the use of water in Western Australia and, as a state, we need to look at how the water will be used, what values we want to protect, particularly from the environmental perspective, and what are the implications for future water users who may have barriers to actually get into the market.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Just to pick up on that whole picture of the full cost recovery process, I guess what we are looking at is that Western Australia, to use an analogy, has a bucket of water and we need to identify who is taking from it. Through this inquiry, report and so forth, we have identified, for instance, the south west scenarios in which a blue gum plantation has sucked up some surface water from a dam on a neighbouring farm, so it is coming that they should be charged or pay a certain percentage for water because they are using it. I guess it is the same wherever we go in the state where there is natural bush or something or other that draws on the water as well. To get this

full cost recovery, for any part of the land that is a Bush Forever site, that is a conservation zone etc, something will have to be factored into that full cost recovery to say that amount of hectares or acreage of space is just natural bush but it is drawing a certain percentage of water, so there has to be a charge back to that process. Did you see that as well?

Mr Tallentire: I think the first step might be, though, to make sure that we have the environmental water allocations right, so for natural areas, we would assume that that is included in the environmental allocation. I think that the point that you raise about blue gum plantations is an interesting one. You would hope that through good catchment management planning, the majority of blue gum plantations would be in areas where groundwater table rises are such that the plantation is actually having a beneficial or equilibrating impact on the whole catchment.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Would you agree they should be charged as a water user just like you and I?

Mr Tallentire: I think if there is a surplus of water in the catchment and the blue gums are being used to return things to an equilibrium, for the purposes of consistency it may be necessary to have a charge, but it needs to be looked at in that context of good catchment management planning.

Mr McKiernan: The other thing to take into account is that we have seen the impact of large-scale plantation forestry, particularly in sensitive areas. I could quote the Gnangara mound as an instance in which hydrogeological investigations have identified that the pines on the Gnangara mound actually stop infiltration of water into the mound. There are so many thousands of hectares of pines that whatever rainfall there is, is immediately taken up by those pines, thereby preventing, firstly, recharge to the superficial and deeper aquifers that we depend on for, I guess, our sense of place on the Swan coastal plain in terms of recharge of the wetlands, and, also, there is an impact in that it does not infiltrate down to the deeper aquifer, which we are dependent upon for our water supply. Therefore, the Gnangara mound is basically being hit from two sides: not only do we have increased evapotranspiration from plantation forestry, but also we are experiencing rainfall decline, so we are getting less in and we are taking more out. The hydrographs are all pointing downwards and, obviously, plantation forestry is involved in that. I understand the state government has contracts for the removal of the pines on the Gnangara mound and there is the Gnangara sustainability strategy as well, which specifically takes into account plantation forestry along with a number of other issues.

Under paragraph 55 of the National Water Initiative, large-scale plantation forestry is highlighted as a particular non-licensed user of water. I think having it highlighted in that COAG-level document demonstrates the need for a broader-scale strategic approach to the usage of blue gum or other large-scale plantations across Western Australia. That could also apply to, say, oil mallees in the wheatbelt or the rangelands as well. Therefore, we need to take into account plantation forestry and its expected water usage. What are the implications for the environment of continually putting in several thousands of hectares of blue gums across what was once productive farmland? What is the result of having this industrial change in land use from productive agriculture to pulp production? Yes, we need to take into account blue gum forestry in particular.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Firstly, my apologies for being late. You should have seen me run up the street! However, I think there is a slightly different issue: I refer to the deep ripping and the mounding in blue gum plantations that go across the water courses and certainly across the hillsides to make sure they catch all the water before it actually gets down in there. So I believe they are taking more than their fair share due to their practices of planting. The ripper goes through, or goes down to, I think, at about nine foot something, so it can be established so that when the water starts to run off, it certainly gets into the strata very much quicker than it would with normal forests.

[10.40 am]

Mr Tallentire: I think we have enough experience with blue gums to be able to make the calculations and put an actual figure on the amount of water that those blue gums would be transpiring, so it would not be too difficult to work out what their take-up is.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Okay.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: To go back to your earlier comment, if a blue gum plantation could survive summer in the wheatbelt, then it is probably performing a different role in the context of a catchment management plan than would be performed by a very commercial blue gum plantation near Bridgetown.

Mr Tallentire: Yes. That is a really important point. In a state as big as Western Australia, there are many different situations. The situation in the south west is very different from the situation in the wheatbelt, where the beneficial impacts of not necessarily blue gums but, say, oil mallee plantations, would be such that you would not want to do anything to discourage people from putting in deep rooted perennial vegetation to assist with re-establishing the watertable equilibrium.

Mr McKiernan: You raised the point, Mr Simpson, of looking at native vegetation, say state forest areas, or Bush Forever areas, or areas of high ecological biodiversity, and you drew a connection with blue gum forestry, because they are intercepting the water flow, or water infiltration.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: The argument would be that they are using water. The National Water Initiative refers to full cost recovery. If we think of the water in Western Australia as being a bucket, then everybody who taps into that bucket will have to pay something to use that water. What we are trying to identify is the amount of water, and who is using it. The next stage is charging people to use that water, and that brings us to the idea of licensing people to use that water, which is the part that we are still working on. The Water Corporation is telling us that domestic bores will not have to be licensed, but businesses will have to be licensed, and they will have to pay for their water. That may create a scenario where on one side of the road there is a market gardener who is paying a lot of money for his water, and on the other side of the road there is a person on a one-acre lifestyle block who is pumping water but is not paying a cent for it. If we can go back to my original comment, if you as the Conservation Council are using water to maintain the natural bushland and that sort of stuff, are you happy about the idea that you will be charged because you are tapping into the water?

Mr McKiernan: Absolutely not. Also, that does not comply with paragraph 25 of the "Intergovernmental Agreement on a National Water Initiative", which states -

> x) identify and acknowledge surface and groundwater systems of high conservation value, and manage these systems to protect and enhance those values; and

Therefore, there is a distinction between environmental use, or environmental benefit, versus consumptive use.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: So if I own a nursery and am growing plants I should not have to pay anything for my water, because I am helping to put more trees back into the community.

Mr Tallentire: No!

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Okay! I see! It is a commercial enterprise. I guess what we are trying to work out is if we are to have full cost recovery, I do not see why I as a bore owner should have to subsidise your Bush Forever site down the road when you are drawing water as well.

Mr McKiernan: The other implication, particularly if we are looking at that in a regional context, is to say what is the value of the rainfall that is landing on that Bush Forever block, of whatever size. It may be having a beneficial effect in terms of filtering the water, or in providing biodiversity value for other areas as well. That may be apiary values, or it may be some other conflicting values that I will not go into now.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes. I understand where you are going with that. We are talking about having a bucket of water, and about who is using that water. However, when we start to talk about all the different types of industry, that raises the question of who is going to pay for the water the state takes up just for general conservation reasons and Bush Forever. We are certainly trying to maintain those Bush Forever sites, because we realise the benefits of having green buffers, and we know they are good for the environment and that type of thing. However, they are sucking up water, and the problem is should someone pay for that, or should it just come out of general revenue.

Mr McKiernan: Absolutely. It is intercepting it before it is made available for consumptive use. A key tenet of the National Water Initiative is that environmental values are identified, measured and assessed before a determination is made about the size and value of that consumptive pool. I guess the critical issue that you are driving at is to look at that consumptive pool as being something that we deal with once we have established how much water we have left to play with. That is where we come into arguments of water use efficiency.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: That is right.

Mr McKiernan: When we talk about full cost recovery, we are talking about the full cost recovery of water resource management. We are not talking necessarily about going just to that irrigated water user and saying you are responsible for looking after that Bush Forever block. We are saying that government has a certain amount of responsibility to provide the background detail in terms of, say, the Indian Ocean climate initiative, engagement with CSIRO in terms of how much rainfall we can expect, what sort of forward planning we should do, and how much we should warn consumptive users that they do need to plan for the future and that they cannot always be guaranteed that they will have a certain amount of water to use every year as they wish.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes, and that is part of the process of identifying where the water is, and charging accordingly so that we can get some recovery back for it. We understand that.

Mr McKiernan: I understand from your terms of reference that you are looking solely at licensing. From the perspective of the Conservation Council and our affiliate groups, we would like that to be not just cost recovery and licensing, but definitely also water resource management.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: I think it is one step at a time. We first need to find out how much water we have, and we then need to identify the users so that we can start the process of allocating that water.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Just to change tack a bit, you state in your submission -

> An absolute minimum standard of water accounting and accountability is for ALL dams, groundwater bores and other water intercepting structures to be identified.

At a practical level, would that be carried out in the way that Chris alluded to, where you would want to know that information for the most sensitive catchments first, or for catchments where there is a lot of water activity, and you would then cascade that down to those catchments for which the information is not so vital?

Mr Tallentire: It is a project that will require extensive study. I suppose that is where the setting of the licence fee will come in. We need to have enough resources to be able to do that properly. Just to take another area in which a licence is applied - the fisheries domain - there is a licence fee, and then on top of that licence fee there is a management fee, and that helps to pay for the good management of the fishery. I think we need to look at doing the same thing when it comes to managing water resources.

Mr McKiernan: I see that the Department of Water is already heading down the track of identifying those catchments or sub-catchments that are at, or over, their sustainable allocation limits. To mention Gnangara again, there are certain sub-catchments in Gnangara that are well over their allocation limits. There is going to be some pain, I guess, for licence holders in those areas as

the Department of Water tries to claw back and get those particular sub-catchments back into some form of sustainability. Would it be possible to read that question again? I did have another point that I wanted to raise.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: It basically related to your statement that all dams, bores and water intercepting structures be identified. I am trying to think through the practical implications of that.

Mr McKiernan: The other point I wanted to highlight is that if you want to manage water in Western Australia, you need to know where it is being used, how it is being used and what quantities are being used. I understand there is a certain city-country divide in terms of metropolitan unlicensed bore usage. One of the criticisms is that we do not know where every domestic bore is. The latest data I have seen is a 2005 report by CSIRO that indicates that there are approximately 155 000 domestic bores in use. We do not know how those bores are being used, and it is only recently that they have become subject to the same, or similar, domestic watering restrictions as scheme garden watering programs. We need to know where those domestic bores are. We also need to know where dams are located in peri-urban or rural areas.

[10.50 am]

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: That is the argument. You need to know the location of domestic bores. In my electorate of Serpentine-Jarrahdale, anyone who lives out of the town of Mundijong, Byford or Serpentine relies on a bore - one in 10 of which is registered. I know they have a bore because otherwise they would never survive and the Water Corporation tells me that it is a domestic bore. I live on a 1 000 square metre block in town. I have a bore. It has been on the property since before I bought the place and it is not registered. I do not know how we are going to identify the locations of all those bores.

Mr McKiernan: CSIRO has done a smaller study in the Floreat area in the vicinity of Perry Lakes - the groundwater gradient from Perry Lakes. It was a very resource-intensive study in which they knocked on every door asking, “Do you have a bore?” or looked at the garden. There are inferred models; the Water Corporation has looked at and identified that a particular house in a suburb is using less water and therefore assumes there is a garden bore in use. However, that is just an assumption. Or someone has dobbed them in and the Water Corporation has gone to check if they are using a bore.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes, that is what I am saying. It is time consuming and it will be hard to do that.

Mr McKiernan: Given the recent government rebates for domestic garden bores, I hope that a record of domestic bore locations is being kept.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: There is a record, but it is very hit and miss.

Mr McKiernan: Particularly in some areas where there are environmental values nearby in which the cumulative impact of unlicensed domestic bores is the largest taker of water from the groundwater resource. We feel that to improve the value of our water resource management, we need to know the locations of the bores. If it comes down to knocking on doors, perhaps it could be integrated into a meter reading approach with the Water Corporation. I do not know how that applies in peri-urban areas such as your electorate. I do not know how it could be done in those areas other than by naming and shaming or dobbing in.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes, that has always been an issue.

Mr McKiernan: However, if you do not know how much water is being used, you cannot manage it. That has been a critical component or part of our submission to the state water plan.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Once we have identified the location do we put a meter on every bore?

Mr McKiernan: That is certainly our policy - yes. Apocryphal evidence suggests that most people comply with the watering restrictions. I am not up at three in the morning to work out if someone has reset their automatic sprinkler system operating off a bore and if they are watering every night. It is something that we are unable to determine. However, I can see why there would be some concern in irrigation areas in which people are subject to certain water restrictions whereas it appears that the Perth metropolitan area has 160 000 straws into the superficial aquifer and is pumping the water into the air to grow lawns and roses.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: That is right. We talk about the English cottage garden that we try to grow in the Australian climate. That has always been the argument.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: What is the council's view on water trading systems?

Mr Tallentire: We think there is potential for some degree of water trading within catchments; however, across catchments we are not supportive of water trading.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Yes.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: What about the issue of a water licence and the land ownership? One of the issues that have come up now is, for example, I have bought a property but I am not farming anymore. I sell off the 100 acres but I do not sell the water rights with the land; I sell them to my neighbour. There has been a big push to make sure that we link the water licence with the property right owner so that it stays with the land. There is not much point buying 100 acres of land for which I have no water allocation. I will have to buy water from somewhere. That seems to be one of the issues out there as well.

Mr Tallentire: I suppose there is an argument to say that you can increase efficiencies when people can trade with neighbours.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes, but what about the ownership? If I bought the property, should I have rights to that water or does it stay with the original owner?

Mr Tallentire: I think we need to have separate titles so there can be that degree of trading within catchments.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Okay.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Mick, is there anything you want to ask?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I was thinking about the question that you just asked about the attachment of the water licence to the property title. Water trading could also turn some areas into a desert, as far as production is concerned, because you would not have any water licence for that area. Say a big company bought out the whole area in order to obtain water licence rights. You might have 1 000 acres that is non-productive. Should there be any restriction on the timeframe of those licences or the buying of that water? You might be able to buy water for up to five years.

Mr Tallentire: The critical thing would be that the water will only be used in that catchment; if they buy up the water in that catchment, there is no risk of desertification of the area because the water will not be leaving the catchment.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: You would have to work out what the catchment areas are then.

Mr Tallentire: Sure, and I think we have good knowledge of that.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Okay.

Mr McKiernan: There is also the eastern states' experience in terms of water trading. It does not necessarily have to be a permanent water trade. There are temporary trades from one year to five or 10 years. I read a news report yesterday reporting trading of up to $2 000 a megalitre in South Australia. If through efficient water use, a water user has reduced his water consumption to a certain level thereby creating an opportunity to trade the excess water available within his

allocation, he would certainly look to maximise the efficient usage of that water by trading it to someone downstream or diverting one of his dams to send the water downstream for someone to use. Certainly, the premium of $2 000 a megalitre in South Australia - I think it was $1 000 a megalitre in Queensland until the recent flood - is something that a water licence holder would be keen to trade off and thereby diversify his particular farming or irrigation enterprise.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: We are concerned that in the case of a mining company that buys up 10 separate 100 acre farms because they fall in the buffer zone or whatever, that that mining company then has the water rights of those 10 farms to use for mining purposes. Mick is alluding to the fact that in five years the original owner can say no to the mine continuing to suck the water out for mining purposes while only paying for the water at the rate a farmer would pay for agricultural purposes. Really, the mine should be charged at a higher rate because the water is being used for mining.

We are just trying to clarify that situation. If the mining company buys up the land and the water rights, it has cheap water to use for mining processes whereas X gigalitres of water for mining purposes would be charged at a higher rate but by buying the farms in the buffer zone, the mining company can access the water at a cheaper rate. There is no way to determine whether the mining company should pay more for that water because it can say it is using allocated water. So this is a situation in which we say there should be a four or five-year time limit on the water licence, to make sure that the mining company is using the water for the right reasons. It was originally to be used for farming purposes, wherever that farm was, but now, all of a sudden it has been diverted into a mining process.

Mr McKiernan: The critical point that I would make about your statement is that currently water has no volumetric value in WA. We are looking at a staged introduction of a fee based on a volumetric allocation but we are not looking at a volumetric usage rate - that is to come down the track. Once we have got into allocation and metering in a trading environment, then we can start applying a value per megalitre or gigalitre to that water. Currently, there is no value applied to a particular volume of water in Western Australia, regardless of its purpose.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: That is right. We understand that.

Mr McKiernan: Clearly, the Department of Water has a stated policy intention or drive to have the highest and most efficient and best use of water in Western Australia. Presumably we would look at a whole range of issues and yes, there may be some payment identified with particular instances. However, if the highest and best use of water is also the most efficient use of water, then I do not see that there is necessarily any concern from the environment movement in that particular instance; coming as it does after we have already determined our environmental water allocations.

Mr Tallentire: It is true that there could be a competition between those two extractive users - agricultural versus mining. As Steven is saying, I think it would end up going to the highest value usage.

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Yes.

[11.00 am]

Mr McKiernan: As we get to nearing that 100 per cent allocation in particular areas, it becomes critical that our water resource management policies improve, water management improves and the amount of information we have improves, and also the provision of education and incentives for water users who are in those very critical areas that are nearing 100 per cent allocation to engage in water efficiency methods and processes. Water resource management is not always about volume but about the quality of the water and the kind of conflicting processes within a catchment that can degrade the value of the water as well. Those kinds of water resource management issues need to be taken into account. You could have a particular groundwater use in one part of a catchment that could be having a detrimental impact on the quality of the water available for other users. Salinity

is one issue, but there is also the issue of acid sulfate soils in which groundwater drawdown causes oxidisation, which has impacts for downstream users and also environmental impacts. Again, on Gnangara, where there is a drawdown of water, there is a significant impact. When pH in certain wetlands gets below four - so getting close to stomach acid - there is an 80 per cent drop in biodiversity in those wetlands. That has implications not only for water users downstream who are also sharing that water use, but also for the acidification of the groundwater, which impacts on infrastructure, sprinklers, pumps etc. There is then degrading at a faster rate. We also experience huge environmental impacts as a result of that. A wetland is more prone to fire damage as a result of groundwater decline. Once a fire goes through a wetland, the wetland is more prone to acidification, to weed invasion and to feral plant and animal species as well. Therefore, water resource management is critical to that; it is not just the licence. I think we have emphasised that probably more than enough.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Do you have any closing comments you would like to make?

Mr Tallentire: I have just a final point on the transparency of licensing. Under present arrangements it is very difficult for the community to get access to information about the conditions on a particular water licence. We would be looking to see a new system in which that is greatly improved. I think it is critical that the community can see what the conditions are, and that people have readily available access.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Is the argument against it commercial confidentiality?

Mr Tallentire: I think that people were seeing that potentially it was possible to trade licences and, therefore, it was commercial in confidence.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: May I just clarify it, without naming names because that might be unfair: has the council tried to find out the conditions of a particular entity's licence from the Department of Water?

Mr Tallentire: Indeed, and on a number of occasions we have had a fair degree of resistance.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: Do you get partial information?

Mr McKiernan: That is my understanding, yes.

Mr Tallentire: Yes, some information comes back.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: You would not necessarily get some of the volumes.

Mr Tallentire: No.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: That would be the most sensible.

Mr Tallentire: I can eventually provide details of two cases that we have pursued and that we have documented.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: If you would not mind, for the purpose of the record, providing us with a supplementary submission - you do not need to go to any particular trouble - on those two case studies you are referring to; to the extent you are able to provide the information to us, that would be very useful.

Mr Tallentire: Great.

Mr McKiernan: If I could just add something. In the past I have made a direct phone call to the Department of Water and said, "I've heard rumours of a particularly large allocation in one particular area. Are you able to confirm this for me?" They have said, "Yes, that person owns these licences." That very informal approach is made. When it comes down to the detail, such as where the bore is located, the dam is located and the conditions of use, those things tend to be sequested away and not be available, I guess using the commercial in confidence aspect of it.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: If you compare that with other forms of environmental licensing, they are on the public record.

Mr McKiernan: They are on the public record. There is good advertising. There is a submission phase. There is often an appeal phase as well. We really do need to bring water licences into line with those other environmental areas. It has been a clear submission from the Conservation Council in the past two years through the State Water Forum process that increased transparency of water allocations should be a basic tenet of the new water resources legislation, which I understand is going through parliamentary counsel drafting as we speak. Access to that information in databases should be made freely available. I am sure the technology is there. The Conservation Council, for instance, is easily able to determine clearing permits. Those clearing permits are archived and the information is available. If a clearing permit has been granted or is being advertised for comment, we are able to see it. They are advertised in *The West Australian*; they are available on the web; we are able to see them every week as new ones go up. No such similar instrument applies under the Rights in Water and Irrigation Act. When an application for a licence for a water allocation is applied for, it is usually advertised only in the local press. For instance, it may be advertised in the local Donnybrook press, and would appear only in that area. It does not necessarily have to appear in *The West Australian*. Obviously, the costs for a local irrigator to advertise in *The West Australian* statewide are probably beyond their realms if they are after 100 megalitres or something like that and it would probably be a little unrealistic. However, there should be some means by which third parties, particularly the Conservation Council, know exactly the status of various catchments, where the pressures are being applied to catchments by increased water licence applications and the number of water licence applications. As those areas get near full allocation, we would like to see an increased level of scientific investigation of the environmental water requirements of those areas, as they may be placed under increased pressure, not only from volume but also from water quality.

Mr Tallentire: In many cases where we do hear of licences being advertised and make comment, the feedback is fairly unsatisfactory; it is just a note from the department saying, "Thank you for your submission," whereas in other areas we get an opportunity to make meaningful comment and our issues are responded to. That is another area in which things have to be brought into line.

Dr J.M. EDWARDS: I thank you both very much for appearing today. Before you leave I will make a closing statement. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Please make these corrections and return the transcript within 10 days of receipt. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct.

Hearing concluded at 11.07 am.