

Division 69: Swan River Trust, \$12 020 000 —

Mr P. Abetz, Chairman.

Mr A.P. Jacob, Minister for Environment.

Mr R. Hughes, General Manager.

Mr M. G. Cugley, Manager, River System Management.

Ms K. Rogers, Manager, Business Services.

Mr L. R. Caporn, Manager, Riverpark.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: The member for Maylands.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to page 826 and the heading “Spending Changes”. I seek some information on two of the line items under this heading, namely program rationalisation, and public sector workforce reform. I note that \$1 million has been taken out of program funding. I would like to know a bit of detail about that, if possible. Also, how many FTE does \$104 000 equate to?

[9.20 pm]

Mr A.P. JACOB: I thank the member for Maylands for her question. Specifically on the program rationalisation, as I have outlined in previous divisions, this is something that is taking place across government as part of our fiscal action plan. I think it was quite fortuitous for the Swan River Trust that this one had been identified. As the member will recall, I have spoken on this in the house on many occasions. It is in and around oxygenation plants. We currently have two oxygenation plants on the Swan River and two oxygenation plants on the Canning River. We will build the third oxygenation plant at the Nicholson Road Bridge, and then we will go back and upgrade the other two oxygenation plants on the Canning River, and that should see good saturation through there. The upgrades that have already happened on the Swan River have more or less shown us that the third plant was not needed, and the upgrades have provided a level of oxygen there that has meant that, with the new oxygenation technology, we can move away from the third plant on the Swan River.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I note the significant issues impacting the agency on page 827 of the budget papers. This is a further question, but I am a bit confused, because the second dot point refers to the oxygenation program plant to be built in 2013–14. I am just checking that that is still being built. The second dot point—the minister just referred to it—states —

The Trust’s oxygenation program ... In the coming year, the program will be significantly enhanced with a new plant to be built in the upper Canning River.

Mr A.P. JACOB: That is correct.

Ms L.L. BAKER: The minister is still building one but he is not building another.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Yes. This one relates specifically to the Canning River upstream from the Kent Street Weir. Since the 1890s, the Swan River has become estuarine, so the two on the Swan River are more at the upper reaches of that. We had initially looked at putting in a third oxygenation plant. However, the upgrades to the new oxygenation technology have meant that we have not needed to do that. That has fortuitously provided the saving there. The extra oxygenation plant on the Canning River system is still going in, as are the two upgrades to the existing oxygenation plants on the Canning River.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I have a further question on this issue. I think I get it; I will just a double-check. That means that the oxygenation plants that were planned—however many there were—were already budgeted for and contained in the consolidated account budget for the Swan River Trust, and now the minister has basically found himself in a position of not building one plant and saving \$1 million; is that right?

Mr A.P. JACOB: But we are still building the one that we need.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Okay. The second point that I had asked about originally was the public sector workforce reform. At only \$100 000, is that one job or parts of jobs?

Mr A.P. JACOB: As I have said, those savings have applied across government, and there is a yet-to-be-determined result for the Swan River Trust on how that will apply. I do not know whether Mr Hughes wants to give any further information on those targets.

Mr R. Hughes: I know that we have been able to make the first year’s savings without losing any staff, and we are yet to finalise how we achieve the savings in the out years.

Ms L.L. BAKER: And is the trust backfilling holiday leave and things like that?

Mr R. Hughes: Absolutely; that is one of the tactics we have used.

Mr J. NORBERGER: I refer the minister to the second dot point under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 827 and to references to the conditions in the Canning River. The Swan River Trust has advised that marine water has over-topped the Kent Street Weir in recent years, exacerbating water quality problems in the weir pool. Can the minister advise whether the current state of the Kent Street Weir at Cannington has any bearing on water quality in the Canning River and what the government is doing in response?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I thank the member for that question. The Canning River upstream from the Kent Street Weir is usually a freshwater system, but it has, however, had periods of saltwater intrusion previously for a very limited duration and impact. Over the past few years, however, a combination of low freshwater inflows and high tides has resulted in unprecedented levels of saltwater intrusion over the Kent Street Weir and into the weir pool. At times this has extended for at least seven kilometres upstream, all the way to the Royal Street Bridge in Kenwick. With a drying climate trend, such events are predicted to become more common in future years. The effects on the aquatic plants and the animals are still largely unknown, but there have been reports of jellyfish upstream from the weir and also unseasonal mats of dead freshwater aquatic vegetation. The ecology of the Kent Street Weir pool is important, and a range of on-ground projects are occurring in the catchment through in-river interventions. These include oxygenation, as I outlined earlier, and also the application of Phoslock—I think in excess of 54 tonnes of Phoslock—within the Kent Street Weir pool, and this is helping to contribute to the maintenance of health in our river systems. The Swan River Trust is continuing to monitor the river to better assess the impacts of this saltwater intrusion and also prevent potential contaminants in the drainage system from entering the Canning River system upstream from the Kent Street Weir.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: I refer to the second dot point under “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency” on page 827 of the budget papers. I am interested to know what action the Swan River Trust is taking to reduce nutrient levels in the Swan and Canning Rivers, especially what action the minister is taking to phase out highly water-soluble fertilisers.

Mr A.P. JACOB: That is probably more of a policy discussion matter, but principally the fertiliser partnership that the state government has brought in is an important initiative that is aimed at reducing nutrient inflows into our waterways. It has helped to improve fertiliser management through industry-accredited fertiliser programs. The fertiliser partnership is all about establishing a cooperative partnership between the government and the fertiliser industry, user groups and the community to reduce nutrient loss or nutrients leaching into our aquatic ecosystems from fertilisers. Last year the state government contributed funding of \$2.85 million for the implementation of three projects under the fertiliser partnership. In addition to these projects, significant work has been done, and will continue to be done, in and around nutrients stripping wetlands.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Is the minister seeking to phase out highly water-soluble fertilisers—yes or no?

Mr A.P. JACOB: As I have indicated, we have the fertiliser partnership up and running.

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Yes or no?

Mr A.P. JACOB: Member, we have —

Mr C.J. TALLENTIRE: Yes or no?

The CHAIRMAN: Member, the minister is free to answer however he wishes. I can ask you, “Have you stopped beating your wife—yes or no?” That is not an appropriate question.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Yes. We consider all issues as they come across at any given time. Every issue is open for consideration.

Mr D.C. NALDER: I refer to the outcomes and effectiveness indicators on page 828 relating to the ecological health of the rivers. Water quality has been linked to the demise of the recreational prawn fishery in the Swan and Canning Rivers. What is there to gain by simply restocking the river with prawns?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I thank the member for that question. The Department of Fisheries is the lead agency regarding stocking of fish. The western school prawns fishery is popular in the Swan Canning Riverpark. Historically, both commercial and recreational fishers have enjoyed our prawns in the Swan River. Commercial catches peaked at 14 tonnes per annum in 1959, and they declined to as low as three tonnes in 1975. Commercial fisheries no longer target these prawns. Indeed, coming from a riverside electorate, I remember years ago it was a very common thing to see people down at the river, and, as a kid, I was one of them. That has more or less faded away with time as well. Environmental factors and not fishing pressure are thought to have been responsible for the decline of the previous abundance of western school prawns. However, this has not yet been

Extract from Hansard

[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 20 August 2013]

p202b-206a

Chairman; Ms Lisa Baker; Mr Albert Jacob; Mr Jan Norberger

proved. The trust has collaborated with Murdoch University, the Challenger Institute, the Department of Fisheries and Recfishwest, as well as others such as the WA Fish Foundation and the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, to develop a project that is aimed at addressing the decline of the species. This project has objectives that include piloting the production and release of western school prawns in the riverpark over a three-year period, engaging the community through stock release and monitoring, and also —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: The minister has already put out a press release on this.

Mr A.P. JACOB: No, I do not think so, member.

There is also the use of stock enhancement to gain an insight into issues that may limit natural recruitment and survival of western school prawns in the Swan Canning Riverpark.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to the third dot point on page 827, which refers to the new Perth Stadium at Burswood. I understand that a pedestrian pass is to be put across the river, and any potential upstream impacts that the building of that bridge will have, with the footings being in the river, are a matter of concern to the residents of Maylands. What work has been done to assess the impact of that bridge and the Burswood development in general on that part of the Swan River, and what funding is in the trust's budget to cover this work?

[9.30 pm]

Mr A.P. JACOB: I thank the member for the question. I will hand over to Mr Hughes.

Mr R. Hughes: The trust senior officers sit as members of the Perth stadium master plan working group and they provide advice through that process. The proposal for development in the waterways will go through our assessment process. We do not receive any new funding to cover that; it is covered within the statutory planning process. That will go through the normal assessment process and we will look at the various impacts that arise and set conditions to ensure that they are mitigated.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to the same dot point and to the Metropolitan Redevelopment Authority's Waterbank project. Where is that? That is a silly question, I know!

Mr R. Hughes: Coming into the City of Perth, it is immediately on the right off the Causeway next to Trinity College. Again, we work closely with the MRA and the developers in the way that they approach that project.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Given the possible impacts of the Burswood development, if the Swan River Trust has to undertake any work, would it have to apply for funding next year to cover the work that might arise from its assessment of the impact of the pedestrian overpass?

Mr A.P. JACOB: We deal with a range of development issues up and down the length and breadth of the Swan River and Canning systems year in, year out. The dot point refers to a full-time equivalent person on the Elizabeth Quay project. That is particularly topical given the extent of dredging involved in that project. Outside of that, my understanding is that we principally manage it with the recurrent resources that we have at our disposal. I will pass over to Mr Hughes to see whether any of that is incorrect.

Mr R. Hughes: That is absolutely correct. We manage the statutory assessment process within our standing budget. We do not do any works as a result of those assessments. If work is to be done, it is most likely a condition imposed either by the minister or the trust on the proponent.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I refer to page 829 of the *Budget Statements* and to the subheading "Riverpark Management". My question relates to the funding in this budget for continuing the riverbank program, including continuing funding for the riverbank grants scheme, the riverbank proactive funding and the riverbank emergency funding that we have had in past years. It is a fantastic program. I seek some assurance about the state funding allocation for each of those areas. The minister can provide it by way of supplementary information. How much state funding is allocated to each of those areas for 2013–14, 2014–15 and 2015–16?

Mr A.P. JACOB: I thank the member for the question. I think she may have got the wrong section, but Mr Hughes principally has the substance of the question. We can answer that.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am sorry.

Mr R. Hughes: We are capable of answering the question. Generally, the riverbank program costs between \$750 000 and \$800 000 a year. Last year it was \$800 000 on the ground from the state, matched dollar for dollar by the adjoining land manager, which is mostly local government or, in some cases, a state government agency. In the coming year, \$450 000 will be distributed through the proactive funding stream for foreshore land managers. This mainly targets the large projects focused on the high priority foreshore areas as they were assessed in the 2008 foreshore assessment and management strategy. The remaining funds will be kept at around the \$200 000 to \$250 000 mark for grants processes and grants projects for which the councils will approach us for funding. Generally, we keep in reserve about \$70 000 for emergency responses. For example, I refer to a section of river walling that might have succumbed to a storm.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY — Tuesday, 20 August 2013]

p202b-206a

Chairman; Ms Lisa Baker; Mr Albert Jacob; Mr Jan Norberger

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am glad that the figure of between \$750 000 and \$800 000 is stable.

I refer finally to the heading “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies” on page 832, which refers to the Healthy Rivers Action Plan. There is a list of projected estimates of controlled grants and subsidies given by the Swan River Trust. It is decreasing each year by as much as 50 per cent of the 2013–14 estimated actual rate. Considering that the actual spending has increased in the last couple of years, why are the estimates so dramatically different over the years?

Mr A.P. JACOB: This question principally deals with the Healthy Rivers Action Plan and is not getting too far into the forward estimates, but is principally based on this year. Does Mr Hughes have something to add to that?

Mr R. Hughes: The Healthy Rivers Action Plan benefits from a range of different funding sources in particular, as well as a relatively stable baseload of state funding. We access money from the Australian government and the state Natural Resource Management Program fund. Those amounts of funding will come in for one or two years and then fall away. We remain optimistic that in the next two years the funding will be topped up again.

The appropriation was recommended.