

STARLINGS - INFESTATION

**437. Hon BARRY HOUSE to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:**

I know that the minister has addressed this issue previously. Is the minister aware of concerns being expressed by the viticulture industry and other areas of agriculture about the starling threat? What is being done to address it?

**Hon KIM CHANCE replied:**

This answer could take the rest of the day. Hopefully tomorrow, during hearings of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, we will have a better opportunity to explore this. For now, I will be as brief as I can. The situation with starlings is very serious. It has been said that it is the most serious vertebrate pest to come into Western Australia since the rabbit and the fox, and I have no reason to doubt that. From an agricultural point of view, it is a much more serious pest than the cane toad. From a biodiversity point of view, it is at least level with the cane toad. My experience with starlings, particularly in Victoria, is that wherever starlings flock and have infested an area, there are no other birds at all. Radio telemetry tracking of the birds has enabled us to get a much better idea of where they are. Starlings are very flighty and sometimes very difficult to recognise amongst a range of native species. Radio telemetry began in the starling program in about 2004, and since its introduction we have been able to get a much better idea of where the birds are. That has led to reports being confirmed of discoveries and a better idea of the numbers, and the news is all bad. We have a very serious problem.

As a result of those concerns, the budget from the Department of Agriculture and Food was increased from \$400 000, which is a long-term commitment, to \$750 000 this year, largely by transferring funds from other biosecurity programs. With other funds to be allocated, our expenditure is already well over \$1 million a year on this problem. I am the first to recognise that that is nowhere near enough, and I have submissions before cabinet as we speak to significantly increase our capacity. The Department of Conservation and Land Management has also made a substantial commitment, as have a number of other players including the South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team, which is the natural resource management group covering the south coast. Other people have come in with support in cash or kind. I hope that tomorrow I will be able to give the member a much more definitive idea of the money that has been spent. However, I will not be able to announce tomorrow the final decision about the dollars, because although it is going through the cabinet process now, that final decision will not be made until next week. It will be a substantial increase. The starling problem will probably cost in the order of \$20 million to fix over a period. We must remember that there have been starlings in Western Australia at one level or another for more than 30 years. In the past they have been as far west as Bremer Bay. The current Bremer Bay sightings have not yet been confirmed, even with radio telemetry, although we are still taking those reports seriously. They were eradicated from the Bremer Bay area in about 1989 or 1990. We can defeat them, but it will require a very committed effort and some substantial movement of funds, resources and people. I thank the member for the question.