

WATER — PFAS — BULLSBROOK

Grievance

MS J.J. SHAW (Swan Hills — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.58 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Water and I thank him for taking it. It is about the terrible treatment meted out to my community in west Bullsbrook at the hands of the Morrison government and its abject failure to address the issues of PFAS contamination of groundwater sources. In 2016, the federal Department of Defence commenced investigations into the presence of PFAS contamination at RAAF Base Pearce following the use of firefighting foam in the area. As a precaution, it offered packaged water to 150 properties for more than three years. In November 2017, that investigation confirmed that contamination had leached off the base, affecting groundwater beneath private properties across west Bullsbrook. It is important to appreciate that in west Bullsbrook there is no scheme water. Residents are using their bore water for drinking, bathing, washing and irrigating. Let us fast forward to 2019, when Department of Defence decided to hold a community information session in which it provided west Bullsbrook residents with information about the outcomes of its investigations. Those investigations found that PFAS levels were above health-based guideline values for drinking water in residential bores at 11 properties in the area, and that PFAS levels were at concentrations above the limit of reporting at a further 15 properties.

The information session that was held was terrible. There was a range of open questions. The methodology that was adopted to test the contamination was very sketchily outlined, and a lot of the questions that were asked were not answered. One particular question that was asked was about whether PFAS contaminants move as a plume throughout the groundwater source. Some really important questions about some very irregular results were unanswered. For example, in a street with three houses, two of the houses would test positive for PFAS, and the house in the middle would not, yet they were drawing water from exactly the same groundwater source. The Department of Defence could not provide any answers to those questions. That showed that very little is known about the migration of PFAS through water sources. In fact, at the session, the department's own consultants admitted that the hydrology is so complex that the PFAS contamination could spread even further once residents started to use their bores again and the water source activity increased. That is absolutely terrible.

Despite the clear unease and clear grievances expressed by my community, the Department of Defence announced at the forum that it was going to remove the provision of packaged water for the west Bullsbrook community and provide point-of-use individual water treatment systems to only 26 out of the 150 properties that had originally been identified as part of the study area. The technology that the department proposed to use was new technology. It was being used at township scale in the United States, but it had not been tested. It was not available in Australia, and it had not been developed or used at a micro or household scale anywhere else in the world. It struck me as a little strange that this experimental technology was proposed to be used in my community of west Bullsbrook. There was a lot of unease in the room about that. The other issue with this experimental technology was that although the Department of Defence would install it at its cost, it would operate it for only three years, and at that point the property owners would be left hanging—they would be responsible for the ongoing operations and maintenance. If a person is a pensioner or an elderly person, I would challenge their ability to be able to operate and maintain an experimental, brand new technology that has never been rolled out at scale anywhere else in the world. It was an absolutely inadequate solution. I said at the time that the best and most effective solution for my community would be to install reticulated water, to give my community the access to safe and uncontaminated drinking water that should be their right. I have repeatedly advocated for that.

In December 2018, a Senate inquiry into the management of PFAS contamination found that the federal government should compensate property owners and businesses for financial losses associated with PFAS contamination. That inquiry also backed up the polluter-pays principle. I know that this state government subscribes to that principle. The federal government created the mess, and the federal government needs to fix it. The federal government has completely failed to take responsibility. It has absolutely absented the field. That attitude endures to this day.

In other PFAS-affected communities in Australia, the commonwealth government's response was to assemble an army of lawyers. It provisioned \$53 million to mount a legal battle against the community of Williamstown in New South Wales, which was similarly just trying to assert its right to clean drinking water. Landholders in Williamstown in New South Wales, Oakey in Queensland and Katherine in the Northern Territory have commenced a class action against Defence. I am pleased to see that west Bullsbrook residents have taken a similar step. In response, the federal government has funded the provision of scheme water in Oakey and Williamstown, and the installation of rainwater tanks on properties in Katherine. But it has done nothing for the residents of west Bullsbrook. We need an immediate solution. We have waited for years. This uncertainty is causing extreme angst in my community. The properties of my constituents have been devalued. Banks are refusing to provide loans or refinance. My constituents are clearly and very legitimately aggrieved. I would like to thank those residents, in particular the Bullsbrook Residents and Ratepayers Association, which has advocated in such a measured and effective way over the years. Overwhelmingly, my constituents have been steadfast and resolute in how they have chosen to approach this issue, in the face of stonewalling and callous indifference from the federal government, and also, unfortunately,

bullying and extreme harassment, and often unreasonable and at times outright menacing conduct from other quarters. I will never stand for that sort of behaviour or with anyone who perpetuates it.

Minister, we have been working for years now on a reticulated water solution. I have written to Hon Christian Porter, the Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, who absented the field long before his current difficulties, and to the former Minister for Defence, Linda Reynolds, a Western Australian Senator, who shamefully refused to respond—she refused to even reply or acknowledge my letter. I have been advocating for reticulated water on an ongoing basis. I know that the Minister for Water has put forward a solution to the Department of Defence for a project that is estimated to cost between \$7 million and \$9 million. I urge the minister to continue to support my community and advocate to the federal government for a solution.

MR D.J. KELLY (Bassendean — Minister for Water) [10.05 am]: I thank the member for Swan Hills for raising this grievance with me. It is indeed a very important issue. I want to thank her for the forceful way in which she has progressed this issue over the time that she has been in Parliament. The strength of the member's grievance this morning is a clear indication of the work that she has done on this issue.

Can I begin by providing the house with a bit of background about the PFAS contamination in the vicinity of RAAF Base Pearce in west Bullsbrook. For those unfamiliar with PFAS, it is a group of synthetic compounds that has been used widely since the 1950s to make products that will resist heat, stain, grease and water. The PFAS group of compounds is persistent in both the environment and the human body. That means that those compounds do not break down and can accumulate over time. There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can cause adverse human health effects.

PFAS contained in firefighting foam was used regularly at RAAF Base Pearce during firefighting drills from the 1970s through until 2004. In November 2018, as the member for Swan Hills has indicated, the Department of Defence completed an environmental investigation into the presence of PFAS on and in the vicinity of RAAF Base Pearce. This review found PFAS contamination at 26 private bores on nearby residential properties. Importantly, the residents of west Bullsbrook are in an area that is not connected to a reticulated water supply. The residents have previously relied on groundwater for all their watering needs—for drinking, cooking, cleaning and bathing. As the member for Swan Hills has pointed out, the PFAS pollution from the RAAF base has caused significant distress and financial impacts for the people of west Bullsbrook. As a government, we understand the concern that is causing. We are hearing stories of families who are concerned about the health of their children from coming into contact with PFAS contamination simply because of their basic human need for a safe water supply. The distress is sincere and deeply felt. The difficulties with property prices and the like that the member for Swan Hills talked about are clear.

As a state government, we accept and support the principle that the polluter should pay. It is the responsibility of the Department of Defence and the federal government to clean up the mess that they have created and to find a long-term solution for the impacted residents. As the member for Swan Hills has articulated, clearly the most logical and sensible solution would be to extend the reticulated water supply scheme to these properties. As the member has also outlined, there have been suggestions from the Department of Defence that other technologies be used. My understanding is that those technologies have not been successfully or extensively used anywhere else in the world. The most sensible long-term solution, based on what we currently know, would be to extend reticulated scheme water to all the affected residents—that is, not cherry-pick certain residents, but provide it to the whole community. By providing scheme water, families in the area will have peace of mind, knowing that when they turn on their taps, they are getting clean and safe drinking water supplied by a trusted supplier—the Water Corporation.

As far back as 2018, I wrote to the then Minister for Defence, Hon Christopher Pyne, urging the federal government to take responsibility for the issue and commence the work to connect these properties to scheme water. The Water Corporation has provided an estimate for the design and delivery of a scheme water expansion connecting properties in west Bullsbrook to mains water. The project would likely involve a two-kilometre water main extension from east Bullsbrook, constructing a localised reticulated network, installing service points and meters to 130 west Bullsbrook residents and reconfiguration of household plumbing to allow for mains connection. I am informed by the Water Corporation that the cost would be in the order of \$6 million to \$10 million. That is really a drop in the ocean when we look at the broader defence budget.

Estimates suggest that the project could be delivered in under a year. I am disappointed that three years after writing to Minister Pyne, the federal government has not yet delivered the appropriate solution. The member for Swan Hills mentioned some of the other people who have had their hands on this issue and not yet delivered. Senator Linda Reynolds is a Western Australian senator and, as the Minister for Defence, should have stepped up and dealt with this issue. Christian Porter, the current member for Pearce, really did nothing on this issue. He failed to deliver for his constituents. I just hope that the new federal member, Melissa Price, the current member for Durack, takes up this issue and delivers the result that residents deserve.

I can report that we recently received a letter from Hon Andrew Gee, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, to the Premier dated 19 August this year. He talks about the Department of Defence wanting to engage with the Water Corporation

on what a scheme might look like. There is no commitment in this letter to deliver or fund the scheme, just a request for further work to be done. I hope this is a glimmer of hope and that after all these years, the federal government will finally acknowledge its responsibilities and work with the state government to own up as the polluter in these circumstances and pay for reticulated water for the residents of west Bullsbrook. This is what they deserve and this is what the federal government should deliver.