

SWAN AND CANNING RIVERS — AUDITOR GENERAL REPORT

567. Mr F.A. ALBAN to the Minister for Environment:

I note that the Auditor General released his report on the health of the Swan and Canning Rivers yesterday. Can the minister please explain to the house what the government is doing to address the health of our rivers?

Mr A.P. JACOB replied:

Let me state right from the outset that, irrespective of what the doomsayers opposite have been claiming, the Swan and Canning River system is not dead and it is not in crisis. I repeat: the Swan and Canning River system is not dead and it is not in crisis. I acknowledge that our rivers face the same stresses —

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Bassendean, I call you to order for the first time.

Mr A.P. JACOB: The member for Bassendean is welcome to get up and ask a question.

I acknowledge that our rivers face the same stresses as other urban waterways around the world. Many of the challenges our Swan and Canning River system faces stem back more than 100 years. However, as to the health of the Swan and Canning River system as it currently stands, research since the mid-2000s has shown that the health of the rivers has improved, particularly in the past six or seven years. I can back this up with hard science and hard data, and independent reports. The 2013 fish community report, which was undertaken by Murdoch University's Centre for Fish, Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Research, provided strong evidence that this state government's efforts are having an impact. I will provide a quick summary.

Dr Chris Hallett from the centre, and the author of that report, said that the conditions of the estuary remained generally good to fair. I will quote him from an article —

“The results are consistent with our previous monitoring, which has indicated an overall improvement in the ecological condition of the Swan–Canning Estuary since the mid 2000s,” ...

The health of the Swan River is heading in the right direction. I absolutely acknowledge that although many of this government's initiatives are already having an effect, we still have work to do. As to what we are doing, one of the main functions this government is undertaking is nutrient intervention technologies. That has been the focus of this government's \$18.5 million spend on the Swan and Canning River system this year alone, plus a few others that I might mention. That money is going towards the construction of end-of-catchment wetlands, or nutrient-stripping wetlands, at both the Ellenbrook and Bayswater catchments, together with a brand-new oxygenation plant near the Nicholson Road Bridge as well as upgrades to existing oxygenation plants on the Canning River system. An additional \$3 million that was announced in this year's budget will go towards further foreshore improvement projects.

The government is incredibly proud of the level of monitoring done on the Swan and Canning River system. It is one of the most regularly monitored waterways in Australia. It is monitored on a weekly basis. That data is always made readily available on the Department of Environment Regulation's website. I have held up charts of that data many times during question time.

Mr C.J. Tallentire interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: Member for Gosnells, please ask a question after this, by all means.

As to comments from members opposite trying to link this back into the merger of the Swan River Trust into the Department of Parks and Wildlife, this report absolutely vindicates the position of this government.

Several members interjected.

Mr A.P. JACOB: It absolutely vindicates it. This report finds that the Swan River Trust, in managing that 72-square kilometre bit at the end of the river, is limited in its ability to manage a catchment twice the size of Tasmania. What do we do? We either expand the remit of the Swan River Trust to take over one-third of the state and have the Department of Parks and Wildlife do the other two-thirds, or we merge the two agencies and have one dedicated conservation agency. That is a very good, commonsense measure that members opposite have opposed every step of the way. The opposition has released inane press releases. In fact it has been deliberately misleading. It has put out untruthful press releases alleging that the Swan River Trust has already ceased to exist and that somehow as minister I am to blame for the past 100 years of problems for an action that has not already been taken!

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Gosnells, I call you to order for the first time. Can the minister bring this to a conclusion.

Mr A.P. JACOB: I will absolutely wrap this up, Mr Speaker.

This revamped model, with a dedicated conservation agency, is absolutely consistent with the views of the Auditor General that a broader approach is required. This merger will bring additional expertise and resources to river conservation and will allow for a whole-of-catchment approach. Our rivers are far from doom and gloom. We acknowledge that more work needs to be done and we will absolutely do that work.