

GRAIN FREIGHT NETWORK — TIER 3 LINES

Statement

HON MIA DAVIES (Agricultural) [8.14 pm]: I did not quite get through my remarks earlier during the debate on the report of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs, so I want to finish them to make sure it is absolutely clear that the Nationals support the committee's recommendations and that we are very disappointed with the minister's response. That is on the basis that the recommendations are reasonable and, I think, prudent, for the reasons that I outlined in my earlier comments. They build on a strong record of this government already making investment into the grain rail network.

I wanted to make only a couple more comments around the fact that for us to move forward on this issue, we really need an idea of how much funding is required for the trial that would take place over the next two years, which was identified in the committee's report. Only Brookfield Rail can provide that accurate information, because it is the manager of the rail. It has told me in the past that it believes the cost is between \$7 million and \$8 million for the next two years. We can all say in this house that we support the trial going ahead, but supporting it is one thing; being able to say that we can support Brookfield and provide funding so that the rail is safe for Co-operative Bulk Handling Ltd to run its new rolling stock on it is another thing. Maintenance is required. Some parts of the lines will not be usable post October this year. Again, CBH and Brookfield are probably best placed to tell us where the pinch points are and where funding would be best directed.

I mentioned earlier that I had written to the Minister for Transport to seek information on how much of the transition assistance package—or TAP—funding is still available from the original investment package that was made as a result of the strategic grain network report. My understanding is that there is about \$5 million, but I have not had that confirmed yet; I wrote to the minister last week. I have requested that perhaps this funding of \$5 million, which has not been called on because CBH has not been calling on the TAP as much as it could have been for the circumstances that were outlined by Hon Max Trenorden and Hon Philip Gardiner earlier today, could be directed towards maintenance on the tier 3 lines to allow this trial to take place. It may well be that CBH, as the only industry stakeholder and the only user of the rail, could potentially top up the rest of that funding, if we are able to access that TAP funding, and allow that trial to go ahead. The suggestion that the Nationals have made is one that is cost neutral to government. The funding has already been made available through that package—it has not been called on—and potentially would be in the spirit of the recommendations of the committee report, which was to allow the trial to go ahead.

Without the trial, no cogent argument can be made for further investment by the taxpayer at least. CBH is certainly looking for the opportunity to prove its business case, which at this stage is still only theory, and CBH will tell people that itself. It is my view that the minister is overlooking an opportunity to make very sure that, in this new and changing environment, we do not create a problem for future generations. Of course, should the trial proceed, it may well be revealed that in this new environment there has been a natural shift in the road–rail mix. That is something that the trial will show and will come to pass. But I will not pre-empt the results of any trial; that would be only speculation. I am simply of the view that it is extraordinarily disappointing that the minister has ignored a committee of this house on such an important issue. It is my view that we should be utilising the funding that has not been accessed by CBH from the TAP. We should support the two-year trial and we should support a report into the cost of upgrading the roads to a suitable standard. Then, and only then, should we make an assessment about a more significant investment into the rail going forward, if it is warranted. This is reasonable and it is a sensible use of taxpayers' dollars. No amount of grandstanding, threats or any other thing will make it occur. As Hon Max Trenorden said earlier today, we just need to let the trial take place, so that the theory that has been put and the business case that has been developed by CBH and industry stakeholders can be put into practice, and it can be proved one way or the other.