

SPACE INDUSTRY

485. Ms J.J. SHAW to the Minister for Science:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to diversifying the Western Australian economy, especially as it recovers from COVID-19. Can the minister update the house on the work underway by the state government to secure funding for projects that support and grow WA's space industry, and can the minister outline to the house what opportunities these projects will provide small businesses and startups in Western Australia?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for Swan Hills for this very important question. One of the commitments that the Premier made when Labor was elected to government was that we would seek to diversify the Western Australian economy. One of the opportunities that we have pursued as part of that is the opportunity for growth in the space industry in Western Australia. A lot of Western Australians do not understand that we have a long history in the space industry. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration tracking station at Carnarvon was the largest tracking station outside the United States and played a pivotal role in the Apollo missions right through to Skylab and beyond. At its peak, over 200 staff were employed at Carnarvon. The European Space Agency cannot operate without the facilities that it has here in Western Australia.

As a government, we want to build on the strengths that we have. We are world leaders in the areas of robotics, remote operations and artificial intelligence, largely out of skills that we have learnt through our expertise in the mining industry. We want to take those skills and transfer them into the space industry. We are also leaders in the management of data through the work that has been done at the Pawsey Supercomputing Centre in preparation for the Square Kilometre Array. With those advantages, last year we signed a memorandum of understanding with the commonwealth to partner on projects to develop the space industry in Western Australia. That memorandum is already starting to bear fruit. This week, with Minister Andrews, we jointly announced funding for two projects. The first is the Australian space robotics, automation and AI command control complex, which will be established in Western Australia, supported by \$4.5 million from the commonwealth and \$3.5 million from the McGowan government. There is a great company called Fugro that already operates a command and control centre at Gnangara. It remotely operates underwater maintenance vehicles for the oil and gas industry from its facility in Gnangara. Unlike remote operations for the mining industry, which uses fibre-optic cable, this is done via satellite because obviously oil and gas platforms are offshore and underwater. Fugro has managed to overcome the issues of latency and can now have an operator operate those underwater vehicles in real-time from Gnangara. We believe that we can transfer those skills to the space industry and take up the opportunities that are presented by NASA's return to the moon and, ultimately, to Mars. The funding that we have put into that project run by Fugro will allow small businesses, small to medium-sized enterprises, to really have an opportunity to build on the skills that we have in the area of robotics and AI and take Western Australian companies into the space industry.

The second project is the Australian space data analysis facility that will be hosted by the Pawsey Supercomputing Centre. It will receive \$1.5 million funding from the commonwealth and \$750 000 from the McGowan government. It will work with the WA Data Science Innovation Hub, established by this state government through the new industries fund. Again, the space industry will require the management of significant amounts of data. We have a comparative advantage in that area because of the work that has been done in preparation for the SKA. We see this as an opportunity for Western Australian companies to be part of the space industry. Once we can manage data, we can produce products for not just the space industry—the possibilities are endless. This government is committed to create Western Australian jobs. The space industry has great opportunities. As a government, we are working cooperatively with the commonwealth to deliver jobs in Western Australia.