

WATERWAYS MANAGEMENT — WATER-SOLUBLE PHOSPHOROUS FERTILISER USE

Urgency Motion

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths): Honourable Members, I am in receipt of a letter in these terms —

Dear Mr President,

I hereby give notice that at the next sitting of the house I intend to move, pursuant to standing order 72;

That the Council consider, as a matter of urgency the Government's failure to implement an effective plan to phase out the use of high water-soluble phosphorus fertilisers in the Swan River and other sensitive waterways throughout the South West

Yours sincerely

Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC

In order for Hon Sally Talbot to move her motion, at least four members should rise to indicate their support.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [3.48 pm]: I move the motion.

What a sad day it is when a budget is brought down, as it was last Thursday, with such seriously bad effects for the environment. What a sad thing it is that this is the second time in a few weeks this year that we have had to move an urgency motion on questions relating to the environment through the actions of the Liberal-National government.

This afternoon, I will outline the reasons why we on this side of the house are concerned to the point of alarm about this particular aspect of what, as I have said, is actually a very sad budget for the environment. I will give a brief overview of why I have used terms like that. Last Thursday we saw in the budget a massive cut in the appropriations for both the Department of Environment and Conservation and the Botanical Gardens and Parks Authority. DEC's budget alone has been cut by nearly \$54 million. Overall, the four portfolios that sit within the Minister for Environment's responsibility have been cut by nearly \$52 million; that is, a little over a 20 per cent cut in funding. I notice that some of the commentary around the budget towards the end of last week and over the weekend was about the environment being the poor relation of the budget. It is actually even more serious than that. Some of the warning bells that sounded after the election, when the direction that this government was taking the decision-making became evident, are beginning to be shown to be absolutely well founded and that that alarm is very well placed.

We have seen massive cuts in appropriations. We have seen, as was confirmed in question time last week, no funding for new marine parks. Despite the minister saying in this place earlier last week that the Liberal-National government would continue to fund new marine parks, there is no funding in this budget in that regard. The environment minister ducks for cover every time this topic arises, but we have seen in the budget a fast-tracking of one of the most controversial roads that has ever been proposed in this state; that is, the building of Roe Highway stage 8. The funding in the budget has been brought forward to build that road more quickly. In the order of \$20 million had been set aside for preliminary studies—that was until last Thursday, when, in the budget, the project was brought forward with funding being approved to the tune of a bit over half a billion dollars to build a road that not only goes to nowhere, but also passes through one of the most precious environmentally sensitive areas in this state.

It is worth pointing out to the house that the budget also halves the funding for election commitments. I am one of many members on this side of the house who has stood up in this place since the election and said that the Liberals went to the election with no policies and no plans. In fact, that is a little bit of an exaggeration. We found one line in a document that referred to providing \$44 million over four years for new programs in the environment. At page 887 of the *Budget Statements*, the government's environmental election commitments are listed, and the figures over the four years add up to between \$20 million and \$22 million, which is less than half the amount the Liberal Party promised before last September's election.

I turn specifically to the fertiliser action plan, the ditching of which is the subject of the urgency motion. Since last September the opposition has had mixed messages from the government about its intentions for the fertiliser action plan. In December 2008 the minister said the following in one of her press releases —

“There is no formal review of the Fertiliser Action Plan being undertaken ...

It is hard to know whether that is any sort of consolation. We were looking for an indication that it was going to be implemented. The reason it was important to get that clarification was that we were getting all kinds of messages from the stakeholder groups. They were saying, “The minister is giving us confusing messages about

it. She won't say that she'll do it, but she won't say that she'll not do it. Is she reviewing it? What's happening here?" In December the minister attempted to clarify the situation by saying that a formal review of the fertiliser action plan was not being undertaken. However, in January, about a month later, we read in one regional newspaper that the minister had been going around to stakeholder groups saying the plan was under review. That all added to the confusion.

I will backtrack a little bit to go over some of the background to this issue. Why did we need a fertiliser action plan in the first place? My suggestion to the house, having gone through this material very carefully, is that the research about the effects of highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers in our waterways is absolutely unequivocal. I will quote from one of the papers that has been influentially guiding government policy on this issue as follows —

Phosphorus that is leached through the coarse sandy soils accumulates in rivers, wetlands and estuaries. While there are many other factors contributing to ill-health of our waterways, **the excessive over-load of phosphorus is a major cause that must be addressed** ...

There are substantial research findings for catchment of the Peel-Harvey estuary. These show that **a 50% reduction in the annual phosphorus load to the estuary is needed to meet the set targets**. While many sources of phosphorus are identified, by far the most extensive is from land used for agriculture. **Annual phosphorus loss from pastures for beef and dairy cattle is estimated to be 64% of the total load to the estuary.**

It goes on to talk about urbanisation and reinforces the point about scientific research, all indicating that the use of these fertilisers is a very substantial contributor to the destruction of our waterways. DEC is on the record saying that evidence indicates all coastal sand plain zones of Western Australia will benefit from the approach to fertiliser application embodied in the action plan. The effect of the overuse of these fertilisers is well documented. It includes the things that we most dread discovering about our waterways. It includes algal growth, low oxygen levels, the resulting fish kills and, overall, the loss of biodiversity. These four things are enough to set the alarm bells ringing and the red lights flashing. We cannot ignore these kinds of symptoms in our waterways. However, this government is walking away from the very plan that would have started to address this most serious problem. If we do not do something about it quickly, the Swan River and our other iconic waterways—my electorate office is in Mandurah and I have people coming into my office every day talking about what is happening to water quality in their area—will turn into a toxic soup. We are already going down that path with these effects that are largely attributable to these fertilisers.

I urge the government to listen to some of the stories that are being told about how the waterways used to be. The newspapers are full of these stories. Only this morning there was an article in the newspaper about somebody who has taken time off work to start cleaning the place up. He is losing income because he remembers the days when the Swan was not subject to these stresses.

In the face of such confusing and conflicting advice from the Minister for Environment, the Minister for Agriculture and Food has announced something else. We are not sure what it is and I do not think he is either: it is a program called Fertcare. The government might have employed somebody else to do the research on the name, but never mind—that is the least of our problems. After we had the Minister for Environment's comments that the plan would not be reviewed or it maybe under review, we heard the announcement a couple of weeks ago of a voluntary scheme. What is more, it is a voluntary scheme run by guess who? It will be undertaken by the fertiliser industry. This government is turning Dracula in charge of the blood bank into a bit of an art form. We have already heard reports about working groups that are planning to transfer environmental approvals to the Minister for Mines and Petroleum. In other words they are saying, "Let the Minister for Mines and Petroleum take care of environmental approvals for mines." Now we are hearing that the government will put the implementation of the fertiliser action plan under the control of the fertiliser industry. The Minister for Agriculture and Food was pressed on the issue of the voluntary nature of the scheme, and I will refer to what he said. He confirmed that it was voluntary but "highly recommended". That is a voluntary scheme. I want to make sure that everyone in this house is clear about what is wrong with a voluntary plan. We need a system in which industry itself is put under pressure to change the products that it is producing, the products that are on the shelves. We are not talking about putting some kind of nanny imposition on farmers; we are talking about upholding the right of farmers to choose products that will not pollute the environment. This action plan has been in formulation for years. When we were in government we consulted with dozens of stakeholder groups about how to get this plan off the ground. We found that the only way to do it was to phase out the use of highly water-soluble fertilisers for the domestic market and give the industry all the impetus it needs to create environmentally acceptable products. We do that by giving it a critical market mass. A voluntary scheme will simply not have that effect. It simply will not work. We had every indication—I am sure the information is still there if somebody on the other side of the house can be bothered to look for it—that the producers themselves thought that this requirement was doable. Again, I quote the advice from DEC. It stated —

The producers of bagged fertilisers have indicated that it is possible to produce alternative products within 12 to 18 months.

I can assure every member of this house that producers will do no such thing if we go down the track of a voluntary plan, because the market simply will not be there to reward their efforts. What was the minister's reaction to this problem? What is the job of the minister supposed to be? Surely, the minister is supposed to make some of these hard decisions about how to act in a way that protects vulnerable parts of the environment such as our waterways. I am sorry to tell the house that instead of making those hard decisions, this government, presumably on the recommendation of the environment minister, has outsourced policy making on the Swan River. It has dumped the fertiliser action plan and awarded a contract worth nearly \$100 000 to "formulate a river protection strategy for land and waterway use". This outsourced contract—presumably the minister has decided that nobody in her office or her department can do this—will cost the taxpayer nearly \$100 000. What do members think this policy might find? What do they think the contract to formulate a new river protection strategy for land and waterway use will find? I do not think it is rocket science to suggest that on the back of all this evidence, some of which I have just shared with honourable members, the government will find out that it needs a compulsory plan to phase out highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers from our waterways. I cannot imagine why that will cost the taxpayer an extra \$100 000.

HON DONNA FARAGHER (East Metropolitan — Minister for Environment) [4.04 pm]: I am pleased to speak on the urgency motion. I hate to disappoint Hon Sally Talbot and pour cold water on her motion but the government is doing a good deal of work to improve the quality of our waterways. The health of the Swan River and our major waterways is of critical importance to all Western Australians, both city and country residents. This motion gives me an opportunity to highlight what the government is doing. I say at the outset that the government is absolutely committed to reducing nutrients in our waterways. In saying this, however, it became very clear to me early on as environment minister that there are a great many water quality improvement plans but they are not necessarily coordinated, and that needs to be improved. Therefore, I asked my department to pull together the plans, work out where there are failures, where we are missing out and what action can be taken to implement improvements. The previous Labor government was very good at putting out press releases; they had a bit of spin and a bit of hype but not a lot of substance. I point to the fertiliser action plan. Hon Sally Talbot might say how wonderful the Labor Party was with respect to this plan, but I ask her what new funding the Labor Party put towards the fertiliser action plan. It put in absolutely nothing. The Labor Party failed to commit any additional funding to implementing this plan.

Hon Sally Talbot: Where's your funding?

Hon DONNA FARAGHER: The member should wait to hear what I am about to say; she will be pleased to hear it. The Labor Party redirected a small amount of funding. No new funding was allocated. That is a fact. As I have consistently said, this government has continued to work to reduce nutrient runoff in Western Australia's waterways. Demonstration trials for alternative low water-soluble phosphorous fertilisers are progressing in Coolup and Busselton. In addition, I am very pleased to advise the house that today the Minister for Agriculture, the Minister for Water and I announced new funding of \$610 000 to boost and expand existing field trials for low water-soluble phosphorous fertiliser products and management and to develop new field trials for various soil amendment products in both agricultural and suburban settings, particularly new residential subdivisions. That is in recognition of the fact that this is not only an issue with respect to agriculture, but also there is funding for greater coordination of fertiliser strategies across the relevant agencies. This announcement was endorsed by the chairman of the Environmental Protection Authority, Dr Paul Vogel, who has stated that it is entirely consistent with the outcomes of the Peel-Harvey water quality improvement plan. Also, a soil amendment working group will be established to provide input into the development of application protocols in relation to various soil amendment products.

In addition—the honourable member referred to this—the Minister for Agriculture recently launched the Fertcare program. Some people have decided to be somewhat negative about this program. That is disappointing. This program will see accredited advisers play a vital role in advising farmers on best practice use of fertilisers on their farms, tailored to their individual situation. The Minister for Agriculture said that this is part of the plan, not a replacement of it. I would have thought that in addition to the work being undertaken through Fertcare, the work being done through the demonstration projects, the work that will be done with the new funding that has been provided by this government which we announced today and the work that is being done by other agencies and departments should be supported by all.

The government has also committed \$30 million towards natural resource management. As part of this commitment, I am working with the Minister for Agriculture and other relevant ministers who have an interest in natural resource management to achieve real deliverables in Western Australia. Obviously, water quality improvement will be a key part of that commitment. More generally, a range of agencies are doing a great deal of work on water quality. For example, the Swan River Trust is doing a great deal of work on the development of

strategies to guide the management of our rivers both now and in the future, looking at long-term actions that are required. It also has a number of projects, including the Healthy Rivers Action Plan, the trialling of oxygenation technology, Great Gardens workshops, River Guardians and a variety of other water quality initiatives. These and a host of other initiatives recognise the multiple issues that relate to water quality, not just farmers and their fertilisers. It is a reality that fertilisers must be decreased. I do not disagree with that. No-one would disagree with that. The reality, however, is that that is but part of other areas that need to be looked at if we are going to address water quality across government.

As I have said, the reality is we must reduce the amount of nutrients that are used, but we also must be able to demonstrate the effective use of the alternatives. We must support a range of other initiatives to improve water quality. As I have said, a number of issues are affecting our waterways. It requires a collective effort from departments, agencies, the agricultural sector and the community and industries. Everyone must consider, for example, what they put down the drains. The solution covers the whole spectrum. We need to look at every single aspect if we are to make a very real difference. The Liberal-National government is totally committed to reducing the number of nutrients in our waterways and I, as Minister for Environment, am totally committed to reducing the amount of nutrients in our waterways. The announcement that we have made today is a significant boost. Unlike Labor, which did not provide new funding to its skeleton weed plans, we are committed to assisting farmers to improve their use of fertilisers and we support a range of actions being undertaken by the departments and agencies, such as the Swan River Trust, to improve our waterways and our catchments.

HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan) [4.10 pm]: I will say a few words about this motion. The one thing on which we can all agree and for which the research is indisputable is that highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers have a significant impact on our waterways. The use of highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers has been having a significant impact on our waterways, wetlands and groundwater ever since we started applying them to sandy soils to grow food. All farmers understand the dilemma of trying to produce exotic crops in highly permeable sandy soils that are nutrient poor. We all agree that it is to everybody's advantage to ensure that the phosphate that is needed for plant growth remains on the paddock or on the area that is to be cropped, and not in the wetlands. People who are trying to produce food on those types of soils are paying for phosphate, a large percentage of which leaches out quickly into the waterways. I understand that 730 kilograms of phosphorus a day is leaching out of the Ellenbrook catchment, which is one of the catchments that flow into the Swan River. That is a lot of phosphorus. That is happening day in, day out and has been happening for decades. It is not surprising that that amount of phosphorous is having a significant impact on the Swan River estuarine system. Other members have pointed out that phosphorous increases algal growth and therefore deoxygenates water and affects the fish and reduces the overall biodiversity of the river. The Swan River system is in serious trouble.

I find these debates quite extraordinary. One can read warnings from 50 years ago about the fertiliser run-off into the system. This is not rocket science and it is not new. The approach that was being taken by the former government was a good approach. The Greens (WA) acknowledge that under the previous government there was an attempt to ensure a transition to prohibit the use of highly water-soluble phosphate fertiliser. That plan involved talking with the landowners and fertiliser manufacturers. That was good because we did not want to leave farmers and small landholders without a product that they could apply to their paddocks. Our criticism of the former government was that the process was dragging on and on. A degree of blame must be laid at the feet of the previous government regarding how long it was taking to achieve the phase out.

We certainly agree with the motion that the budget, as we understand it, is not providing any funds to continue with the plan. I heard the minister say that the government has not abandoned this issue. To me this issue is matter of political will. As I understand it—I am happy to be corrected—the Swan and Canning Rivers Management Act, which we passed, gives the Minister for Environment the power to impose certain land management schemes. All the mechanisms are there. One of the reasons we supported that legislation enthusiastically was it provided, for the first time, a mechanism to impose a management regime on the catchment for the Swan River. My question to the Minister for Environment and this government is why does it not use that mechanism, if the government is dinkum about fixing this problem? It is not rocket science. My understanding is that most farmers are quite happy to be part of the solution. They want the phosphate on their vegies or their paddocks; they do not want it in the river either. It is a fairly simple equation and it is a win-win situation. I accept that the slow-release fertilisers are more expensive, which is another issue.

Where is the cost of using phosphates then reflected? It is reflected in the fact that there is a very diffuse problem with the entire ecosystem of the Swan River and its tributaries. We are avoiding the cost at one point but then putting the phosphate into the environment, which requires a huge amount of money to be spent for unproven and problematic engineering solutions to try to reduce the amount of phosphate in the system once it is in there. Once the phosphate is in the river system, it is very hard to take it out again, and all the processes of Phoslock and aerating and the other fancy ways of trying to remove it are very difficult from an engineering perspective and also are very expensive. A cheaper solution is to prevent the phosphate from going into the water in the first

place, and that is entirely achievable. One way of achieving that is to require slow-release phosphate fertilisers to be used in areas that affect the Swan River catchment. I have looked at these issues for probably 30 years, and there is nothing new here. What is lacking is the political will to make that become a reality and to take off the shelves the highly water-soluble fertilisers. We achieved that by removing from the market other sources of phosphates such as certain laundry detergents and other chemicals that went into our waterways. We can achieve the same result by phasing out the use of highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers on paddocks. There are, of course, other ways of fixing the problems associated with phosphate, such as remediating soils and stripping out the nutrients before they get into the river by the use of fringing vegetation. I acknowledge that catchment groups and the Swan River Trust are attempting to achieve these things, but the biggest difference could be made by committing to ending the use of highly water-soluble phosphate fertilisers in the catchment. I encourage the minister to work to a firm deadline. I believe that mandatory controls are necessary because voluntary engagement has its limitations. We have seen attempts to encourage voluntary engagement and they have gone only so far. If 730 kilograms of phosphorous a day leach from just one of the catchments into the Swan River, then we still have a very significant problem on our hands. I encourage the minister not to abandon that issue. I heard the minister say that she is not abandoning this issue, but, unfortunately, the signs are very worrying; therefore, the Greens (WA) support the motion.

HON WENDY DUNCAN (Agricultural — Parliamentary Secretary) [4.20 pm]: I have been advised by the Minister for Agriculture and Food that, in the near future, the government will undertake a further study on the eutrophication—that is, algal blooms and fish kills—of the rivers of the swan coastal plain between Jurien Bay and Augusta, as well as an examination of the government's arrangements required to address salinity in the wheatbelt.

The study is a combined project of the Department of Water, the Department of the Environment and Conservation and the Department of Agriculture and Food. The aims of the project encompass three key strategies to reduce phosphorous inflows into the coastal waterways. It supports the adoption of improved fertiliser management through the fertiliser industry's Fertcare program; the development, evaluation and adoption of low water-soluble phosphorous fertiliser; and the adoption of soil amendments to increase the ability of sandy soils to retain phosphorous. This project will work in partnership with industry to develop guidelines for phosphorous fertiliser use on the coastal plain and be applied by Fertcare accredited advisers within the framework of the state environment policy, and to define guidelines for soil amendments and fertilisers in urban environments. The project will provide research outputs to evaluate LWSP products, and demonstration and extension outputs to encourage the adoption of soil amendments, low water-soluble fertilisers and production systems with lower total fertiliser inputs. The cost of the project is expected to be in the vicinity of \$650 000, and the results are expected within a year.

The Minister for Agriculture and Food launched the Fertcare accredited adviser program on 29 April 2008 at the Western Australia College of Agriculture Wokalup campus. This is one of the first steps in getting right the use of fertilisers on the Swan coastal plain. Getting correct the rates and timing of the application of fertilisers will contribute more to reducing phosphorous run-off into our rivers and waterways than any other action. Fertcare will be the government's tool for achieving this. Better fertiliser management alone is expected to reduce phosphorous leaching by up to 30 per cent.

The evaluation of low water-soluble fertiliser is another key component of the project. The government needs to know what the cost of the fertilisers will be in broad-scale applications and what impacts they will have on agricultural production. This information needs to be demonstrated to farmers so that decision-makers have up-to-date and accurate information. Thirdly, soil amendment in both the urban and agricultural setting will be examined. Soil amendment is the addition of soil substrates such as ash or clay, which retain not only soil moisture, but also phosphorous, and thereby reduce the amount moving from the soil, where plants can use it, into waterways where it causes damage.

These three actions will guide government's outcomes in fertiliser management on the Swan coastal plain and will have a great effect in improving water quality in our rivers.

HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral) [4.24 pm]: I support the motion moved by Hon Sally Talbot. One thing we know for sure from having worked in this place for a while is the amount of stress our rivers are under. Since this state was formed, successive governments have failed to address a coordinated, planned approach to the formal management of our estuarine and river systems. From work on one side of the equation in fisheries, the terrible stress the fisheries within our river systems suffer is obvious. A lot of that is due to water run-off containing nutrients and certainly from trying to recover from the effects of algal blooms. As a consequence of ecological change, certain species are pushed out of areas and others become dominant. We also see the introduction of feral species such as cichlids—pet fish that end up in our drains and river system because people have flushed them down their toilets.

Hon Norman Moore: They're in the Swan River now.

Hon JON FORD: That is right.

I used to get lots of letters from people about blowfish. I have a DVD that I should give to the Minister for Fisheries called *Blowies be Gone*. That is an example of an ecological change that seems to have become permanent. Whenever there were massive fish kills in the river, more often than not, it seemed to be around algal blooms. Occasionally, it would be associated with a sewerage main breakage and an associated algal bloom. However, it seemed to be brought on mainly by the excess nutrient content of water, encouraged by elevated temperatures and low rainfall. It is prevalent in different parts of rivers. The issue of nutrients is a key to the plan. It was interesting to hear the minister talk about a number of agencies working together. I am not sure yet whether a range of agencies should work together or under one minister. I am forming a view on that.

I see a fundamental flaw in this plan to have a voluntary code for limiting phosphates and fertilisers and the manufacture of soil amendment products. Although the minister and the parliamentary secretary talked about a range of other strategies, I was interested to hear Hon Wendy Duncan's comments, because the issues she raised are all very important items that need to be addressed. The trouble with a voluntary code is that if incentives, either negative or positive, are not established, particularly for manufacturers, people will always go for the cheapest option. We see it in car manufacturing. We have known for years and years that we will run out of oil, and that industry worldwide is pumping all sorts of antigreen gases into the atmosphere, yet governments have never come to grips with the fact that manufacturers continue to build cars. Manufacturers have made small improvements around the fringes, such as reduced lead levels, antipollution gear on cars and reduced engine sizes, albeit they increased their performance at the same time. Now that the world is close to panicking about the shortage of oil, governments are starting to talk about incentives and looking to place money on the table to get manufacturers to deal with those issues. Under some sort of voluntary program to look at slowing the release of phosphates from fertilisers, both manufacturers and farmers will go for the cheap option. And why would they not?

There is a nice little saying in the oil and gas industry designed to discourage people from lighting cigarettes when they are in a gas plant: "You can hide the flame, but you cannot hide the explosion." The same applies to rivers. The failure of this policy will result in an increase in algal blooms; I am absolutely sure of that. It may take a couple of years to be seen, from a political perspective. Then the government will say that all these plans need to be put into place, or that another committee needs to be established. However, the previous government established a system that was working, although it needed improvement in the areas that Hon Wendy Duncan talked about in some detail. I was interested in her comments to the house, because they contained some detail, and outlined a plan and how it would achieve its aims. Unfortunately, with the exception of one element—the \$610 000 plan that Hon Wendy Duncan explained better than did the minister—we saw a lot of fluff but not much detail from the minister. The river cannot be protected with timid approaches and by waiting for something to happen. The precautionary principle must be applied. We already know what the problem is, and it cannot be solved by skimming \$53 million off the environment budget, or by significantly reducing or delaying infill sewerage programs. It must be done by coming up with a plan. If the government thinks that the previous Labor government failed in this area, it is pointless simply saying so; the government must put something in its place. It is the government's job; it is on the Treasury benches.

Hon Norman Moore: Do you expect us to solve the problem you left us in our first six months?

Hon JON FORD: No, but I was interested to hear about the plan the government has laid out for the next four years—I had not heard that. I just told the house that I expect to be standing up in his house in two or three years delivering a "please explain" about the algal blooms, and not just those in the Swan River system; the Wilson Inlet near Denmark is also under heaps of pressure, as is the Peel Inlet. Successive fisheries ministers must take action on the river systems because of not only the fisheries issues, but also the environmental management issues. The minister and I will have a few conversations across the floor of the house on those issues. As years go by, judging from where the government has targeted its cuts, I suspect we will have a lot more conversations about that matter. I want to hear from the government about a coordinated plan and the detail of what it is planning to do for this and other river systems and how it will manage inlets and estuaries. What is the government's plan for our kids' heritage? That is what we need to focus on. If the government does not have a different idea, it should not throw out an idea just because it was a product of the previous government. If there is a good argument for throwing out that idea, then that is okay. Members will note that we have not seen a significant algal bloom for some time, but I am predicting that as a result of this policy change, we will see more of them—not straightaway, but in a few years.

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [4.34 pm] — in reply: I am very glad that Hon Jon Ford took that interjection from Hon Norman Moore. The secret is out, is it not? We sat in his house last week and listened to a

budget speech that was supposed to tell us what the government intends to do for the next four years. The Premier spoke at the budget breakfast at the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia last Thursday and gave a message that the minister seems to have missed. The minister's Premier said that from now on, this is the government's plan. For the first eight months since its election, the government has been able to say that it is working on Labor's budget and the plans from last year. However, from this moment on, the Premier said, this is the government's budget, and the government will take responsibility for it. What did Hon Norman Moore just say? He said that this is not really the government's problem as it has not been in office long enough and has not yet worked out what to do.

Hon Norman Moore: You can't expect us to fix the problem in six months.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: It is not good enough.

Several members interjected.

The PRESIDENT: Order! The good news is that I have only three minutes and 57 seconds left of an urgency motion in my parliamentary career. The bad news is that Hon Sally Talbot has only three minutes and 57 seconds left to speak, so she should be allowed to speak.

Hon SALLY TALBOT: Thank you very much, Mr President.

I have never pretended to understand the Liberal Party, but it seems clear to me that some of the honourable members opposite have great trouble taking that little walk down the corridor to where their leader sits. I wish they would do it, and I am sure he would be happy to repeat the advice he tried to give them at the beginning of his introduction to the Treasurer's post-budget speech to the CCI.

I started off by saying that this was a sad day, and that last week's budget was a sad occasion. It is sad that we have to keep moving these urgency motions about the environment. I think it is even sadder that the minister clearly brought the wrong speech into Parliament this afternoon. The urgency motion refers to the government's failure to implement an effective plan to phase out the use of highly water-soluble phosphorus fertilisers in the Swan River and other sensitive waterways throughout the south west. This afternoon we heard more weasel words about having to look at things, having to do trials and having to do further studies, as Hon Wendy Duncan said. The minister referred to a "skeleton plan". I think the minister probably just broke the hearts of several public servants working in her department. These people have spent years and years of their professional lives putting this plan together.

The previous government announced in September 2006 that it would put together a plan to phase out the use of these fertilisers in the affected rivers. We tabled the action plan on 10 May 2007. We held a symposium on the action plan with all the stakeholders on 3 July 2007, and the plan went out for consultation after that. We have spent years talking about this, and the work is all done. If the government wants to put a different spin on it, that is fine. If the government wants to say that its plan would take every Labor voter out of the metropolitan area, I do not care what spin is put on it. The government should just do it. As Hon Giz Watson pointed out, the government has the power under the act to reduce this drastic risk to our river systems, but it does not have the courage or the will to do it.

The Minister for Environment should go back and look at the evidence and call in some of the people in her department who have spent years working on this matter, and ask for their views on a voluntary code. As Hon Jon Ford said, we have tested this over and over again. The evidence is all there that voluntary codes for these measures do not work. We have to be able to create the incentives for industry to provide the products that will be less risky for the environment. The government must not keep telling us that it wants to do further studies, that it is looking at it and that matters are under consideration. Why does the minister not use the powers given to her under the act? The reality is that the plan put together by Labor would have totally phased out these dangerous nutrients by 2011. The minister went through a couple of ideas that the government has obviously been tossing around. Did she talk about mandatory controls? Did she name a date by which these highly water-soluble fertilisers would no longer be leaching into our rivers? She did not, and this was for one reason; that is, she knows that the government does not have a plan that will remove this danger. If we carry on in this way, we will indeed see our waterways turned into a toxic soup before we get a chance to replace this government.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.