

LAND CLEARING

956. Hon LOUISE PRATT to the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries:

Yesterday constituents raised with me the issue of land clearing near The Lakes. They live nearby and are worried that the clearing could cause soil and land degradation in Western Australian farmlands.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: While you are on your feet, tell Dorothy the way home to Kansas.

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

Members will note that I have not thanked the member for some notice of the question, although I admit that she did mention it before we came into the Chamber. This is not a Dorothy Dix. The member was on site at The Lakes yesterday representing her constituents.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson: She is wasting her time, because it is outside her electorate.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I note that the question refers only to soil and land degradation and not to biodiversity or other purely environmental matters that are the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for the Environment and Heritage. Relating the question only to soil and land degradation, it is certainly correct that land clearing has been the principal cause of salinity in agricultural areas.

Hon Derrick Tomlinson interjected.

Hon KIM CHANCE: A vast bulk of scientific evidence supports that view. At current clearing levels, it is no longer an issue of any consequence with regard to salinity; in fact, the deforestation of Western Australia's agricultural areas has been substantially reversed.

I sought information about this issue earlier today. It has been indicated to me that the amount of land which has been able to be cleared for agriculture but which may also include areas used for extractive industry on rural zoned land, such as quarries and gravel pits, amounted to a total of 3 782 hectares over the past five years. That is an average of 756 hectares per annum. The Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that the current rate of reforestation is 25 000 hectares a year. Therefore, the deforestation rates were 756 hectares a year, and reforestation rates were 25 000 hectares a year. I suspect the figure may be even higher than that, because the ABS data related only to plantations and I am aware, of course, as other members will be, that there has been massive planting by farmers of a rather more balanced nature which does re-establish the biodiversity of those regions.

The expansion of the Forest Products Commission's plantation program into the medium and lower rainfall areas of the agricultural region will greatly enhance the Government's ability to reverse salinity and land degradation.