

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

YARRAGADEE AQUIFER

Urgency Motion

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths): I received two letters; however, the first letter received in time pursuant to standing order 72 is that from Hon Paul Llewellyn in the following terms -

Dear Mr President

Pursuant to Standing Order 72 I intend to move that the council consider as a matter of urgency the following motion -

That this house calls on the Western Australian government to abandon plans to tap 45 gegalitres of water from the south west Yarragadee and to urgently adopt widespread water efficiency, recycling and conservation measures.

The member will require the support of four members in order to move the motion.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

HON PAUL LLEWELLYN (South West) [3.45 pm]: I move the motion. This morning and just after lunch more than 1 000 people appeared at the steps of Parliament House to register their concerns -

An opposition member: How many?

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: I do not know; there may well have been many more than that. They were registering their concerns about the government's proposal to tap into the south west Yarragadee. Those people join scientists in our community and politicians across both sides of Parliament who are gravely concerned that tapping into the Yarragadee is a short-sighted and, in fact, unnecessary move to deal with what has amounted to a water crisis in Western Australia. No-one would disagree that there is a water crisis in Western Australia. Over the past 30 years there has been a 20 per cent decline in regional rainfall which, in fact, has resulted in a 60 per cent decline in the stream flow of our important south west rivers. That 60 per cent decline has resulted, at this stage, in less than 27 per cent storage in our dams. With a profligate use of water, Perth continues to grow and the Water Corporation of Western Australia continues to support the unrealistic target of providing every single person in the south west interconnected system with 155 kilolitres of water; this is occurring just at a time when Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and other cities around the world that are suffering from similar stresses have chosen to implement water efficiency and conservation targets rather than look for new water resources.

The feature of the Western Australian water crisis is quite different from that of any other capital city in Australia. Western Australia has an extraordinary gift; namely, a very large underground water aquifer that runs right across the Swan coastal plain. In order to supplement the state's failing surface water supply, the Water Corporation has persisted in increasing the draw on our groundwater resources. Twenty years ago, 20 per cent of our water supply came from groundwater, and now up to 60 and 70 per cent comes from underground water resources such as the Gnangara mound. That is occurring despite the increasing evidence that the Gnangara mound is being overtaxed to the extent that the ecological systems that are dependent on that water body are collapsing. To address this water crisis that faces Western Australia and all the major cities throughout the world, a clear long-term vision is needed, along with clear political leadership and a clear action plan that will take us out of the current crisis to a future with a more secure water supply for the south west region and our cities.

The people of Western Australia, particularly the people of the south west, are deeply concerned that the metropolitan region - that operates off the south west interconnected system - having depleted the Gnangara mound, is looking south to the Yarragadee to meet its future water needs. We are very conscious that even if we had to develop the Yarragadee - in other words, if we had to tap the Yarragadee today - at the present current rate of growth of water consumption, it would last until only 2015 and we would then need to tap into yet another Yarragadee. That is not a solution to the water crisis. That is like sweeping the problem under the mat and taking even more risks with the way in which we manage the water governance in Western Australia. We should be looking for a coherent, clear way forward.

The scientific community is highly concerned about the potential impact of extracting an additional 45 gegalitres from the Yarragadee. They note a range of impacts on water dependent ecosystems and on the biodiversity of the south west region, which is a hot spot of biodiversity and should be protected at all costs. Only yesterday in *The West Australian* - I will not quote it because I do not have a copy of it in front of me, but I am sure other members do - some of our state's most senior scientists laid out the case that the Yarragadee should not be tapped any more than it is currently being tapped. The amount of rainfall is decreasing and the recharge into the aquifer is collapsing. Therefore, it is too risky to continue that activity. The people in the south west region are already tapping into the Yarragadee to meet local and regional needs. When we say that our water resources

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

should be used responsibly, we are saying that not only the people of Perth, but also the people of the south west region should take responsibility for water conservation and become more water efficient.

Today I was given a very damning letter, which will I seek leave to table. It is a letter from Dr John Bailey, the Chairman of the Conservation Commission of Western Australia. That is the peak statutory body that oversees the Department of Environment and Conservation. The letter is addressed to the Appeals Convenor and the Minister for the Environment on the matter of the Yarragadee. The letter reads -

Dear Minister

South West Yarragadee water supply development (Assessment No./1552)

I refer to the Environmental Protection Authority's assessment and recommendations regarding the South West Yarragadee . . . water supply development.

The Conservation Commission does not support the conclusion that the proposal can be managed to acceptable standards based upon an adaptive management approach especially given the uncertainty of understanding of the impacts and environmental consequences that could result from implementation.

That is a statement made by the chairman of the Conservation Commission. He is not an external independent scientist; he represents a peak body of the West Australian government. The letter continues -

The specific grounds of the Conservation Commission's appeals are as follows:

The EPA has concluded that it would be "preferable for a proposal with such significant public benefit and potential environmental impacts not to have to proceed reliant on an adaptive management approach" (p 51) and then recommends that the proposal should only be implemented if "a rigorous and transparent monitoring program and adaptive environmental management plan is established and implemented".

The government cannot have it both ways. It cannot say on the one hand that it is inappropriate to use an adaptive management plan and then say that tapping into the Yarragadee aquifer can go ahead provided that an adaptive environmental management plan is done. The letter continues -

This conclusion and recommendation lead to requirements under condition 7, Groundwater Adaptive Management Plan. The difficulty with this approach is the lag time before the impact of pumping on a biological or physical/chemical factor is observed and confirmed as being related to the project. There would be considerable uncertainty about whether an observed change in biota, groundwater level or surface flow was related to the proposal, even where there was a well developed database of relevant factors that had been accumulated over a number of years. Also once the matter is confirmed there is likely to be debate concerning the appropriate course of action, particularly if that may involve a considerable reduction in the contribution from the SW Yarragadee bore field. This would particularly be the case if the metropolitan water supply was dependent on the project as other alternatives had not also been progressed as part of the Integrated Water Supply System.

That is a clear message. This message is very similar to the problem of salinity that has ravaged our agricultural land; that is, there is a long lag time between when the land is cleared and when the salt rises to the surface. The Yarragadee and our water supply system are faced by an equivalent problem to salinity. If we continue to tap into our ground water systems in an unregulated and irresponsible way and in the context of a drying climate, we will run into another salinity problem. The letter continues -

It is also unclear that impacts, once observed, could be reversed. The expression of groundwater level changes some distance from the bore field could be observed some considerable time after pumping commenced. The lag time and uncertainty of applying effective countermeasures would mean that further impacts may well occur before any response can take effect leading to long term ecosystem disruption.

In other borefields where adaptive management has been adopted, concern about the ongoing success of the approach and compliance with conditions has been brought to the attention of the Commission. These include Gngara and Jandakot water mounds and Millstream. Stress on the groundwater-dependent ecosystems on the Gngara and Jandakot water mounds resulting from factors including pumping, climate change and land use impacts lead to the EPA reviewing the environmental conditions for pumping on the mounds rather than seeking compliance (Bulletin 1155).

As a result, the commission concludes -

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

The Conservation Commission considers that the decision of the EPA to allow an adaptive management approach in this instance is too risky for the reasons given above.

I seek leave to table the letter.

Leave granted. [See paper 2536.]

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: I will not be able to read the entire letter in the time I have available. Needless to say, this is a damning indictment on the government's proposal from its own Conservation Commission, which has stated that it is a risky adventure to tap into the Yarragadee aquifer.

The inquiry into the Yarragadee failed to look at alternative investigations to consider water recycling, water efficiency and other water conservation measures instead of heading down the path of tapping into the Yarragadee. This morning the Greens (WA) read into the house a bill that supports a document called "Our Water Challenge". That document outlines a water efficiency target for Western Australia to reduce water use from 155 kilolitres currently to 120 kilolitres by 2020. That would relieve us of the need to develop the Yarragadee. We also call for an investigation of other water resources in the south west region, including the Collie-Wellington Dam, which could be restored and which currently stores 186 gegalitres. That dam is saline as a result of salinity.

The 1 000 citizens who were on the steps of Parliament House today were calling on the government to take a more responsible approach to the management of our water resources and to the management of the Yarragadee, and to stop the madness of setting up yet another salinity disaster for Western Australia for which our children would not forgive us.

HON BARRY HOUSE (South West) [4.00 pm]: I am pleased to support the motion moved by Hon Paul Llewellyn, because in my estimation the Water Corporation's proposal to tap 45 gegalitres from the Yarragadee is too risky. The science behind it is largely guesswork, and we would be entering an unknown era, which is far too risky. Firstly, I congratulate the organisers of today's rally. It was terrific to see so many people I knew from the south west electorate, in particular, and the commitment they displayed to actually get to Parliament House. Many of them got up at dawn this morning to make the effort to travel some distance to catch a bus and come to Perth. That is a pretty significant effort. It is a far bigger effort for them to do that today and return this afternoon than it is for people from the Terrace to walk up during their lunch hour and register their protest on the steps of Parliament House for a couple of minutes. It was not a rent-a-crowd; it was concerned local residents. It was not members of the union movement of Western Australia, sponsored by the government to wag work, if one likes, to attend a political rally. It was a crowd that represented a broad cross-section of the community. This issue is not the province of one political party, the Greens (WA); it is not the province of a small, individual not-in-my-backyard group of people. It is a mainstream issue, and anybody who does not believe that is really living under a rock. There was a statewide survey recently, I think, that demonstrated that tapping the Yarragadee was something like fourth in the line of priorities behind doing something to clean up the Wellington Dam, recycling water and even constructing another desalination plant, with only about 30 per cent support even in the metropolitan area. Therefore, it is very much a mainstream issue. It is now, of course, in the political domain well and truly. The only part of the formal process that remains is for the Environmental Protection Authority Appeals Convenor to report to the government, which I understand will happen in a week or so, and then the decision is to be made by the government.

In this issue, the Labor Party is the odd man out. It is interesting for *Hansard* to note that when this motion was moved and support for the motion was called for by the President, as we know, at least four members had to stand in their places. Members of the Liberal Party and the National Party stood to support the Greens' motion. Not one Labor member stood to support the motion.

Hon Kim Chance: To be fair, I did look to make sure that four stood, because were there not, we would have stood; but thank you.

Hon BARRY HOUSE: An insurance policy; that is fine. I want to make a few comments very briefly because I know there is not much time. In broad terms, the proposal of the Water Corporation to tap into the Yarragadee at this stage should be opposed on several grounds. The first is the process itself. The Water Corporation is the proponent. It is charged with the responsibility of sourcing and selling water, and its responsibilities cease at that point. The Water Corporation is very keen to get enough water to service its demands. That is fair enough; that is its job. However, the Water Corporation is not directly responsible for the impacts of its actions, and therein lies a problem with the process itself. There is, of course, a problem in Western Australia with water. We are not alone, by the way. It will be a worldwide problem that grows by the day. We could say that the Water Corporation has been caught off guard in recent years in underestimating the impact of declining rainfall, underestimating the impact of declining stream flows and runoff and underestimating the water demands of a growing population. It has been caught with its pants down.

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

For the Water Corporation, the Yarragadee presents the easy option. That is the difficulty that many people have a problem getting their heads around. If the Water Corporation's proposal to tap into the Yarragadee is based on the fact that it has already spent \$50 million in proving up the source, I do not buy it, because the proposed figures that I have seen for the full development of the Yarragadee proposal show that it will cost \$617 million. That alone does not stack up on economic grounds, because if we compare that with the \$350 million that it took to put in the first desalination plant, which produces about the same amount of water, 45 gegalitres, for the south west interconnected system, it does not stack up merely on economic grounds, let alone on all the other social and environmental grounds.

The other point is that the scientific views on the whole issue are conflicting. The scientific views that support the extraction of 45 gegalitres come from a band of scientists who largely rely for their living on government contracts. Not surprisingly, they support the proposal. There is, of course, another band of scientific opinion that contradicts that and says that a lot of the research done is guesswork, and that we are entering into unknown and dangerous territory. The issue with the process is that there is clearly no independent assessment.

There are too many issues to go through in the short time that I have, but I will use as an example one case study. Let us look at the Blackwood River, the Hardy Inlet, the Scott River that feeds into it and the Scott coastal plain in the surrounding area. People should remember the Beenup mine experience. I remind members that the Beenup mine operated for about two years from 1996 to 1998. There is a very rich deposit of mineral sands on the Scott coastal plain. BHP started the Beenup mine, against the advice of many of the operators who had been involved in mineral sands development in the south west for many years, I might add; but the big operators know best. However, BHP was caught out very badly. It injected something like \$450 million plus into that operation. It operated that mine for a very short time, with all sorts of mechanical and physical problems. However, the major problem was that, with the extraction of the material, the acid sulfate soil was exposed to the air. It then, of course, turned into sulfuric acid as it was discharged into the Scott and Blackwood Rivers. BHP has spent something like \$40 million to \$50 million on a clean-up operation as a result of that mine closure, just to maintain the situation at Beenup and on the Scott coastal plain. That is just one major issue. If people have a good look at the impact on the Blackwood River and the Hardy Inlet, they will see that it is serious. Already this year the area is clearly under stress. For the first time this year, algal blooms have resulted in fish kills. In the height of the holiday season, there were signs in Augusta saying that people should not swim in the river. The proposal puts at risk the recharge into the Yarragadee from the Blackwood River. The environmental aspects of that alone make that a good enough case for me.

The Water Corporation should be considering other alternatives. One alternative is to clean up the water in Wellington Dam. Wellington Dam is a major water source. It is the largest dam in Western Australia after Argyle Dam. It would be a relatively easy ask to clean up the water in that dam. Other alternatives are to collect more stormwater, and to reuse waste water. Also, we should not totally eliminate the option of bringing water to Perth from the north in some way.

HON MURRAY CRIDDLE (Agricultural) [4.10 pm]: I will be brief. I am pleased this motion has come forward. Obviously the people who were at the rally at the front of Parliament House at lunchtime today have serious concerns about this matter. Those concerns have been relayed to me very adequately by the member for Stirling. He tells me that this is a major issue in the south west, and obviously I have come to know that too.

I want to concentrate on some of the things that could be done in Western Australia to improve water efficiency, recycling and conservation measures. Before I do that, I want to relay an issue that was raised with me when I was in New South Wales recently, when I met an old stalwart in the town of Narrabri. He told me that in his younger days, water could be found just 10 metres below the surface. He said that nowadays it is necessary to drill down about 100 metres to find water. That was an enormous education for me, because of its implications for our water reserves. The Premier said this morning that the amount of underground water in the Yarragadee is the equivalent of 2 000 Sydney Harbours. That sounds as though there is an enormous amount of water in the Yarragadee. However, that does not take into account the fact that replenishment will be required if water is taken out of the Yarragadee. About 40 gegalitres of water is already being taken out of the south west Yarragadee to supply the south west. The population of Western Australia is gravitating to the south west region and the coast. That will place enormous pressure on that part of the state.

Hon Bruce Donaldson: People would go the central coast if the government was willing to spend some money on Indian Ocean Drive.

Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE: I think the member will find that the movement of people to the south west has been huge compared with the movement to the coastal regions to the north. I would be very happy for people to move to my area, because it is a fantastic place to live, as the member would obviously know.

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

It has been estimated that it will cost between \$600 million and \$700 million to extract water from the south west Yarragadee. That is an enormous expense. We have heard the expressions of dissatisfaction from the shires in that area. We have heard the scientific opinions. Recently, a local resident applied for a licence to extract water, and the licence was refused. If there is a problem with a licence to extract only a small amount of water, that indicates that we need to get a better understanding from the government of where we will end up with this sort of proposal.

We made it known at the last election that there are a number of alternatives. One alternative is to build desalination plants in the country to deal with the rising watertable in country areas. That would have the dual benefit of reducing salinity levels in towns such as Katanning and Merredin, and now also in Morawa, and providing fresh water that could be pumped back into the town water system or used for other purposes. As everyone would know, it is very dry in country areas this year. Enormous benefits would be gained from desalinating that water.

For a number of years United Utilities has been seeking to desalinate about 20 gegalitres of water a year in Esperance and pump it to Kalgoorlie. That would be of enormous benefit. It would eliminate the energy cost of having to pump water from the reserves in Perth to Kalgoorlie, and also into the wheatbelt, I might say. Better use should be made of the groundwater in Perth. About 100 gegalitres of grey water and stormwater goes into the ocean each year. That water could be used to replenish the Gnangara mound. The desalination plant cost about \$350 million. I have mentioned United Utilities. A great opportunity exists to involve private enterprise in funding water initiatives such as desalination plants.

Another serious issue is run-off from the catchment areas. The amount of run-off into the dams has been diminishing greatly since 1975. That may coincide with the fact that the catchment areas are no longer being thinned. Those areas used to be burnt. A real opportunity exists for those of us who make decisions to put that process back in train to allow better run-off into the existing dams. There are a number of dams in the Perth area. It has been recognised that the water in Wellington Dam is becoming increasingly saline. It might be possible to reduce the salinity of that water through the use of mechanisms such as diverting the Collie River, or by allowing water to run down the escarpment and be purified.

Some interesting measures could be taken in the irrigation areas in the south of the state. I first saw this when Mr John Logan took me to a cotton experiment south west of Broome to look at how water can be dispersed under the ground to reduce evaporation. These sorts of things could be put in place, particularly for the irrigation of vegetable crops and the like. A couple of days ago, as I was watching television, I saw a very good idea that could be used in these situations. It involved a mechanism that dribbled water into a porous container and dispersed it through the underground water. Another very good initiative is the installation of taps, showers and toilets that reduce water use. Those initiatives have been introduced by this government. We talked about that also when we were in government. As Hon Barry House has said, this issue needs to be dealt with across-the-board, by all governments. This is a very serious issue. However, we need to take a good hard look at whether we should take water from resources that we may need in the future.

HON KIM CHANCE (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [4.17 pm]: I acknowledge the limited time that is available in a debate such as this. I thank Hon Paul Llewellyn for moving this motion today. I join Hon Barry House in particular in thanking all the people who came to the rally today to make their views known. The government appreciates - as much as does Hon Barry House - the fact that such a large number of people came to the rally to express their sincerely held and valuable views. Hon Paul Llewellyn referred to a water crisis. It is not uncommon for people to use that terminology. However, I wonder whether it is not going a little too far to refer to it as a crisis. The south west corner of Western Australia is, on a per capita basis, one of the most benevolently treated populations in the world when it comes to the availability of potable water - not because an enormous amount of water is available, but because the population is small relative to the amount of water that is available. As Hon Paul Llewellyn indicated, much of that water is underground. However, we are experiencing a dramatic downturn in our surface water supplies, or stream flow, and I will go into that further later, if I have time -

Hon Paul Llewellyn: And groundwater recharge.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Yes, indeed. I thank the member for that. We are doing a few things to address that, at least with the Gnangara mound. As a result of having that groundwater resource, which I think deals with about 60 per cent of our urban and goldfields demand, we have not experienced the genuine crisis conditions that Sydney or Melbourne have, where they are totally reliant on their surface water.

In speaking to his motion, Hon Paul Llewellyn called for three things - clear leadership in this issue, an action plan and a requirement for the government to set targets. There is nothing in his motion that the government finds objectionable at all. Indeed, we thoroughly support the intent of his motion. We do have long-term targets.

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

We have targets that are not only ambitious but also vital if we are able to maintain our level of water security, which has been acknowledged throughout Australia as the model for the rest of Australia for keeping ahead of demand. The planning that we are doing and the resource enablement that we are putting into place, along with demand management, are recognised as the best in Australia and I believe it deserves to be but we need to do quite a lot more.

I will run through the targets that were set in 2006 when the government determined that the issue of water resources was its highest priority. Western Australia aims to become one of the most water efficient communities in the nation, achieving a 14 per cent reduction in domestic per capita water consumption by 2012. We aim to have 20 per cent of Western Australia's waste water reused by 2012. To support achieving that aim, we need to better educate the broader community about water consumption and the need not to waste water. Last year in Western Australia we actually moved on a whole range of resource generating and demand management issues that I think fit precisely within the description that Hon Paul Llewellyn used for clear leadership in this matter. I want him to briefly consider these few issues.

Hon Paul Llewellyn: Well, then you don't have to tap into the Yarragadee.

Hon KIM CHANCE: Perhaps not. The government is yet to make a decision on that. That is why we welcome the opportunity to discuss this motion, and why we welcome the views of the Western Australians, the south west residents in particular, who came to Parliament House to express their views.

Hon Robyn McSweeney: We spent a lot of money for no reason, which was rather silly.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I will take that on advisement. The Kwinana desalination plant commenced operation last year. A total of 45 billion litres of drinking water per annum is now being delivered into the metropolitan system, powered by renewable energy at a cost of \$387 million. Water trading, with the improved efficiency for irrigators in the Harvey district, has so far secured more than 11 billion litres of drinking water per year. We set a target to investigate new groundwater resources, including the south west Yarragadee, and the recycling initiative, such as the Kwinana reuse plant, which provided almost three billion litres of water to industry in 2006 alone. There are trials and research into the managed aquifer recharge in terms of reuse. The increased run-off to dams through active catchment management, a matter that was referred to by Hon Murray Criddle, starting with the Wungong trial, aims to achieve both water resource and environmental benefits. Hon Murray Criddle was quite right when he intimated that that kind of catchment management is the most cost-efficient water harvesting technique that we have available to us. The average consumption of water per person in 2006 was less than 155 kilolitres per person, a reduction of 17 per cent since 2001. Demand management is in place and it is working. In 2000, we recycled 2.6 per cent of waste water; we are now recycling 11.5 per cent. I thought it was worthwhile running through those facts and figures. Things are being done. We are staying on top of that ever-narrowing gap between supply and demand.

I turn now to the Yarragadee. The final decision on the south west Yarragadee has not been made, and it will not be made until state cabinet has taken into account the sustainability panel's report and the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change has related the report from the Appeals Convenor, which is obviously an important stage in the process. For four years we have been investigating whether the south west Yarragadee can reasonably and responsibly be tapped for the state's water supply. I noted in a debate in another place, which I will not refer to in detail, that a question was asked about our headlong rush to export water from the south west Yarragadee. I would have thought that four years of detailed investigation and we are still not there is hardly a headlong rush. The government has said over and over again that we will not tap the south west Yarragadee if it is not environmentally responsible to do so. We will consider a range of advice on that matter before we finally make a decision. It is not the only source that is available to the state.

When I made that first comment about this not being a water crisis, I was not trying to be clever. We could reasonably say to Western Australians that there is no water crisis. People can have as much water as they want and they can waste it if they want to, provided they are prepared to pay a marginal cost somewhere between \$1.50 and \$1.80 piped to their house, potable. That is the final dimension. That is the cost parameter that is set by desalination, not by the south west Yarragadee. That is the marginal price of water at its most available resource, a resource that will never go dry and that never goes down. It does go down every day but it comes up again when the tide comes back. That is the end of the line in terms of water availability. That is where we need to be taking our consideration forward. The south west Yarragadee is amongst a group of options that we are looking at. It is probably the one that can come on stream quicker than the others. We would have a time lag if we constructed another desalination plant, and we may get to a point where supply and demand factors touch before it is built. Tapping the south west Yarragadee will not reach that point.

HON ROBYN MCSWEENEY (South West) [4.28 pm]: This is not the first time that I have stood in this place to oppose taking 45 gegalitres of water from the Yarragadee. I support Hon Paul Llewellyn's motion. I stood

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

outside Parliament House at lunchtime with what looked like about 1 000 people, many of whom came from the south west. Many different signs were held up. Some were very emotive. One said “Yarragadee or Yarraga don’t”, which I thought was very clever. Another said, “Yarragadee is life.” Another said, “Where has all the water gone, mummy?” A petition signed by 8 000 people was presented. Hon Simon O’Brien presented a petition for me in this house last week signed by people who were against tapping the Yarragadee. It certainly did not have 8 000 signatures on it, but their sentiments were the same.

Three buses from Bridgetown came to Perth for the rally. That made it a long day for some people. Some people were quite elderly but they were determined to have their say outside Parliament House. I thank them for that. Greg Giblett was one of the bus drivers who appeared on the front page of *The West Australian* a few weeks ago standing in a dry Blackwood River bed, a part of the river that had never dried up before.

Hon Ken Travers: That’s without the Yarragadee being tapped, though.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Yes.

Hon Kim Chance: Is that an argument for saying that we should stop tapping what we are now?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: It is just that it is unseasonal and the first time in many years that this part of the riverbed has dried up. Hon Kim Chance can take that whichever way he likes; I am just putting the facts out there.

Hon Kim Chance: People have actually said to me though that we are taking too much now.

Hon Ken Travers: I am just trying to understand in the context of this debate what the relevance of it is.

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: Why does Hon Ken Travers not listen? Perhaps he might find out the relevance.

This is a very high-risk proposal for the south west. The rally outside Parliament House today mentioned that Hon Paul Llewellyn would move a motion that the people at the rally said would be unprecedented. We constantly debate urgency motions in this house, but because I agree that this is an important motion, I will not be too hard on Hon Paul Llewellyn. I think he was exercising a political licence. However, I have always supported a motion of this kind.

In the past four years I have attended many meetings of very concerned residents in the south west. People in the south west oppose taking 45 gegalitres from the Yarragadee aquifer, not because it is their water and Perth cannot have it, but because of the needs of the region in that growth area. The area is growing very rapidly. Hon Bruce Donaldson reminded me about other ways of getting water other than tapping the Yarragadee. Hon Murray Criddle talked about thinning out the catchments. There was a fire a few years back at the Mundaring catchment that thinned out a lot of trees naturally. The dam catchment was between 60 and 70 per cent full after that fire. I recall Hon Bruce Donaldson asking questions in this house about that.

Many people ask me about the location of the Yarragadee. They know about the Yarragadee but not how far it extends or even where it is situated. The south west Yarragadee is defined as the area from Australind to the south coast bounded on the west by the Busselton fault and on the east by the Darling fault. The aquifer underlies a land area of at least 4 000 square kilometres and contains an estimated volume of 400 cubic kilometres of fresh water, which is about 400 000 gegalitres. I guess that is where the Premier got the saying that it was like the volume of two Sydney Harbours, as that is the volume of the water there. Although that volume of water is there, the Premier did not take into account the recharge factor or any other factor. The aquifer lies 90 to 200 metres below the land surface under the Blackwood plateau and is estimated to be 2 000 metres deep. It outcrops at the land surface in a small area south and west of Nannup around the Blackwood River and is close to the surface in the Capel-Stratham-Gelorup area. Water is extracted from the Yarragadee for Bunbury and Busselton town water supplies, by the mining industry, and recently for agricultural use.

From my own perspective, I have become very concerned about government legislation that puts environmental controls on private property. This also covers water rights, wetlands and a raft of other issues that concern land usage. In other words, I think the government takes what it wants. If it wants the Yarragadee, I have a feeling that after spending all the money that this government has spent and its readiness to acquire land, it will probably go ahead and take water from the Yarragadee. Why is the government therefore posturing and saying that it is waiting for another report to come out? I could take government members onto farmers’ properties now and those farmers could show them where the government intends to go to get what it wants.

Hon Kim Chance: Are you suggesting that if the Appeals Convenor said no, we would ignore him?

Hon ROBYN McSWEENEY: No, I am not. I just wonder what the government really would do. This government is pretty arrogant. I am very concerned about this government’s arrogance. The Leader of the House may have to eat his words. I certainly hope that will be recorded in *Hansard*, so I will let that one go through.

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

A report prepared for the Water and Rivers Commission titled "South West Yarragadee - Blackwood: Groundwater Area: Economic Value Study" was written by Economics Consulting Services Pty Ltd, in particular Murray Meaton and Dr David Bennett, and in part reads -

In Western Australia, the *Rights in Water and Irrigation Act 1914* vests control of water in watercourses and underground water in the State thus abolishing common law riparian rights in proclaimed groundwater and surface water areas.

In 2004, the Whicher water group was considering - it probably still is - proclaiming areas that had not been proclaimed previously. The report continues -

Guidelines for the allocation of water under the Act require the Commission to take into account whether the allocation:

- is in the public interest, -

What is the public interest in taking water from the Yarragadee? -

- is ecologically sustainable; -

I do not believe it is ecologically sustainable -

- is environmentally acceptable; -

To whom is it environmentally acceptable? It is to the government and nobody else -

- may prejudice other current or future users; -

It certainly does that because - I am running short of time - as Hon Murray Criddle said, the Water and Rivers Commission has stopped issuing water licences and has, therefore, prejudiced other current or future users -

- would have a detrimental effect on another person; -

It certainly does -

- could be provided by another source; -

It certainly could -

- is consistent with local practices, by-laws, any approved plan under the Act or previous Commission decision;
- is consistent with land use planning instruments;
- is consistent with the requirements and policies of other government agencies; or
- is consistent with any intergovernmental agreement.

...

There are no specific references to regional issues in the legislation other than the need to consider water use impact on other people.

All that the residents of the south west want is to be satisfied that no damage will be created by taking the Yarragadee water. They are not satisfied. The one thousand people at the front of Parliament House today and many more people are not satisfied. The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation conducted a survey titled "Social Values and Impact Study: South West Yarragadee: Blackwood Groundwater Area" in 2003. One of the questions in the survey relating to confidence in science, planning and management reads -

An attitudinal scale of high reliability was developed which measured respondents' trust, confidence and certainty in the ability of the experts and authorities to conduct investigations, plan for the future and make appropriate decisions. The mean score indicated little trust and certainty in the community and any demographic differences were in degree rather than in opposition.

...

The findings of this short survey were both clear and consistent with those of the South West survey. Perth respondents considered the export of Blackwood groundwater for Perth use to be less than fair to the people of the south-west and to be a least favoured source, along with storing wastewater in aquifers for future use. Reuse options and desalination were the most favoured sources of the seven offered for consideration.

That is a very interesting report by the CSIRO. The Water and Rivers Commission issues licences for groundwater abstraction in proclaimed areas.

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan) [4.38 pm]: I sought the call but I am happy not to take it, other than to say that I support the motion, to allow my colleague to make some concluding remarks, if he gets the call.

HON NIGEL HALLETT (South West) [4.38 pm]: I will be brief in giving my support to this motion. It was interesting to hear the Leader of the House say that if water is taken from the Yarragadee aquifer, the government would be worried about the crossover of supply and demand. If that were to occur, that would indicate total mismanagement by the Water Corporation. There is currently in excess of 100 gegalitres of water in Wellington Dam. I was there last weekend and saw the bottom valve on the dam open and water flowing freely from it. I do not know why that water is not being used. We know that the former Environmental Protection Authority chief Wally Cox, who resigned two years before his contract expired, was concerned about pressure being put on the environment by taking water from the Yarragadee. There are alternatives being offered, for example, Wellington Dam - and I refer also to the fire that went through Mundaring Weir.

The run-off from the clearing around the four dams would amount to 60 gegalitres of water. If thinning programs were undertaken quickly around those four dams, that would be the result. Between them, the four dams and Wellington Dam hold in excess of 150 gegalitres of water. I am amazed that the government wants to spend approximately \$50 million to \$70 million extracting a further 45 gegalitres from the Yarragadee aquifer. It is not necessary. A sufficient time frame exists to enable the government to examine the potential of taking water from the Kimberley and to study what is happening around the world. China is investing some \$US60 billion to channel water from the Yangtze River to the northern parts of the country. The length of each canal will be in excess of 1 300 kilometres. Projects such as the one in Libya and the Californian state water project are all being undertaken on a large scale. Comparatively, the Kimberley proposal in Western Australia is not very complex. Research is telling us that the rainfall in the Kimberley will increase by a minimum of 15 per cent by 2030 and possibly 30 per cent by 2060. The Yarragadee proposal is an overreaction given the 14 per cent reduction in rainfall in the south west since 1970 - a period of roughly 40 years. The present extraction is sustainable; the 1970s rainfall was high, coming off the 1960s period. I would be interested to see the records for the previous 40 years.

The proposal to extract water from the Yarragadee aquifer is the number one issue in the south west. In fact, it has taken over from daylight saving. Previously, they were neck and neck. The south west is uncompromising in its objection to the proposal to tap water from the south west Yarragadee.

HON PAUL LLEWELLYN (South West) [4.41 pm]: I seek leave to table this letter from the Chairman of the Western Australian Conservation Commission to the Appeals Convener and the Minister for the Environment.

Leave granted. [See paper 2536.]

Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN: In my submission to the Appeals Convenor I made a number of points, one of which was that no alternatives to the Yarragadee proposal have been properly investigated. My letter states -

A rigorous Sustainability and Environmental Assessment of the Yarragadee proposal should have evaluated the project through a comparison with other specific alternatives to meet the equivalent water need including:

- The recovery of the Wellington dam resource,
- A specific proposal for large scale drainage and stormwater recovery through managed aquifer recharge,

I mean "large scale" -

- A large scale waste water recycling program,
- A program to license meters and to regulate Perth groundwater bores,
- A program to fund water efficiency, . . .

It was also erroneous on the part of the Water Corporation to say that the only alternative to the Yarragadee is a second desalination plant. It is quite clear that if we invest in alternative water strategies, we will not have to build another desalination plant or tap into the Yarragadee. Many people have mentioned the environmental impacts of the proposal. Clearly, they are so significant that the Yarragadee proposal, as assessed by the environmental review and management plan, appears to be highly likely to result in an unacceptable long-term environmental, economic and social impact on the south west region. The proposal is inconsistent with both the precautionary principle and intergenerational equity.

Other members have mentioned acid sulfate soils. The Water Corporation's analysis has been founded on flawed logic in relation to the allocation of water to meet the regional needs of Perth and the south west region.

Extract from *Hansard*
[COUNCIL - Tuesday, 27 March 2007]
p650b-658a

President; Hon Paul Llewellyn; Hon Barry House; Hon Murray Criddle; Hon Kim Chance; Hon Robyn
McSweeney; Hon Giz Watson; Hon Nigel Hallett

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.