

SOUTHERN FORESTS IRRIGATION SCHEME

Statement

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [9.57 pm]: This afternoon, I tabled a petition on the southern forests irrigation scheme. I have to say how pleased I was to hear Hon Adele Farina speaking on this issue. The petition I tabled had over 3 000 signatures that were gathered in the past six weeks. Most of them were from people in the south west near where the scheme is supposed to go in. These people are not happy with the outcome and what is being planned down there. This petition is even more significant because last year I tabled a petition with only about 860 signatures; it was before people knew what was going on. At that time, someone requested a copy of all the signatories to the petition. That person gave the list of names of people who had signed the petition to other members in the community. Some of them went around threatening the people who had signed the petition.

I understand that if this was proven, it would be in contempt of the Legislative Council. However, as members would know, in most small towns, people do not like to come forward and say what is happening, so it was kept quiet. No-one wanted to speak up and say that they had been threatened by someone who had found their name on a petition and was using that against them, trying to scare them from saying anything about the scheme. The fact that another petition has been put out, which received over 3 000 signatures, means people are really putting their businesses, health and wellbeing out there, knowing that this might happen again. However, I believe that this time, they know they can stand up for themselves and there will be support to say that if they are threatened by anybody for having signed this petition, it is a serious offence and will be dealt with properly.

To get on with this, people are upset because, as we heard, the scheme was originally based on the Hydrology and Risk Consulting report, which was used to justify this scheme and was based on the rainfall figures in 1975. We know that the rainfall has changed in the past 45 years. We know that the rainfall is not there, and this has been documented by the people who live there. Originally, the HARC report outlined that there would be 95 per cent reliability for the scheme based on those rainfall figures, but it also pointed out that by 2050, there would be only a 40 per cent chance that water would fill the dam. That is only 30 years from now and the \$80 million that will go into building the dam would make it ready 40 per cent of the time, but that was based on medium rainfall projections using 1975 figures.

The members of the community who are trying to stop this asked Mike Rowe, director general of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, to go down there and have a look. He provided information to them and I have a table here. He provided information using more current rainfall figures, from 2011 to 2019. The data excluded 2010 and 2020, which were dry years. But even those nine years of data show that rainfall would have been able to fill the dam for only four out of those nine years, or 44 per cent of the time. If we add in the data from 2010 and 2020, it would be filled for only four out of 11 years, or 36 per cent of the time. That \$80 million is going to build a dam and destroy a forest to provide water to people who have already planted the trees that they are expecting to get the water for, taking water from an area where other farmers could use it. It makes absolutely no sense and is completely unjustifiable. I understand that this is going for a public environmental review through the Environmental Protection Authority, but why are we waiting for that? We know that it is a dumb scheme. We know that it is not viable. We know that it is not going to work. We know it is unfair; it is inequitable; and environmentally, of course, it is a rotten idea. But it is wrong on so many counts to just sit here and wait for the EPA to make a decision. That is clearly a way of just stepping aside and not taking responsibility for the actions of this government. We know that that reliability is not there and we know that that is not going to happen.

The table also shows whether there would be enough water supply when only 80 per cent of the entitlements are used. The dam would supply water only in really wet years. In really wet years, the chances are that there is already water. In the dry years, people will be taking every drop that they can get, so, again, it is making assumptions about this data that are not reflected in reality.

I also have to speak on the “Stewart Tree”. I have spoken on this before. In Record Brook, originally the dam wall area was going to include the tree, which is probably between 300 and 400 years old and it is not the only tree. Right beside the “Stewart Tree” are two other trees that may be even the same age, probably within 100 years of it, but they did not grow as big. The “Stewart Tree” is the tallest standing karri tree that we know of, and that would be in the world. The people who do not want to see this go ahead have had a walk through the Record Brook area, the area that will be inundated with the 15 gegalitres of water in those wet years. There are many significant trees. It is beautiful bushland. No-one gets in there; it is pretty well protected. It has not been logged much because it is on a steep bank and here we are talking about inundating it with 15 gegalitres of water.

To make matters worse, the Southern Forests Irrigation Co-operative has gone out to try to sell it to the public by saying, “What sort of recreation activities would you like to do on this dam? Come and waterski. Come and swim and sit on the beach.” But we are talking about a dam that will have 15 gegalitres at the peak of the wet years down to next to nothing in the dry years. In the summertime, when people want to go waterskiing, there will not be any

water in there. It is a ludicrous idea. It was an idea to try to get people onside and think that it would be fun for people in Manjimup because they would get tourists down there to use this dam. It is not going to happen.

The next step will involve the “Stewart Tree”. Now that the dam wall will be moved, the “Stewart Tree” will be outside the area of inundation. There is talk about keeping the water that would normally flow into Record Brook as long as it is flowing at over four megalitres per day, but the area downstream has lived with considerably more water per day on an average basis. We can say that this is the environmental flow and that is all the water the area needs, but this should be based on actual data and research. Let us actually find out what amount of water is needed in that area because the rainfall level is already falling, so the area is less wet than it has been in the past in dry years. To collect some of that water in a dam and hold it back does not make sense environmentally, but we will leave that to the Environmental Protection Authority because this government is too scared to make the decision on its own!

Hon Stephen Dawson: Goodness gracious! Damned if you do and damned if you don’t! If we don’t listen to the EPA, we are in trouble, and if we do listen to the EPA, we’re in trouble. Please be consistent for goodness sake!

Hon DIANE EVERS: Sometimes a person just has to stand up before the EPA gets involved; that is all I would like to say.

This letter from Mike Rowe outlines some of the points used by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation to justify what it is doing. He states that the department is going to provide additional water at varying reliability to scheme customers. As I said, that is in the wet years. In the dry years, the years that the customers will need the water, they are not going to get the water. He also points out that the department is going to allow the environmental flows, but the maximum is four megalitres per day, and because it is a drying climate, we will have even less water than that. It does not make sense. Mike Rowe mentions that the proposed scheme is a response to climate change because the water wars are beginning. People are trying to get a hold of and hold onto as much water as they possibly can. That includes people living in catchments where they do not have the rainfall, the water running through their streams is saline because of the agricultural practices in that area, or their soil is not holding the moisture like it used to and that is where the water is going to go.

I have so much more to say on this. I will have to carry on with this issue tomorrow night because this scheme has to be stopped. There is no reason to allow it to continue. The EPA has now put the assessment out until July next year after the election. Why make people wait? We know that it is a dumb scheme. Nobody needs it and we can put an end to it now.