

SALINITY, FUNDING

251. Mr McNEE to the Minister for the Environment:

Last year the former coalition Government committed about \$40 million to tackling Western Australia's salinity problem. Given that the Labor Party's environment policy statement concedes that salinity is the greatest environmental problem facing Western Australia, I ask -

- (1) How much extra money has the Government committed to tackling salinity this year?
- (2) Is the Government prepared to match the coalition Government's record on funding to solve the salinity problem?

Dr EDWARDS replied:

- (1)-(2) There is no doubt that salinity is the number one environmental issue affecting this State. The Government is keen to move forward and build on the work of the previous Government and do meaningful things to tackle the problem. The Government has designated a minister with responsibility for the area, and that is me. The Government has appointed a short-term, high-powered task force to review what has happened, how we build on it and how we move forward. Preliminary findings were released in Merredin last week in the presence of the member for Merredin. The full report will be released soon. The Government is contributing extra money. That was spelt out in the Government's election commitments. It is being worked on at the moment and at the time of the budget it will be reaffirmed and the exact nature of the projects will be confirmed. Pilot engineering works will receive an extra \$4 million to build on the previous Government's work in places like Merredin to tackle the problems that affect such towns. There will be evaluations of drainage works, why they work and how we can ensure that we get the best value for money from drainage projects. The Government is working on its commitment to spend \$6 million to develop demonstration sub-catchments. I get a clear message from farmers that if they have to continue helping to pay for these projects - although many tell me that they do not want government help and they want to tackle the problems themselves - they want to know what works, where it works and what combination of measures work. There is no single answer and I believe the Opposition believes that as well, given what it has written. Demonstration sub-catchments will try every measure and the Government will give advice, apply peer pressure, lead by example and get people to follow on. Money from the AlintaGas sale that the previous Government allocated for these measures has been kept for the purpose by this Government. The Government, unlike the National Party, did not notionally spend it during the election campaign. The Government is waiting for advice from the salinity task force on how to best spend the money.

In the company of Senator Robert Hill, the member for Vasse and others, I was delighted to announce the launch of Bushbank. Bushbank was a priority of the previous Government but the project had not been completed. Money was reserved for the project and this Government has used those funds as well as attracting money from the Commonwealth Government. The money will help greatly in tackling the problem of salinity. The Government will continue the work of the previous Government and will build on it. The AlintaGas money has not been touched and another \$10 million has been allocated. I hope we can all work together to tackle the issue that is causing severe problems in parts of the wheatbelt.