

NATURAL HERITAGE TRUST, ABOLITION OF LANDCARE OFFICER POSITIONS

52. Hon BARRY HOUSE to the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries:

- (1) Why have the positions of 15 land conservation officers who worked from Department of Agriculture offices on the Swan coastal plain been abolished?
- (2) Why were these people prevented from applying for the recent redundancy packages, when it would have been known that their positions were about to be scrapped?
- (3) How do these changes reflect the Labor Government's much-stated commitment to the environment and sustainable agriculture?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank Hon Barry House for asking the question, because it provides me with an opportunity to more fully answer a question raised on the last sitting day in this place by Hon Murray Criddle.

Hon Murray Criddle: I am all ears, minister!

Hon KIM CHANCE: Thank you, honourable member.

- (1)-(3) I will begin with the last of the three questions. The Government that provides the money for Landcare officers under the Natural Heritage Trust scheme is not a Labor Government. The Howard Government is in fact a Liberal Government.

Hon Murray Criddle: It is a coalition Government.

Hon KIM CHANCE: I am sorry! It is indeed a coalition Government. There is one coalition Government left in Australasia, and that is the federal Government.

Hon Peter Foss: It is a very important Government!

Hon KIM CHANCE: It is indeed a very important Government, and one with which I am able to deal very effectively.

I can understand Hon Barry House being confused, because there is widespread misunderstanding - and for a very good reason - about the original funding source of the Natural Heritage Trust, which is the primary source of funds. I say "primary" because the State employs some NHT people. Primarily, the Commonwealth funds these positions under NHT1, through the community support officer scheme.

If I answer the question raised the other day by Hon Murray Criddle, which I could not answer in detail at the time, it will go part of the way towards answering the question of Hon Barry House. In relation to the funding for the Landcare coordinators and facilitators, the Western Australian NHT secretariat first suggested to the Commonwealth that the Commonwealth accelerate the processes for coordinator/facilitator funding in late June 2002. This is the CSO funding. The State wrote to the Commonwealth requesting that this be done. However, despite approval by the Commonwealth for an accelerated process, the State only received verbal indications of time lines in mid-July. Confirmation of a firm date was not received until the secretariat, on 9 August, was forwarded a copy of the letter referred to by Hon Murray Criddle. This letter was sent to proponents of previously funded CSO projects. Because of the lead times involved in assessing bids for facilitators and coordinators, a closing date of 16 August was set. So, the State received the letter on 9 August, and the Commonwealth wanted the bids back in Canberra on 16 August. This was after the State had been negotiating with the Commonwealth for over a year on this matter.

Hon Murray Criddle: To be fair, the letter was actually sent on 2 August.

Hon KIM CHANCE: It arrived at the secretariat on 9 August. The time lines set were totally unrealistic, given that advice was not received until 9 August. In the absence of firm time lines from the Commonwealth, the secretariat worked to a time line it established in consultation with the commonwealth officers. In other words, they got back to the Commonwealth and asked for a few more days. The state assessment panel met yesterday to assess the regional submissions for CSO funding. The state bid will be forwarded to the Commonwealth no later than 21 August. That was the time line agreed with the commonwealth officers. There was a problem in the short term, but there is no problem now.

There has been considerable confusion over this matter. The reason that I said I can understand people being somewhat confused is that many people, including people involved in Landcare, think that the Natural Heritage Trust is a state-commonwealth program. To a certain extent it is, but only to the extent that the State provides some services to the Commonwealth; in particular, the secretariat is provided by the Department of Agriculture. Essentially, the Commonwealth intends that local Landcare groups should be the employers of people in those

funded positions. Many Landcare groups prefer not to take on that role. They do not want the hassle of being the nominal employer. Therefore, many of those officers are employed by the Western Australian Department of Agriculture even though the positions are commonwealth funded. Therein lies the source of the confusion. People imagine that Landcare officers are state-employed. They are, technically, but the positions are commonwealth positions and dependent upon commonwealth funding. It seems as though this issue has been resolved, although I must refer the member to the general part of the answer that I provided to Hon Murray Criddle.

Hon Barry House: Are we talking about the same thing?

Hon KIM CHANCE: I am talking about land conservation officers and not Landcare officers. I think they are the same thing, but I will take the question on notice for further advice. I believe that this is the issue since many of these positions are uncertain at this stage and will be until we have resolution of the matter tomorrow.

I mentioned this in my answer to Hon Murray Criddle last week: it is also true that the Commonwealth has quite severely cut back its NHT commitment. As a result, a number of Landcare officer positions will not be funded under the interim arrangements. At this point, the contribution that the State is making is the appointment, as per the Government's election promise, of six new regional Landcare officers, but, unlike the commonwealth positions, these will be permanent positions and funded entirely by the State.

Hon Barry House: Would those people be offered redundancies; that is, given a choice?

Hon KIM CHANCE: That is a matter for the Commonwealth, but I doubt it because they would all be contract employees.