

PLANT PESTS AND DISEASES (ERADICATION FUNDS) AMENDMENT BILL 2002

Second Reading

Resumed from 12 September.

MR R.N. SWEETMAN (Ningaloo) [8.31 pm]: The Opposition does not have a difficulty with this Bill. It has been decided that rather than substantially amend the plant pests and diseases eradication legislation, a new Bill will be introduced. This Bill precedes that Bill. The reason for this Bill is to seek an extension of the legislation from 31 October 2002 to 31 October 2003. The Opposition is happy to go along with that. The only contribution I will make to this second reading debate is to say that I hope this situation will not be similar to the situation with the Grain Marketing Bill and the Bulk Handling Amendment Bill, which were introduced into the Parliament about five weeks ago in the knowledge that that legislation had to be proclaimed by 1 November. I understand that a review group that included representatives from the Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia, the Western Australian Farmers Federation, the Agriculture Protection Board and the Department of Agriculture has deemed it appropriate that a new Bill take the place of this legislation. I hope the new legislation will be drafted in plenty of time to allow this House to scrutinise it prior to 31 October 2003 and that we will have the opportunity for more consultation than we had on the Grain Marketing Bill and the Bulk Handling Amendment Bill. With that note of caution about the time frame for the drafting of the new Bill, I am happy to say that the Opposition supports the Bill.

MR B.J. GRYLLES (Merredin) [8.32 pm]: The National Party also supports the Plant Pests and Diseases (Eradication Funds) Bill. The purpose of the Bill is provide for the expiry of the Plant Pests and Diseases (Eradication Funds) Act 1974 on 31 October 2003 instead of 31 October 2002. The Plant Pests and Diseases (Eradication Funds) Act provides for the imposition of a levy on the growers of grain and seed to fund the eradication or prevention of the spread of skeleton weed and certain plant diseases, and the eradication of resistant grain insects. The Act also provides for growers whose crops are destroyed in the course of steps taken to eradicate or prevent the spread of skeleton weed or relevant plant diseases to be compensated for any loss incurred. The principal current use of the Act is to raise most of the funds necessary for the operation of the skeleton weed eradication program. This amendment Bill seeks only to extend the life of the plant pests and diseases Act. This amendment should be supported, given that the principal current use of the Act is to raise funds for the operation of the skeleton weed program. If the amendment does not come into operation before 31 October 2002, the Act will expire.

Although the National Party will support this Bill, it has serious concerns about the direction that the skeleton weed eradication program is taking. In the middle of last week I attended an extremely volatile meeting in Southern Cross at which the grain growers in that area, which is the most affected by skeleton weed, indicated that they were extremely disillusioned with the current process and direction of the skeleton weed eradication program. I put on the record that as this is my electorate, I completely support the farmers in Yilgarn and Narembeen when they say that their area should be the priority target for funding from this program and that we should continue to seek to eradicate skeleton weed in those areas. If the Agriculture Protection Board and the Department of Agriculture continue to go down the path of their current recommendations, which is to turn simply to a control program in those areas and not an eradication program, then in a few years we will have a major problem on our hands. Through the processes that have been undertaken over the past few years, they have managed to keep a lid on the problem. The strong summer rains of 2000 caused an anomaly in the system, but the farmers assure me they can continue to work to an eradication program. The last thing they need is for the department that has been put in control of eradicating this plant to say, "Sorry. We can no longer operate an eradication program in your area. We need to put our main effort and focus into the outlying areas."

The skeleton weed levy, which is levied at 35c a tonne, will raise approximately \$1.5 million for the program this year. This is growers' money. Only a small percentage of government money goes into this program. For that reason, I hope the growers in the areas that are most affected will be given the greatest say in how the money is spent. My family farm is in Corrigin. We are about 100 kilometres from the areas that are most affected. We are more than happy for the money that is raised from our skeleton weed levy to be spent in Yilgarn and Narembeen, where the problem occurs. We have an export hay market that is going ahead in leaps and bounds, and that is fantastic for our area. However, these products are transported from Yilgarn and Narembeen and down Brookton Highway to the processing areas in Brookton. These loads are open, so there is a possibility that skeleton weed will also be transported. The last thing we want is for the skeleton weed plant to get out of control in Yilgarn and Narembeen, because we know that as soon as that happens we will have it on our farm. We welcome the fact that our levy is spent in those areas on an eradication program, not a control program. I made a commitment to the people at the meeting on Thursday, and I have also made it in telephone calls since that time, that I will put pressure on the review committee for skeleton weed and on the Department of Agriculture, which

have decided that the focus can no longer be just on these areas and that other areas of the State should be the main focus, to change their decision. I cannot see how that will work.

Mr T.K. Waldron: Is it true that if the Department of Agriculture comes onto a farm and finds skeleton weed, the farmer has to eradicate it and pay for it?

Mr B.J. GRYLLS: I thank the member for raising that important point, because that is exactly what is happening. The Agriculture Protection Board is saying that in the areas of Yilgarn and Narembene, it does not believe an eradication program can be continued and be successful. Under the Act it is still possible for farmers to be issued with a notice that they have to eradicate skeleton weed. That is an anomaly that is certainly not missed by a lot of growers. This problem is specific to my patch in Yilgarn and Narembene. All of the growers in Western Australia came together to raise this levy to try to support these growers in the battle against this weed. We are very concerned about the direction the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is taking. Moves are afoot to lobby the minister very strongly and ask him to reconsider the direction that he is taking on skeleton weed. We cannot risk making a mistake this year because we will not have the chance to come back in two years to fix the problem. The problem needs to be addressed now. Farmers in some of the eastern areas are just about to start harvesting. Once harvesting has started, it will be too late to get this right. At the moment I do not believe we have it right. It is critical for the farmers in that area to make sure we get on top of the skeleton weed issue. I am sure that the parliamentary secretary representing the Minister for Agriculture is listening intently and that as soon as I have finished speaking, he will race back to his minister to tell him that he has it all wrong and that the people of the Yilgarn and Narembene must have this levy for searching spent in their areas to ensure that we remain on top of this weed problem. If that is not done, next year we will be trying to get on top of the matter in the adjacent Shires of Bruce Rock, Corrigin and Kulin and after that in the next lot of adjacent Shires of Brookton, Lake Grace and so on until the member for Cockburn has skeleton weed growing in his backyard in Swanbourne.

Once again, I put on record my concern about what is happening with skeleton weed. This Bill is important to ensure that a levy can be raised and we will be working with the parliamentary secretary and the Minister for Agriculture on this Bill to see that it is spent in the best possible way.

MR F.M. LOGAN (Cockburn - Parliamentary Secretary) [8.42 pm]: As indicated in the second reading speech, this is a minor Bill that seeks to extend the life of the Plant Pests and Diseases (Eradication Funds) Act by a simple amendment to section 18 to delete "2002" and insert "2003". This is necessary because, as I pointed out in the second reading speech, a review of the Act is under way at the moment. The review committee comprises nominees from the Pastoralists and Graziers Association, the Western Australian Farmers Federation, the Agriculture Protection Board and the Department of Agriculture. I am sure that the issues raised by the member for Merredin will be addressed by the review committee.

The member for Ningaloo hopes that there will be sufficient time to debate the new Bill at length before it is passed. Obviously, that comes down to the effort made by the review committee to finalise its work and produce a new Bill rather than amendments to the Act. As the member for Merredin said, those issues will be argued long and hard; the structure of the new Bill will determine who pays for the eradication of skeleton weed and how that eradication program will be implemented. The number of properties in quarantine because of skeleton weed at the end of each year has risen from 200 in 1990 to more than 700 in 2001-02. To give members some idea of the difficulty in dealing with skeleton weed, each flowering plant is capable of producing between 20 000 and 35 000 seeds that are dispersed by the wind and, in some cases, up to 50 kilometres from their point of origin. That is the reason for skeleton weed becoming so prolific throughout all areas of the State and not just in those pointed out by the member for Merredin. The weed is widespread in the eastern States, and new areas of infestation are recorded each year. To give an indication of how the plant is transported from the eastern States, one was found growing in a parking bay on the Eyre Highway on the Nullarbor Plain last year. The plant is found on new sites within the metropolitan area each year, and infestations of the plant can be found on railway reserves. The high cost of treating the infestations must also be taken into consideration, bearing in mind the criticisms made by the member for Merredin. It costs approximately \$320 per hectare to obtain a 90 per cent effective eradication with one treatment. It is an extremely expensive process to effectively get rid of skeleton weed and, despite that effectiveness of up to 90 per cent and the cost involved, each year it is spread further by the nature of transportation and the way in which our economy is structured.

Mr B.J. Grylls interjected.

Mr F.M. LOGAN: No, I do not. All these issues will be debated at length by the review committee and will be addressed in the creation of the new Bill.

I thank members opposite for raising these issues and for their contribution to the debate on the Bill. I commend the Bill to the House.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY - Wednesday, 16 October 2002]

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Mr Rod Sweetman; Mr Brendon Grylls; Mr Fran Logan; Acting Speaker

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms K. Hodson-Thomas): Before I move the next motion, I remind members that it is not parliamentary practice for newspapers to be read in the Chamber. I will not specifically name any members, but I remind them that it is unacceptable behaviour in this House.

Question put and passed.

Bill read a second time, proceeded through remaining stages without debate and transmitted to the Council.