

SOUTHERN FORESTS IRRIGATION SCHEME

Statement

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [6.30 pm]: I rise to hopefully complete my comments on the southern forests irrigation scheme tonight, in the hope that before I need to talk about it again, maybe the whole project will have been canned for the ridiculous scheme that it is. Yesterday, we heard from Hon Adele Farina about the letter she received from Mr Kim Taylor. He was formerly a general manager of the Environmental Protection Authority and a former director general of the Department of Water.

Today he spoke on ABC South West WA radio for about five minutes or so to explain the idiocy that is going on in Manjimup with this scheme. The numbers just do not stack up. He knows what he is talking about. He has looked at that place and looked at the figures and it is just not going to work. To continue on this ridiculous path and wait another six or eight months for the Environmental Protection Authority to do its public environmental review to find out whether it will have any environmental impacts—which of course it will, and many—is completely unnecessary, because the scheme is a dud. There is no reason to continue with it.

In response to communications from people in Manjimup who are against the scheme and to information from Kim Taylor, the current director general of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, Mike Rowe, wrote to them. He started out by providing a little history and said that the issue went back to 2012, after a couple of very dry years. Was that climate related? Yes, probably. Anyway, after a couple of dry years, the department said, “We need to do something to make sure we have water. We’ve got to find a way to get more water.” I remember hearing about this scheme back in, I think, 2014 or 2015, when the department was talking about bringing additional water into the system. I am sorry, but that is not how the planet works. It rains, water flows through our rivers and streams, and we take it up from the ground. We do not make new water because we have not really worked out how to, other than through desalination or maybe by planting new forests. We know that forests generate rainfall, but we cannot make more water. We will be taking it from somewhere when there is a decreasing supply. It just does not make sense.

I will seek to table Mike Rowe’s letter when I finish my contribution, but one issue is the level of public funding for this scheme. He points out in his letter that it is an \$80 million project, of which \$19 million will come from the state government and \$39 million from the commonwealth government. The remaining funding will come from private investment. We know that there is \$11 million from the buyers into the scheme—the 70 or so people who are buying into the scheme to get their water. That still leaves a further \$11 million, and a large number of people are very concerned about where that \$11 million will come from. I will ask another question without notice to find out where that \$11 million will come from. If it is another private investor into this scheme, what are they planning to get out of it? People do not invest without expecting some sort of return. That is a question I will return to later.

There is one paragraph in the letter that I thought would be almost amusing were it not for the fact that it is in support of a dud scheme. It states —

The Department’s attempts at explaining the complex science —

Remember, we are talking about water here —

to inform decisions about the scheme have been made in good faith and with a genuine endeavour to balance the needs of all current and future water users in the Warren and Donnelly catchments. However, I acknowledge that the Department’s explanation regarding the water that would supply the scheme has not always been clear and recognise that our efforts to simplify the complexity of the science and associated management arrangements has, at times, seemed to lead to mixed messages.

Water is not complex. It comes from the sky, it flows, it seeps into the ground, and it goes out to the ocean. Plants use it and we drink it. Water is not that complex. The reason we are having difficulties and why there have been mixed messages is that there are sometimes errors in the information. Sometimes the department’s information is based on really dodgy evidence. There are stream flows where, once a month, someone from DWER goes out there to check whether the water is flowing. There are no gauges in the water to actually measure it as it flows; they just go out there once a month to see what the water flow is. Really? When we are about to invest \$80 million to collect 15 gigalitres of water, we do not have a permanent gauging system. I do not understand. That makes no sense.

Mr Rowe then goes on to talk about the source of the water. He wants to clear this up. Farmers were concerned that they would lose the water that falls on their land. He states —

Water diverted for the scheme would come from:

1. unallocated high reliability water in the Upper and Middle Donnelly sub-areas which cannot be accessed by on-farm dams due to the predominately undeveloped and forested nature of these sub-areas;

This is “high reliability” water, as shown in the department’s own corrected table. Remember, the department’s own table shows that it would have been pumping less than two and a half gigalitres from the Donnelly River for three of the last nine years. That does not include the years 2020 and 2010. If they were included, it would be five years when the river pumped out less than two and a half gigalitres to fill a 15-gigalitre dam. That is not complex; that is just wrong. The letter refers to “high reliability” water often. It is not highly reliable; it is ebbing and flowing, like so many other things in the climate change world that we live in.

The letter then refers to taking the water from Record Brook. Further along, the letter states that the amount taken from Record Brook is not a large amount, but it will still be taken from there, even though in many years it will supply about half a gigalitre, or not even that. We are talking about less than 200 megalitres, so it is not much at all. That water will be stopped from flowing downstream, through its natural course, to maintain the health and resilience of the water downstream. I was talking to a friend down there just today who had taken some photos. This is the end of winter, and they have had most of their rainfall for this year, and it is dry; there is no water flowing through it. Really, we need that water to be flowing to maintain the health of the river. If it is blocked up in a dam, it is not going to work. To make matters worse, there is not even a gauging station on Record Brook. This is the area where it is proposed to build the dam and we do not even know how much water is flowing into it. Let us invest in those gauging stations before we start spending \$80 million on a dam and piping system. The list of diversion sources continues —

3. flow to carry water downstream between sub-areas (as allowed for in the allocation plan); and

I do not think that is 10 gigalitres’ worth. That is a small addition, because the last one is even more questionable —

4. higher flows in wetter years, generated from all areas above the proposed take point.

That is the cleared areas where these farmers are saying, “Why can’t we have more of the water that falls on our land? Why does this water have to go off to this scheme that 70 people have bought into to take water from our catchment and send it through an \$80 million system to their catchment because they possibly haven’t managed their water flows that well?” It is possibly because they have cleared so much that the water is now going into their streams as saline water. Perhaps it is because they are not managing to keep the water that they have there or maybe they planted avocados in an area that does not have the rainfall available for them. It does not make sense. The letter goes on about the highly reliable water, which is not highly reliable.

It looks like I will have time for one other point. A paragraph under “Applying climate projections” states —

... The highly reliable allocation limits are based on an actual benchmark dry year and provide security of supply for all water users, and the lower reliability variable take and proposed scheme mechanisms are based on the future probability of higher flows in a sufficient number of wetter years.

That is how the department is trying to simplify the complexity. That does not make a whole lot of sense because here it is talking about climate change and “the future probability of higher flows in a sufficient number of wetter years”, but as we have seen from the table, which I will also seek leave to table, the flows just are not there, so in most years, the dam will be dry before the end of summer.

I will leave it there, but I will table the letter and the amendment to the letter so that other people have a chance to read through it.

The PRESIDENT: Member, is there a way to identify the document, such as the title of the letter or the author of that letter, just to assist Hansard once it has been tabled.

Hon DIANE EVERS: It is a letter from the director general of the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation, Mike Rowe, on 28 October 2020. The second document is the additional information requested as a correction to that letter.

Leave granted. [See paper [4555](#).]

House adjourned at 6.41 pm
