

**Division 42: Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions — Services 1 to 10, Environment, \$465 697 000 —**

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Mr R.R. Whitby, Minister for Environment.

Mr P. Dans, Acting Director General.

Dr F. Stanley, Acting Deputy Director General.

Mr D. Coffey, Acting Executive Director, Parks and Visitor Services.

Dr M. Byrne, Executive Director, Biodiversity and Conservation Science.

Ms C. Wright, Acting Executive Director, Zoological Parks Authority.

Mr A. Barrett, Executive Director, Botanic Gardens and Parks Authority.

Ms A. Klenke, Manager, Financial Services.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by 12 noon on Friday, 2 June 2023. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system to submit their questions.

Do we have any questions? I give the call to the member for Roe.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to the line item “Bushfire Suppression” in the service summary at the bottom of page 695 of budget paper No 2. I note that the actual budget in 2021–22 was \$55.5 million. It appears to have flatlined to around \$44 million to \$45 million right through to 2026–27. Under “Fire Management” on the previous page, paragraph 10 states —

Over the past decade, the Department’s fire management operations have become increasingly complex and demanding ... including:

... significant growth in the area of land for which it has fire management responsibility;

Can the minister explain why funding has not increased to match these increasing complexities and the area of land?

[5.30 pm]

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** The 2023–24 budget target total cost of services is higher than the 2022–23 budget to reflect the average trend of actual expenditure for bushfire suppression over the last few years. The 2021–22 actual is higher than the 2022–23 budget due to a busy bushfire season in 2021–22. The department received supplementary funding of \$14.9 million. I understand that is an annual practice, is it not, that it is likely to be higher? I refer to Mr Dans for further explanation.

**Mr P. Dans:** The trend over the last few years is that fire seasons appear to be longer, and certainly the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions has been called to assist with suppression on lands that are not managed by DBCA, such as local government lands or other lands. As the minister indicated, the department has overspent its budget for bushfire suppression, and around this time in the financial year we have sought supplementary funding to top up that budget so we do not overspend our total budget. It is suggesting that we have adjusted the budget estimates for this year to reflect the trend of the last few years whereby we have overspent the budget posted in previous years’ *Budget statements*.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Has the land area that DBCA manages increased since 2021?

**Mr P. Dans:** Over the past one to two years, with the Plan for Our Parks initiative, the land managed by the department has probably increased by about two million hectares, but it is not so much that that is driving the change here; it is the cost that DBCA is incurring in suppressing or assisting with the suppression of bushfires that are not on DBCA-managed land. We are helping out local governments and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services on lands that we do not manage. We are incurring costs and overspending our budget as a result, and Treasury is providing supplementary funding to bridge that gap.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I will flow into prescribed burning, if I may. There is also reference to increasing complexity and demands and the need to increase planning and operational requirements. Can the minister explain why the funding for prescribed burning has not also increased to match the increasing complexities and requirements? It is a very similar question.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Does the member have a page number?

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** It is the same page—page 695. It is the line above “Bushfire Suppression”. It is a very similar amount going through in the forward estimates.

**Mr P. Dans:** The government made an adjustment to the department’s budget called the enhanced prescribed burning program in 2018–19 that locked in an additional \$5.5 million a year across the forward estimates for prescribed burning. That has been a permanent budget adjustment. I guess the prescribed burning budget has not been under the level of pressure that the bushfire suppression budget has been. There has not been a need at this time to extend beyond the additional funding that was put in in 2018–19.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** What percentage of the prescribed burning target has been achieved? I do not know whether it is done by calendar year or financial year, but I know the department has a hectare target.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I might refer that question to Mr Dans.

**Mr P. Dans:** We operate on a financial year basis. As of 11.30 this morning, we achieved about 165 000 hectares of prescribed burning in the south west forest, which goes from about Denmark on the south coast up to just south of Jurien Bay or about Wedge Island. We have a notional target in that area. It works out to be about 200 000 hectares a year. It is a reasonably good effort, but we have not achieved the 200 000-hectare targets since about 2017–18, I think it was. But that is a good effort. The other metric we use is that we aim to have at least 45 per cent of the lands that DBCA manages in the south west—we manage about 2.5 million hectares—with a fuel age of less than six years. As of 30 June 2022, it was at 46.4 per cent. We are above that average. Even if we do not get 200 000 hectares this year, we are still in a place we would like to be in respect of the fuel loads across the landscape.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Is the minister keen to press on with the current regime for prescribed burning? I heard the minister get a fair bit of flak on talkback the other day. Does the minister feel this is the way to go? Is he comfortable with it?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I might add to the earlier comments of Mr Dans that the 200 000-hectare ambition is there each year, but we are achieving goals in the broader sense with 45 per cent of land with a fuel age of less than six years since the last burn. But the department takes a very careful and calculated approach to prescribed burning. The files on each prescribed burn are very thick and they involve lots of information. Lots of work is done and then the plan can be aborted at the very last moment on a particular morning if the weather conditions are not right. The department does everything it can to make sure the impacts of prescribed burns are minimised, and that they are done as safely as possible. I do not see it as an ambition each year that we must get to that 200 000 hectares. It is a guide, but I do not lose sleep if we do not meet it. We have a month to go and we have done 165 000 hectares. Whether we get there or not, we will be in the ballpark.

I refer to the member’s broader question about prescribed burns. This is a very passionate and at times polarising debate. People tell me we should not burn anything, and there are others who say we should have a massive burns program. The member can be assured that I do not sit on either of those extremes. However, I believe that it is our most important tool for mitigating devastating fires in this state. Over the history of Western Australia, we have seen loss of life, towns wiped off the map and devastating impacts from bushfire. We know from recent years that fires are getting more intense and the fire season is lasting longer. We must retain prescribed burning to safeguard our communities and infrastructure and lives and property. However, we can always be as informed as we can and rely on the very best science. The climate is changing and getting drier, and we know that that is having an impact on vegetation. In some parts of the state where a fire would not have brought the same devastation in past years, it is now more devastating because of the drier climate—particularly down south.

I think it is always up to government and the agency to make sure they are applying best practice, best international standards, and the very best science we can gain locally. We will never make everyone happy. There will always be people on either side of the debate who want a total firestorm or want nothing at all. The reality is that fires have been part of the natural environment in Western Australia for tens of thousands of years. Before European settlement, First Nations people engaged in a form of fire management. It has always been here. The issue we have today is that if fires start from lightning strikes or inadvertently, or even when we burn to make safer the environment, we cannot just let them run because there are now towns and communities and buildings and bridges in the way. It is a real challenge and an increasing challenge in a drying climate. We will continue to apply the best practice we can. Prescribed burning remains an important mitigation tool for averting devastating loss of life and property.

[5.40 pm]

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** By way of commentary on that, I will say that I will stand beside the minister in any forum and defend the government's program. A bipartisan approach to controlled burning has saved hundreds of lives and many hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars' worth of infrastructure in loss of housing and the like. I congratulate the minister on maintaining that program.

A comment was made by the acting director general on the township of Denmark. I am particularly concerned about the township itself because it is extraordinarily heavily wooded. People have built million-dollar mansions literally in trees in the township. Is the controlled burning program around that town at target or is it behind target? I understand there is very substantial local opposition amongst some people, at least to controlled burning, which may have mitigated the program.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I will take the member's comments and opening remarks. I appreciate that very much and I am glad we have bipartisan support. That is not to say we need to take everything for granted. We need to update our skill sets and our knowledge to make sure we are absolutely doing the best we can for the community. On Denmark, I think the member is right. It is a beautiful part of the world that is heavily timbered. The community is invested in the environment and wants to see it preserved. For burns, the desire is to do it in a way that protects assets and communities. That is the key role. Where we choose to have prescribed burns, they must be in areas where the priority is to safeguard people's lives and property. I will ask Mr Dans to elaborate.

**Mr P. Dans:** I am sorry, member. I am not immediately familiar with the fuel ages in Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions-managed land around the Denmark town site. However, within the town site, obviously that is not DBCA's responsibility. If the minister wishes, we can provide some information on fuel ages on DBCA-managed lands in the vicinity.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I would appreciate that. Would that be through supplementary information?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Is that a request, member?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I would like to know that, minister. I am especially concerned about that township and the fuel loads around that township. The question would be: are the DBCA targets for fuel load reduction being achieved around that township? I fully appreciate that it is a difficult circumstance but it is a dangerous one as well.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Given that looking for the data might take a little while, I am happy to take that question on notice.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** That means it will be put on notice, which gives you more time.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Yes.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** Thank you for coming along today. My question is a general one on management of the estate. I refer to page 692 and significant issues impacting the agency. Under biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management, it sets out that climate change is impacting species and ecological communities and that the department will focus on preserving those species. On the management of DBCA lands and other lands it manages, because I understand it is not just national parks that the department has a role in some way in managing, has there been a change to the management of wild dogs? My area of the state bounds onto a lot of reserve land in what were former pastoral leases, which are managed by a mishmash of various groups, including DBCA. My understanding is that no baiting is now being conducted on any government land. Can the minister confirm that no wild dog baiting is taking place on DBCA-controlled land?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** I will defer that to Dr Stanley to respond.

**Dr F. Stanley:** I thank the member for the question. It is not true to say that there is no wild dog baiting occurring on DBCA-managed lands. I understand that the member would be referring to the relationship we have with recognised biosecurity groups, largely, in those rangeland areas. As the member may be aware, some adjustments were made to the permitting process for those groups to undertake wild dog control. That includes not only on lands we manage under the Conservation and Land Management Act, but also on unallocated crown land and some former pastoral lease lands. The permitting process was reviewed across the three agencies that have responsibility in that area: DBCA, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development and the Department of Health. That came into place last year. We have been working really closely with all those recognised biosecurity groups over the last few months and with DPIRD. Most of those groups now have their permits in place for wild dog control in those areas. As I understand it, they are undertaking that work.

**Mr R.S. LOVE:** I might take that on board and follow it up through the minister after going back to some of those communities and discussing it further.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to page 702. Under works in progress, there is a line item for Plan for Our Parks. I am confused because it mentions the Buccaneer Archipelago and various others but there is no mention of the south coast marine park, which is obviously 1 000 kilometres of coastline. Co-managers DPIRD has a line item for management

of parks, including its plans for Marmion and the south coast. Is this an omission, is it by design, or can the minister advise where this proposed marine park is being funded from?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** If the member looks at the top of that page, it is the asset investment program. After we establish a plan for a national park, there is an agreement with traditional owners and an investment is made to manage that park—control pests and weeds et cetera, maintain roads and have certain facilities and infrastructure. That is the part of every national or marine park that is progressed to a completion and agreement. The south coast marine park is in the planning stages, so that is why that and other national parks are not listed here, as they have to be completed and an Indigenous land use agreement made, and then a funding agreement for that marine park can go ahead. At some stage, with the hopeful completion of the south coast marine park process, we will have an asset investment program for it as well.

[5.50 pm]

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to the employee FTE allocation for the south coast marine park. The community engagement information officer's position was recently terminated. Given that the south coast marine park plan is incomplete, will that position continue to be funded to the project's completion?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** It is not true to say that there will not be any representative from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions providing that community information role in Esperance. I understand there was an appointment for a particular period that coincided with the community reference committee process. That process has now concluded. DBCA officers are based in Esperance and they will continue to engage the community and provide information to the public about the process, which now moves to the next stage of planning involving broader public consultation.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** It seems rather strange that this particular person was geared up as a communications officer, had the communications plan ready to go for the next six months and then was let go or the contract finished—whatever we would like to call it. Given the absolute key to improved communication over the next six to 12 months, would it not have been appropriate to retain this person given, as the minister said, the public consultation period is coming up?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** The government engages people routinely on fixed contracts that have a start and finish date, so this is not unusual. As I said, it is not the fact that there are not people in the DBCA office in Esperance who are now responsible for community engagement and information. There was a specific time during the community reference committee process; that has concluded. There are also resources for DBCA liaison in Perth who routinely travel to the great southern in Esperance to inform the community. I want to be very specific that there are officers in the DBCA Esperance office and part of their job role is to inform the community and maintain community liaison. That service continues, and it is crucial that it is part of the ongoing process in the marine park, because we are getting to the point of getting to broad community invitation for submissions and feedback. It will run for three months. The resources of the DBCA in Perth and Esperance will be all about making sure that as many people as possible know about that process and have the information they need to engage with it.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I have a final further question.

**The CHAIR:** You are not going to ask the same question a third time, are you, member?

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** No, I am not going to ask that same question.

Has there been any conflict between the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions; the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development; and, of course, members of the public about where proposed sanctuary zones might be located?

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** It is fair to say that we are engaged in community views. People involved in recreational fishing and commercial fishing and conservationists will have a conflict of views on striking a balance on how the marine park is structured. I do not think that is a surprise. The government's role, and that of both agencies, in this process is to strike the right balance. It is no surprise that there might be difference of opinion between people in the community. That routinely happens with every endeavour we could ever imagine. The marine parks are important and substantial. We currently protect less than one per cent of the marine environment, and this is a world-class coast with unique biodiversity. It is absolutely imperative that it is protected for future generations. Most Western Australians would agree that this is a good thing and that it needs to be done. Striking the right balance is what it is about. It is finding out where the balance is and getting it right. There are obviously fishers who want to fish in areas and conservationists who want areas protected. Sometimes there is a difference of opinion, but in my engagement I have met fishers, conservationists, the local community, the council and the CRC group at its final meeting, and it is a civil, open practice of sharing information and views. It is a journey, and we will take all views on board. I think it has been a very constructive process.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to pages 692 and 693 of budget paper No 2, the line item that refers to the *Forest management plan 2024–2033* on page 692, and paragraph 2.1—about thinning—at the top of page 693. The minister might be aware—I was made aware by farmers who also work as foresters in the area—that replanted areas, and karri

plantations in particular, have been planted with a high stem density. Off the top of my head, I forget how many thousands of stems have been planted per hectare, but the trees would literally be a metre apart. In fact, there are parts where people cannot walk between tree stems. I have been informed that the groundwater table has reduced by around 20 metres because of excessive vegetation. These are quite mature trees and apparently thinning has been stopped. Will the government provide details of where the thinning will occur and what thinning will occur over what time line, particularly in those replanted areas? I know that the local community is extremely concerned. For example, Record Brook and other creeks in the area are now running dry because of the excess of drawdown by unnatural forests.

**Mr R.R. WHITBY:** Absolutely; the member makes some excellent points and he points to the science we will draw on. It is important to remember that the next forest management plan taking effect from next year will be all about preserving and protecting the forest and managing it in the most environmentally friendly way in the future, whereas all other plans were involved with how to harvest our native forests for products. As the member points to, ecological thinning is about helping the forest be more sustainable because we have thick plantations and the drawdown of water is high. Indeed, the whole forest is stunted. We do not get the large growth that is part of a natural forest that evolves over time that is not an artificially planted construct. It is critical that we have ecological thinning, and this FMP is a transitional one because for decades and decades we have been harvesting our native forest and this is about preserving them. We will do things differently. We will have new approaches and we will learn a lot of lessons about how we manage this. For details of where the thinning will occur, I might refer to my colleague here Dr Stanley. This is important work for the conservation of the forest. It is important that everyone understands that. We need to ecologically thin if we are to give the forest a chance to survive, especially with a drying climate.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, minister. Unfortunately, we have run out of time.

**The appropriation was recommended.**

*Meeting suspended from 6.00 to 7.00 pm*