MIDGE INFESTATION — LAKE GOOLLELAL

Grievance

MS A.R. MITCHELL (Kingsley) [9.10 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Environment. I wish to raise the problem of midges around Lake Goollelal in my area, but I know that it is also a problem around Lake Joondalup. I raised this matter in May 2009 after we had a very bad summer—it was the 2008–09 summer—with this midge problem. The area around Lake Goollelal is a fantastic place to live. It is a marvellous environmental area. It has fantastic recreational and lifestyle opportunities. Many people have lived in the area since the suburb of Kingsley was developed and many have moved in since. After the very bad summer of 2008–09, a dedicated plan was put together by the City of Joondalup, the City of Wanneroo and the Department of Environment and Conservation. They seemed to think that they could manage this problem. They have managed it for the past two years. The residents are not silly. They live in an environment where there is water and things like that but this year the problem has turned around again. The midge problem started in September this year, which is very, very early. Normally it occurs in about November, as the weather warms up. We usually get our first call in November. I have received photographs and complaints. This midge problem previously occurred at dusk and dawn. This year the midges are around all day. I will compliment DEC down the track but DEC seems to have been caught without treatment options for the midges this year. That is one of the issues that we are facing. The midges are not just a problem on the east side or the west side of Lake Goollelal; they are also a problem around Lake Joondalup, which is experiencing the same sorts of problems.

A number of members have talked to me about midges and how big they must be for me to talk about them. I will describe the midge. It is not a mosquito. It is not something that bites. It is an environmental problem rather than a health problem. It is a small invasive insect. It can be large. We have seen some larger ones around lately. I explained where I came across them recently.

Mr A.P. Jacob: They come through the flyscreens.

MS A.R. MITCHELL: As the member for Ocean Reef said, they can get through flyscreens. The normal barrier methods do not work. They love light, as we can well imagine. As I said, I have photographs that look like a black wall. Midges get attracted to light colours, and they just go there. They are not the sort of insects that fly around well on their own; they drift around with the winds and in the air. As I said, they are absolutely invasive. They become very thick. They do not fly individually; they tend to be in large clumps and large groups. These midges are unique. They are not normal insects that people understand. I can understand why people ask me where my Aerogard is and things like that. If people have not experienced this, it is a very difficult problem. It is a lifestyle issue. Is that a real problem? Yes, it is. We believe that a good lifestyle is very important. Living outside and getting some recreation is extremely important.

I have experienced midges this season. The other week I was working with Friends of Yellagonaga at Lake Goollelal. We were weeding one of the rehabilitation sites. We were there between 10.00 am and 12.00 noon. The work was made so much more difficult because these insects were everywhere. We could have sunglasses on but they would get in our eyes. We could have gloves on but they go down our gloves. We were constantly working through this swarm of insects as well as trying to do the work around the lake. I was also with the St John Ambulance cadet corps on Monday night. Even when I was driving down Lakeside Drive in Joondalup, the midges were hitting the car, to the point where I had to get out of the car very quickly so they did not end up in the car when I came back to the car. I guess people do not understand the invasiveness of this group of insects, which we really cannot stop getting in anywhere.

Let us go back to the problem. I compliment DEC. It has been most helpful and it is really trying to sort things out. It has been very, very good to work with. I believe that a helicopter was going to start spraying today but I have not heard the latest on that. DEC does monitor the situation; it is keeping tabs on it. My concern centres on a couple of matters. As I said earlier, it appears that DEC was unprepared for this sudden infestation of midges and the treatment options available to it. It was most unfortunate that many times residents were told that they do not have any treatment options this year. It is nice to be honest but I would like to think that we can also give them some solutions. Secondly, what is the treatment plan for this season? There has to be a treatment plan. I am also aware that because we have had late rains and the level of water in the lake is higher, treatment options may not work as well because the spray ends up diluted. Is there any reason why the influx of midges has occurred so quickly, so early and so thickly, given that we seem to have been able to manage it over the past couple of years? I understand that a plan was prepared to minimise the annual midge problem in the lakes. Has that fallen apart, and is there a plan to make sure that we can look after this problem in the future? It is an environmental area, it is one that we very proud of and it is one that we want to see people make the most of in the future.

MR W.R. MARMION (Nedlands — Minister for Environment) [9.16 am]: I acknowledge the member for Kingsley for providing me with some notice of this grievance and I also acknowledge that, at her invitation,
some weeks ago I visited Lake Goollelal and the retirement village off Wanneroo Road, and met some of the residents who explained to me the problem of these midges. I acknowledge the significant nuisance these non-biting midges cause to residents living around the lake, particularly in the months leading up to Christmas and new year. I am advised by the Department of Environment and Conservation that Lake Goollelal has generally experienced low numbers of midges; however, continued urban development in the catchment and elevated nutrient flows into the lake have changed the situation in recent years.

The member asked about the action taken by DEC in response to this important matter. I have been advised that the City of Joondalup, the City of Wanneroo and DEC are managing the midge problem at Lake Goollelal in accordance with their joint midge management strategy partnership agreement, a copy of which I have here and can provide to the member. This agreement was signed by all three parties in 2010, covering the wetlands in Yellagonga Regional Park, including Lake Goollelal. The strategy requires the presence of continuously high numbers of midges before the application of the first treatment, as was explained when I visited. DEC has advised that treatment of the lake with a product called Abate, a chemical larvicide, is an option. However, the problem with Abate is that it is a non-target pesticide that kills a suite of invertebrates, not just midge larvae. This may impact on the many waterbirds that inhabit the lake. For these reasons, the treatment of Lake Goollelal with Abate is used as a very last resort. In addition, given that the water levels in the lake are high, the application of Abate will be diluted, possibly limiting its effectiveness. DEC has also advised that in light of the persistent high numbers of midges recorded through monitoring and acknowledging community concerns, the Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo and DEC are planning to treat midges at Lake Goollelal this month, particularly early this month. In fact, the member may be right; they may be treating them today. Measures will be put in place to minimise the effects of Abate on the local environment. For example, treatment will occur only under suitable weather conditions and the lake will not be treated in its entirety in one treatment event. An assessment of the effectiveness of treatment will also be undertaken in the days following the application of Abate. Based on current midge larvae numbers, it is likely that Lake Goollelal will receive a second treatment in mid to late November. The Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo issued a media release on 20 October advising of the intention to undertake spraying in the first week of November so as to provide sufficient warning to people who may be hypersensitive to chemicals and may come in contact with them. Both administrations maintain a register of persons who may be hypersensitive to chemical treatment and they provide advice on how to best minimise exposure to these chemicals.

The member also asked why the infestation has occurred so very early in the season and what will be done to overcome the midge problem for the future. I have been advised by the Department of Environment and Conservation that the midge problem at Lake Goollelal is a symptom of nutrient concentrations in the lake’s water that are higher this year than in previous years, and that this factor in combination with local climatic conditions has resulted in the swarms occurring earlier this season. To address this, the Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo in consultation with DEC have prepared an integrated catchment management plan for the Yellagonga wetlands. The plan has identified a number of projects to improve catchment health to protect the diverse values of the Yellagonga wetlands. For example, the Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo have been upgrading local stormwater drainage infrastructure in Yellagonga Regional Park using water sensitive urban design approaches. This is an approach that is taken not only in that area, but also right around the Swan and Canning catchments. It is an approach that we will have to work on not only in the member for Kingsley’s electorate, but also around the Swan and Canning catchments. Research into management solutions is also occurring through the midge partnership agreement in conjunction with Edith Cowan University, including midge larvae monitoring and short-term treatment of midge swarms. The government, through DEC, is working with the Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo to address immediate concerns regarding nuisance to the community while also pursuing long-term, sustainable solutions to this problem.

I do acknowledge the problem. One image that stuck in my mind when I visited the people in the retirement village was of midges stuck on their fly screens, and the fact that some could get through the screen and those that did not get through covered the whole screen; so I understand the extent of the problem. Spraying the whole screen drops the midges off the screen; nevertheless, some get through into the house. However, I can assure the member that DEC is working with the Cities of Joondalup and Wanneroo. There is a proper plan in place—a partnership agreement that the member may or may not have seen—the principal objective of which is to control and manage the nuisance of midges in the wetland system of the Yellagonga Regional Park through funding midge larvae and water monitoring; nuisance reduction using pesticide application when required; other intervention strategies; research projects in an effort to better understand the factors contributing to the seasonal midge plagues; and public information and education.

We have to therefore take a holistic approach to deal with midges. They are a problem statewide. In fact even the member for Kimberley will acknowledge that in Broome, at four o’clock in the afternoon, midges can cause concern to people enjoying the sun going down at Mangrove Resort Hotel. It is therefore a statewide problem.
and I can assure the member for Kingsley that it is being taken seriously; indeed, so seriously that there is a partnership agreement in place between DEC, the City of Wanneroo and the City of Joondalup.