

Division 68: Agriculture Protection Board of Western Australia, \$1 067 000 —

Mr J.M. Francis, Chairman.

Mr D.T. Redman, Minister for Agriculture and Food.

Mr I.G. Longson, Director General, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr M.J. Marsh, Executive Director, Business Services, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr R.L. O'Dwyer, Executive Director, Industry and Rural Services, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr E. Wright, Acting Executive Director, Natural Resource Management, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Mr D. Collopy, Acting Executive Director, Biosecurity, Department of Agriculture and Food.

Dr M. Sweetingham, Acting Executive Director, Research.

Mrs K.M. Blenkinsop, Senior Policy Officer, Office of the Minister for Agriculture and Food.

The CHAIRMAN: We move on now to division 68, the Agriculture Protection Board. Does the member for Mandurah have a question?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes. There is a comment in the second dot point on page 871 under "Significant Issues Impacting the Agency" on increases in international trade having seen the increased threat of incursions of pests and diseases. One of the preventive measures under "Outcomes and Key Effectiveness Indicators" is the inspection of properties and, if I read it correctly, it indicates a substantial reduction. Does this not demonstrate that there is an increased risk, yet the number of inspections taking place, on my reading, is decreasing significantly by \$2.5 million? Why is that the case?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I thank the member for the question. I will make a couple of comments and I will pass over to Damian Collopy to make a couple of comments in regard to the numbers at the bottom of the page. There are a couple of trends happening in respect of biosecurity. One is the Beale review to which the member's first comment made some reference. The review is happening at a federal level and is in the transitional stage. It will have some impact on how Australia as a country deals with biosecurity. Significant to that from Western Australia's perspective is making sure that we are around the table for that discussion. Western Australia and Tasmania are biological islands in respect of the continent and we have benefits in being free from some of these incursions that the eastern states have. Therefore, significant to any discussion at the federal level is where Western Australia fits and ensuring that we have the necessary border security and so on to maintain the integrity of our natural resources. There are benefits in terms of more targeted surveillance, and a better assessment of risk, and therefore some efficiencies to be gained in respect of how we monitor and manage biosecurity issues. I will pass over to Damian to make some comments in regard to the number of inspected properties to which the member referred.

Mr D. Collopy: The greatest benefit we can achieve from investing in biosecurity is at the end of the spectrum that deals with managing the risks of new, harmful organisms coming in and impacting on the state before those organisms get here or very shortly after they get here. Traditionally and in the past 20 years we have gradually moved resources largely from managing species that are widespread in the countryside to managing pests before they get into the state. For example, 15 years ago we made probably more than a thousand inspections a year of properties to enforce compliance with the control of Paterson's curse; whereas most of our investment now is in biological control. Because Paterson's curse occurs over eight million hectares of the south west and on more than 7 000 properties, it is therefore no longer a pest that can be effectively managed by regulation; it has to be managed better by science and biological control. We have moved more resources into border biosecurity, thereby protecting ourselves at the border by preventing new organisms coming in, and also doing risk analysis to give us a better lead on what are the emerging risks and managing them before they get here. The member will therefore see a decline in the number of properties inspected, but the inspections that are made are far more targeted to the higher benefit end of the biosecurity continuum, rather than spending a lot of resources on managing pests that are already well established.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I have a further question. I am happy to accept that reasoning. What I am interested to know is if the \$2.5 million has decreased the impacts on the number of properties inspected, has there been a transfer of \$2.5 million into the initiative?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: Did the member say \$2.5 million?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I think that is the number of inspections.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Is it the number of inspections? Is there, therefore, a dollar figure for the cost of those inspections; and, if so, has that cost been transferred to the new focused initiative of attacking pests before they get here? The minister's adviser said that inspections were decreasing because the department is focusing on problems before they reach WA. Has that effort been reflected, in dollar terms, in additional resources; because if not, the words are hollow from my understanding, as no additional resources are going to the new area on which the department is focusing?

[3.20 pm]

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The funding for biosecurity is about \$36 million in total, and clearly that is directed in accordance with priorities. That is the number of inspections; it is not a dollar figure and does not reflect a resource. I cannot comment on the reallocation of that specific resource. I do not know whether Mr Collopy is in a position to comment on the reallocation of 2 500 inspections, but he did reflect on a shift in focus to achieve better outcomes.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes, and I want to know whether that shift in focus has been given additional resources. If the minister is changing the focus, what additional moneys is he putting into that focus? If he is reducing the effort on the number of properties being inspected, that must involve a cost. Has that cost been transferred to the new focus on preventing the nasties from getting here in the first place?

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I will pass this on to Mr Longson to make a comment.

Mr I.G. Longson: The problem is that we are now dealing with the Agriculture Protection Board budget and the member will see that the services that are provided to the board come through the Department of Agriculture and Food. This does not represent the total expenditure on biosecurity matters, some of which are contained in the Agriculture and Food division, and the minister has referred to a total of around \$36 million. If the member looks at the top of the table on page 871, he will see that the agriculture resource protection figure is \$16.7 million, and the 2009-10 budget figure is listed as \$16.67 million, which is a slight increase on the budget figure for 2008-09 but a considerable reduction on the figure of \$19.9 million. Basically, there is a movement in this fund because most of it relates to matching activity by the zone control authorities, or what will be the regional biosecurity groups under the new act. It is a bit difficult to pull that figure out, but I will hand over to Mr Damian Collopy to talk about where the shift of resources has gone from surveillance into other activities.

Mr D. Collopy: We are talking about a similar quantum of overall total funding. I was trying to describe a consistent move of resources from year to year from on-farm inspections to conducting activities that help prevent the entry of new pests. Traditionally, the APB's general business has been on-farm control. Over the past 15 or 20 years it has gradually migrated to a preventive focus through investing more in quarantine, border security and biosecurity. For instance, we did not have 24-hour checkpoints at Eucla and Kununurra 15 years ago; we now do. Those checkpoints are resourced by people who previously carried out on-farm inspections. Many of those pests are now very widespread, so our resources are going continually towards prevention.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: So we have given up!

Mr D. Collopy: No, we have not given up at all.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That has occurred with locusts and starlings. Page 872 shows a reduction in animal pest programs for locusts and starlings. We have thrown in the towel!

Mr D.T. REDMAN: I might add that under the budget allocation of the former government—the member's government—in 2008-09 \$16.6 million was allocated to the APB; my government has allocated \$16.677 million. The member referred to giving up resources; in this instance, there has been an increase.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: It is not a significant increase at all.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: In this environment, what sort of increase is the member expecting?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am expecting, if we are talking about international trade and all those associated issues and we are facing an increased risk from exotic pests being introduced into Western Australia, that our priority would be to increase what we are doing, both within the state and at our borders, to address these threats. The budget clearly shows that there has been no increase and, in fact, that the government is cutting back on a number of the programs that were being delivered in Western Australian agricultural regions.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The response is targeted, and by using different technologies the government is responding in a more efficient way to get that dollar to the ground. Yes, we have some difficult biosecurity challenges, and in some circumstances our agricultural products have a premium on them because we are able to maintain a level of freedom from some of those pests. The effort that is put in at the airport with those dogs, which the member for Mandurah would be familiar with through his many travels, is a response from this agency. The efforts that go into the border security arrangements are a response from this agency. A number of issues are more targeted

than perhaps was the case previously. However, in the financial environment in which we find ourselves as a state, those are some of the challenges that we face to get the most efficient use of that dollar. As I said, where there are direct industry benefits—it does not come under this division—we need to move towards a regime in which industry pays a greater proportion of the funds that are committed to those issues.

The CHAIRMAN: Members, we have five minutes left and we still have to deal with division 69. Are you happy to stay on division 68?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes, and I have a further question. I accept the minister's argument. I again refer to page 872. Note 2 concerns the APB's delivery of information to agriculture participants in communities and states that the anticipated reduction in the level of available funding will lead to an increase in the use of letters, email and the web et cetera. This is another example of recognising the threat of bio pests and diseases and the threat to our state's clean, green image of our products. However, no allocation has been made in the budget to address that, except to reduce programs for existing pest control and to revert to a "Let's hope they read the email, letter or website to be informed". This is a major concern. I do not believe that this element of the budget adequately addresses this threat, which the minister has already admitted is a very real one, to the Western Australian agriculture industry and the people who work within that industry.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The government is faced with a very different set of circumstances financially from a state perspective from what the previous government faced late last year. Even in those circumstances, this government has been able to maintain the level of funding in this division.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: But the department is losing 200 staff!

Mr D.T. REDMAN: We are discussing the Agriculture Protection Board and the member is referring to the previous division, on which the member stuck his hand up and voted yes. When one is making decisions based on the limited resources that we have—I might add the same resources that the previous government allocated to this division —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: You are in government, I am not.

Mr D.T. REDMAN: That is a very easy comment to shoot off from that side!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The minister used to throw it back at us constantly when he was on this side of the chamber. The minister is responsible, and if Western Australia has an influx of pests and diseases, it is on his head!

[3.30 pm]

Mr D.T. REDMAN: The government needs to make decisions about resources for biosecurity. These decisions must reflect the challenges that those potential threats pose to industry, and their impact. Those are some of the criteria that we use to assess what are the greater challenges. As I highlighted previously, we have some challenges, and opportunities, by being pest and disease free from an agricultural industry perspective. Therefore, we need to put our effort into placing a level of priority on the potentially bigger threats to the industry. Likewise, we have to balance the threats to our community with the public benefit. We have not reduced this budget below what the Labor Party had during its term of government; it is the same. The agency is making every effort to direct the available funds to get the best bang for its buck on biosecurity issues. We are continuing the trend where significant industry benefit can be gained as it is beneficial for the industry to make a greater contribution to dealing with these potential incursions. I think that is smart; it gets the direct benefit from Western Australia being incursion free.

The appropriation was recommended.