

**Division 41: Water and Environmental Regulation — Services 1 to 3 and 5, Water, \$98 362 000 —**

Mr D.A.E. Scaife, Chair.

Ms S.F. McGurk, Minister for Water.

Ms M. Andrews, Director General.

Ms E. Briggs, Deputy Director General, Climate and Sustainability.

Mr D. O'Reilly, Deputy Director General, Strategy and Performance.

Ms H. Manderson, Chief Finance Officer.

Mr D. Nevin, Executive Director, Strategic Policy.

Mr S. Meredith, Executive Director, Green Energy.

Mr J. Moynihan, Executive Director, Science and Planning.

Mr S. Taylor, Executive Director, Regional Delivery.

Dr S. Gallacher, Chief of Staff, Minister for Water.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard and the daily proof 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 those details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall be examined only 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 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.

Are there any questions? I give the call to the member for Cottesloe.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 670 of budget paper No 2. Under new initiatives, there is a line item for green energy approvals under “Climate Action Fund”. Does the minister or the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation have any responsibility for that under this heading?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** No.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 672 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the Gngangara groundwater allocation plan implementation. I have been following keenly the levels of Gngangara groundwater and we are now seeing a consistent increase in its level. Does the government still intend to persist with its 10 per cent reduction in groundwater allocations to growers in that area, despite the fact we are now not seeing any continuing decline in Gngangara groundwater?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** The plan has been announced and will be implemented. It was released in June 2022 as part of new measures to protect our important groundwater resources, which are at risk from the impacts of climate change as well as increased use due to increased population. It sounds like the member is across the detail, but for others, under this plan, the Water Corporation will reduce its baseline abstraction by 27 per cent, which is a significant reduction. There are also reductions in water entitlements for most other licensed groundwater users, although that has been limited to just 10 per cent. Schools and hospitals will be exempt from any reductions in water entitlement. Groundwater licences that are subject to the planned water entitlement reductions are being modified when they are due for renewal to apply the abstraction reduction coming into effect from 1 July 2028.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I believe a second groundwater replenishment plant has been commissioned. How much groundwater is now being re-infiltrated into Gngangara mound via those two plants?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Member, it is hard to see you over there!

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Do not worry, minister. I am very happy you are there and answering!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I should be able to see the whites of your eyes! This question would be better directed at the Water Corporation, which will be available next for consideration.

[8.10 pm]

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The basis for the future reduction in the groundwater allocation was that the groundwater level in the Gngangara mound would continue to decline. In fact, that is not the case anymore, and, if anything, that level is increasing. It is, at the very least, completely stabilised at current usage rates. I understand that significant volumes of water will be annually re-infiltrated once the second treatment plant is fully commissioned. Surely, that means that there is a basis for revisiting the decision. I appreciate that a decision was made by the former minister based on information at the time, but now that it appears there is stabilisation, in fact, an increasing of the level in the Gngangara mound, surely it is an opportunity for the government to revisit that decision. Will the minister consider that?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** There will be not be any revisiting of that decision. It is not 12 months since that announcement was made. It is important to know about rainfall, particularly in the south west, but it might apply to the area over the Gngangara mound as well, that there is variability in water levels across systems. That has been the experience across bores. The period since commencement of the plan is too short to determine its impact.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Given that that is a 2029 plan, is the minister's indication that the government has no intention of revisiting that at all, or, if in two to three years' time a continued steady increase in the level of the water mound is shown, would the minister reconsider the reduction in water allocation from that mound?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It is unlikely, based on the projections we are seeing through reduced or variable rainfall and increased population. Although we are supplementing our water supplies with desalinated water, it is an expensive option, but it is an option we are employing. It is important to reduce our use of groundwater where we can. It is not only important because of its unreliability as a source, but also because of the environmental benefits that come with a sensitivity to the use of that resource. I was reminded of that at a recent wetlands conference I went to at Bibra Lake.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** The wetlands around the area were wet. We had the second wettest winter we have ever had two years ago, and also the wetlands are being re-established by that re-infiltration. Is this a scientific decision or a philosophical decision? The minister just indicated that somehow or other there is a problem with using groundwater, yet it seems to me that the scientifically guided use of groundwater is entirely appropriate.

**The CHAIR:** I hope I have been consistent on this throughout the day, but I have said repeatedly that I will not entertain policy debates in the chamber that do not closely hew to the budget papers, so I am ruling that question out of order.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Is it the minister's clear statement that no matter what evidence comes out about changing groundwater levels at Gngangara her government will not reconsider the decision?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** There was a line item about implementation of the Gngangara groundwater plan, and I acknowledge the previous Minister for Water who is in the chamber tonight. It was a really significant decision, and I think we should be grateful to him and the department for making that decision. It is not easy to implement change when it requires changed practices by households and huge government utilities like the Water Corporation, and we are particularly sensitive to the impact on industry. These are not easy decisions to make, but all the scientific advice is that climate change needs to be responded to. It is impacting rainfall to varying degrees, and it means there has been a lack of reliability and a characteristic of variability from year to year. I did not say that we would not use groundwater. I said we needed to use it sensitively, and that is what we intend to do. So, no, we will not change our position. In any case, it is not my position to change the allocation that has been announced for the Gngangara plan.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 675 of budget paper No 2, service 1, "Water Information and Advice". The underspend in the line item "Net Cost of Service" is mainly due to the rural water program underspend on direct investment on strategic water supply network across dryland agriculture areas. Can the minister explain why there has been underspend in that area?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Can I clarify that the member was talking about the total cost of service?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes, and note 1 explained the underspend as follows —

... Estimated Actual mainly relates to Rural Water Planning program direct investment on the strategic community water supply network across the dryland agriculture areas.

**The CHAIR:** This is the note at the top of page 676.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Yes, it is just overleaf on page 676.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Sorry, member, some of these files can get a bit clever by half!

I am advised that it is just about the timing of the delivery of the program for works for the rural water planning program. I can give the member a bit more detail. We are aware that some of the program has received federal government money and we are trying to get that money to growers and businesses. So far it has been difficult to get it out to them, and we have had some discussions with industry and want to continue with industry representatives' feedback on how we can make that money available to the people it is intended for. I had a conversation not that

long ago with representatives from vegetablesWA about this point, and they said we could look at the design of the program to make sure we get some of that money out to those organisations.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Are the details of what is to be done in the plan the minister indicated available?

[8.20 pm]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** These programs are co-funded between the state and the commonwealth. From the commonwealth, it is from the national water grid fund. They are to increase non-potable strategic off-farm water supplies, which will help meet firefighting water needs in dryland agricultural areas. Excuse me, member; I will just make sure that I am talking about the right program.

Thank you, chair. To date, 42 community water supply projects have been approved through the jointly funded program to the value of \$3.3 million. In addition, there is a consideration of the AA dams program, which will be small works up to \$50 000 totalling \$1 million. To enable those projects to progress, the AA dams program has enabled projects to improve existing water infrastructure in regional communities, support emergency water supplies for farmers and firefighting needs and help to build water security to combat climate change. I believe that I went and visited some of the successful applicants to those programs in Denmark. I will withdraw that, because it might be under a different program, so I will not complicate things.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I think that there was a flurry of activity on this when we had our last really dry year; it would have been about 2019. For example, in Lake Grace, work was done to improve water catchment and improve the dam, and a couple of dams there were improved. Is the minister able to tell me which of those major town supply dams, which are the ones being generated, will be worked on in the next 12 months?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I might hand over to Mr Taylor to answer this question. We made an announcement about a project in Esperance, but he will be able to talk about it much more confidently than I will.

**Mr S. Taylor:** Thank you, minister. The focus of the latest work is on using some second-hand tarps provided by CSBP to line catchments, which significantly increases the run-off into dams. There are two pilot sites being established and demonstrations are intended to encourage similar practices in surrounding areas.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** One issue last time was that the sealed or roaded and graded catchments had substantially deteriorated. Is there an ongoing maintenance program as part of this plan, or is that something that sits with individual shires to manage?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I am advised that the maintenance does sit with individual shires, although there are programs here, and if a catchment fits the criteria, we are prepared to have a look at it. But, primarily, that maintenance work sits in the remit of individual shires.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 676 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, service 2, “Water Planning, Allocation and Optimisation”. At paragraph 3 of the notes under the table, there is an explanation, if you like, for the large increase in the average cost per plan from about \$269 000 in 2021–22 to roughly \$416 000 this year. There is some discussion about that. Can the minister please explain why that cost has increased so dramatically?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** The increase in the average cost per plan, report or guidance document to support water planning, allocation and optimisation from the 2022–23 budget to the 2022–23 estimated actual is due to higher cost allocations to this indicator resulting from the timing of the royalties for regions program of works for Watering WA and rural water planning, the timing of delivery of the *Gnangara groundwater allocation plan*, adjustments to the Australind jetty, and carryover of funds for the smart farming partnerships from 2020–21 to 2022–23 to allow the Australian government National Landcare smart farms funding to extend the project from April 2022 to June 2023. That was because of challenges in establishing trials because of COVID-19. Finally, there was a forecast reduction in the number of documents or advice delivered. The 2022–23 budgeted average cost per plan, report or guidance document was based on 29 outputs. The estimated actual cost per plan is based on 27 outputs, increasing the average cost per plan.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I think this question falls into this area. I think that in 2019—the former minister could correct me—the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation produced an outstanding paper, I thought, on the potential use of water in the Fitzroy River valley. It went through and canvassed a number of options, and that report recommended what I thought was a very sustainable, softly softly approach to the potential use of water from the Fitzroy Valley, which looked at using very small quantities of groundwater and developing a program over a period. Does the government have any active plans to proceed with that plan that was developed by the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation for the Fitzroy River?

**The CHAIR:** Just to clarify, member: is there a particular line item?

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** It is within the water planning, allocation and optimisation as a total cost of service. I imagine this would fall under that as part of a major initiative of the government.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will take the question, because it has been a big issue for a number of people, not least in the Kimberley, and I must say that I see a number of bumper stickers about it in my electorate in Fremantle, too.

First of all, the point needs to be made that the government remains committed to having no dams in the Fitzroy River or its tributaries because of the river's national heritage-listed values. We are also supporting pathways for people to pursue economic development opportunities that will benefit the local community, so we are committed to that.

As the member said, the department released a discussion paper in November 2020 titled *Managing water in the Fitzroy River catchment*. In fact, that paper provoked a large number of community responses and submissions. The government will prepare and release a draft water allocation plan following the consideration of public submissions, but I must say that the pace at which we intend to do that has been influenced by the flooding earlier this year. It has been difficult for the community to genuinely engage in some of these issues while they have been quite rightly preoccupied with cleaning up their community and getting back on their feet, so we are cognisant of that. Having said that, we understand that there is quite a bit of interest from all sides on the issue, so we do intend to deal with this issue later on this year or early next year.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I thank the minister. I genuinely thought that paper was an excellent analysis of the situation and covered the issues that the minister has raised. What form will that take? Will the government issue a plan, or will there be a further round of community consultation and discussion? I am just interested in what form that will take, because I thought that a large amount of consultation had gone into that paper. I thought it was really well done.

[8.30 pm]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Thank you, member. It is envisaged that when the plan comes out, it will come out as a draft plan, so there will be another opportunity for people to give feedback, considering that we have been consulting on this for a while. Obviously we have had various interruptions in that time, but there will be another opportunity for people to give feedback.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I refer to page 673 of budget paper No 2, volume 2. The fifth service in the table headed "Relationship to Government Goals" is "Water and Environment Policy". I have looked through the rest of the budget papers and I cannot see a reference to it; it is a broad reference in the table. I am looking for an update on where the legislation that has been under consideration for some time is up to, and whether we are likely to see it before the next election.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I thank the member. Sorry, my file has malfunctioned!

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I am sympathetic, minister!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Yes, member, that is certainly my intention. In fact, I have a list of the number of water ministers who have committed to this piece of legislation and it spans a number of governments, I think going back to Hon John Kobelke; the member is also in there. It is a who's who of water ministers in Western Australia!

**Mr D.J. KELLY:** It is the member for Central Wheatbelt's fault, though!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** That is right!

Yes, it is my intention to finalise this matter and bring something before the Parliament. I hope to do that this year. It is an ambitious project, as the member is aware; it will bring across six different current water acts and provide for commensurate powers to meet the challenges of water management in the twenty-first century. It is intended to support responses to climate change and make sure that that is considered seriously in the legislation; to meet the needs of our growing population and the development of industry in our economy; and to protect and recognise the interests of Aboriginal people and their cultural and economic needs. We also want to provide certainty in water access approvals and introduce a faster, streamlined regime for licence renewals and trades. These are some of the things we will be looking at. I am hopeful that there will not be any policy surprises for people in this piece of legislation, but it will bring together a range of different pieces of legislation. We are working through that at the moment.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I thank the minister and wish her well as she takes on the challenge that has thwarted so many former water ministers. Can the minister tell me when the government undertook the last series of external formal consultations on this legislation?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Member, there has been ongoing consultation on the items contemplated in this bill since the member was water minister in 2014. Someone has just handed me the list we discussed earlier. It has been 15 years since there was consultation on the architecture and policy underpinning the new bill. As I said, it is a who's who of water ministers: Hon John Kobelke first released a blueprint for water reform in 2006; Hon Graham Jacobs released a discussion paper in 2009 for water resource management options; in 2013, the member's predecessor, Hon Terry Redman, released a position paper, *Securing Western Australia's water future*; and in 2014, as I said, the member released the analysis for public submissions and statement of response of the position paper; when we had a change of government in 2021, the then Minister for Environment, Hon Stephen Dawson, released our

government’s climate policy, committing to introduce a water resources management bill; and also in 2021, my predecessor Hon Dave Kelly announced the drafting of the bill, and it is progressing, but there is a lot of work that needs to be done to pull it together.

To answer the member’s question, we will have to strike a balance. I want to get this done and actually introduce the bill to Parliament, but I also want to give people the time and opportunity to consider some of the policy issues. As I said, I do not imagine there will be any surprises in it, but I want to give people an opportunity to provide feedback. I also want to get it done. As I outlined with that list, there has been considerable ventilation and discussion of the policy issues and, frankly, I think it is time we got on with it, but I will give people the opportunity to give feedback.

As an example of that, there has been a request from the southern forests area to have some discussion on and exposure of those issues, and I am of course committed to doing that. Similarly, Aboriginal people in the north of our state want to know what opportunities there might be for them to realise not only sensitivity to their cultural and social connection to water resource, but also the economic opportunities.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** When the minister says “released”, will it be an exposure draft of the bill for comment, or will it just be introduced and sit for a while? How does the minister anticipate managing that?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It is not my intention to introduce a green bill or some sort of exposure bill.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** After it is introduced, will it sit for a while for feedback, or will there be a process by which people can provide advice before it is finalised and second-read?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I am tempted to ask what line item we are talking about, if the member can just refer to that.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Under the “Desired Outcomes” for the “Water and Environment Policy” service, which states —  
Development and implementation of strategic policy and legislation —

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** On page 675?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Page 673.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I will be frank: it is a balance between ensuring that people get an opportunity to give feedback and not getting caught in another round of consultation and discussion so that the opportunity slips away. I do not want that to be the case. My job will be to get that balance right, and I commit to ensuring that people will have an opportunity to give me or their local representatives and their industry bodies feedback about the issues that are raised within the bill.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I apologise if I was not listening, but when does the minister think that will occur? Just to explain, I am not trying to pin the minister on this; it is more to alert various stakeholders to be ready to deal with it when it comes.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I have been clear—I think the previous minister was as well—that we are actively working on this bill. It is my intention to introduce it before the Parliament this year. If I can do it in the second half of the year, then that is my intention. But it is a big amalgamation. Apart from the policy issues and working through them, it is a logistics question for the parliamentary drafters and the like.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to page 670 and the line item “Gnangara Groundwater Allocation Plan—Water Efficiency Scheme”. There is no funding for 2023–24 or the out years. Can the minister explain why that is not funded in the forward estimates, or is there funding implementation elsewhere?

[8.40 pm]

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** The department identified \$1 million to be repurposed for a water efficiency scheme for groundwater users affected by the 10 per cent reduction proposed under the Gnangara allocation plan. The initiative will increase the expense limit by \$1 million in 2022–23 funded through the repurpose. That was the program. Local governments are given \$4 million for assistance. I think nine local government areas were impacted. The new \$1 million water efficiency scheme is to support horticultural and viticulture licensees. It was only ever envisaged to be a \$1 million allocation. That is what we announced. We did not announce that it would be an ongoing plan. My predecessor announced that it would be a \$1 million allocation for viticulture and horticulture licensees affected by the 10 per cent reduction. In addition, there is \$4 million of assistance for local government areas most impacted by urban heat in that they are being supported with assistance to prepare and implement plans to reduce their abstraction. Sorry, the \$4 million is given through the Water Corporation, which is why it is not in the budget.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I just want some clarification. Can the minister tell me if I am in the wrong division? We just had a bit of a problem asking this question in another division, so we want to know where it fits. Can I ask a question about page 680, paragraph 7, “Environmental Impact Assessment Services to the EPA”? Is that in the minister’s delegate or is that the DBCA’s?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I think the member has missed the opportunity. Did the member ask it in environment?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** We tried and we were told that this is where it needed to go. I want to clarify that we have been given—never mind. It is all right; we tried!

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It is a pea under the cup trick.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 677 of budget paper No 2, “Water Regulation, Licensing and Industry Governance”. The table shows under the efficiency indicators that there has been a rise in the time to assess water licence applications. We have seen that cost increase. I apologise, minister; I have to go to page 677, services 3, because I want to talk about the time for licences. The efficiency indicator shows that there has been a slippage of time taken to undertake licence application assessments within the high-risk category. The time slipped from an average of 65 days last year to 81 days this year. As I recollect, the number of days last year was a slippage from the year before. The minister will be aware that those high-risk applications are typically around mining activity and other major activities. One of their bugbears is time slippage and that the “stop the clock” aspect adds to a greater real approval time. Can the minister explain why there has been such a significant change by 28 per cent in the increase in time?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I am advised that timing has been impacted by staffing challenges, particularly technical staff required to do this work. This is even more the case in regional areas that undertake the lion’s share of this work. That is the short answer. There has been a lot of focus on that by the agency, particularly in terms of recruitment across skilled staff needed.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Does the minister anticipate that that will reduce this year or going forward? The table indicates that this year it is going to increase even further. Have we lost even more staff? Otherwise, what plans are in place to get the required staff?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** It was pointed out to me that the target is actually unchanged; that is done by Treasury—sorry, it is within the target range. A particular effort has been made around recruitment. I point out that the risk categories for applications guide the level of assessment carried out by the department. I could talk about how they assess risk indicators, but the indicator of risk is calculated using the time taken to assess all licence and permit applications within each risk category completed within the period. The measurement of time includes “stop the clock”, which I should explain. I think the member probably knows, but “stop the clock” means that the time measure excludes the time taken by processes outside the department’s control. When an application process is outside the department’s control, the time taken in that process is not included.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to the same area on page 677, paragraph 3, “Water Regulation, Licensing and Industry Governance”. What expectations are there around the Aboriginal cultural heritage impact on water licence applications? For example, I was told that when a station owner from the north applied for a water bore, they were told that they would have to get an Aboriginal cultural heritage water bore clearance before the department would consider their application.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Before I answer that question, a good point was made by one of my advisers about the member’s previous question; that is, the time taken has been affected by floods, particularly within this financial year. That has really impacted the agency’s work.

In terms of the impact of the new heritage act and the approvals and consultations required, I suggest that that be referred to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

[8.50 pm]

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** But in relation to the Department of Water and Environmental Regulation considering any application, will it require Aboriginal cultural heritage clearance before it considers an application? Will that be a precursor to being able to obtain a water licence?

**The CHAIR:** This is again a question that is not really about a budget item; it is a policy question that a member might ask in question time or by notice to the minister. If the minister has something to say, she can, but it is just not in order, member for Cottesloe.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I am not seeking to argue, chair, but just seeking to explain. My view is that it has a direct impact on the time to obtain a water licence.

**The CHAIR:** I do not share the view that questions can be asked about any matter that has an impact on the budget. It needs to hue closely to the items in the budget itself.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** I refer to page 677 of budget paper No 2 and water regulation, licensing and industry governance. Paragraph 2 under “Explanation of Significant Movements” indicates a rise in income from \$1.8 million last year to \$3 million this year due to higher application fees for mining and public water supply sectors. Why has that risen so significantly in the year?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I understand that the member is talking about the increase in income.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** That is right.

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Total income for the service comes mainly from water licence applications, external funding for projects, and permit application assessment fees for mining and public water supply sectors. The increase from the 2021–22 actual to the 2022–23 budget target is due to increases in regulatory fees and fines as a result of the inclusion of water regulatory fees, commercial and institutional industry and power generator sectors, and changes in the volume of water licence applications.

**Dr D.J. HONEY:** Why do we see such a dramatic reduction in the 2023–24 budget target?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** When the department collects fees, it considers a range of legislative instruments. This is encompassed in those fees, so it is a broad range, including contaminated site fees, controlled waste licence and tracking fees, industry regulation, native vegetation clearing fees, noise regulation fees, Port Hedland dust regulatory fees, and water regulatory service licence fees. We are alive to the increased cost pressures over the past year on many important business sectors as well as the community. We have worked hard to manage those fees to make sure that there is no unnecessary cost impact on industry. The fees currently apply to only the mining and public water supply sectors. I hope that answers the member's question.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** I refer to page 670 and ongoing initiatives. I note that \$6.25 million is coming out of royalties for regions per annum for Healthy Estuaries WA. Why is there no budget item for the current year, 2023–24?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** This table represents spending changes. It is already funded going forward; it is not represented in this table because this represents only changes in the years specified.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** Are those seven estuaries all in regional areas?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** Yes; Peel–Harvey is included in that.

**Mr P.J. RUNDLE:** How are they all measured—that is, reducing nutrient losses through fertiliser, dairy effluent management, use of soil amendments and phosphorus in streams?

**Ms S.F. McGURK:** I have appreciated this program since I became aware of it and I visited some of the stakeholders in Oyster Harbour who are involved in this program through the City of Albany. When I was reading before this session, I was trying to remember the surname of a farmer called Chris who I met and who had been very impressed by the assistance he had been given through this program in a very accessible way to understand his soil and the levels of nutrients needed at various parts of his farming operations and how he could adjust the fertilisers he was putting in at different times and at different locations. He was a convert and he said that the resources that were given to him through the Healthy Estuaries program meant that he understood his practice better. He was able to adjust the nutrients he was putting into the soil and, therefore, were able to be retained through that process. I asked him whether it was cheaper for him and he said that it was a bit early to tell because sometimes he had to reduce some of the nutrients and fertilisers and at other times he had to increase them.

However, he was happy to talk at length about how he found the program of assistance. It was good to visit that site near Oyster Harbour in Albany to be with the department staff and the partners who were involved, including the City of Albany. The mayor was there, along with administration staff and community members who had helped clean up some of the bank area and the like, and a member of the farming community who had benefited from the program.

**The appropriation was recommended.**

[9.00 pm]