

STARLINGS - INFESTATION

377. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Minister for Agriculture and Food:

Following my question to this house on 14 March 2006, it has been brought to my attention that starling numbers are continuing to increase across the south east of this state. Without major intervention, these birds will become a serious problem.

- (1) Can the minister outline what new processes, if any, have been initiated to address this matter?
- (2) Has the minister managed to secure additional funding to overcome the starling infestation?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank Hon Murray Criddle for providing some notice of this important question.

- (1) The Western Australian Department of Agriculture and Food and the Agriculture Protection Board have successfully excluded and controlled starlings since 1971 with the aim of preventing their establishment in Western Australia. The department increased the level of resources invested from \$400 000 last year to \$750 000 this year from within its existing allocation. In part, that is in answer to part (2) of the question, but I will get back to that. Currently, there are five main populations of starlings in the Esperance region - near Condingup, east of Esperance; Coomalbidgup; Munglinup; North Jerdacuttup; and Jerdacuttup Lakes, west of Esperance. In early 2006, the extent of the infestation at Munglinup, east of Esperance, which was first detected in 2001, was expanded to around 3 000 square kilometres. In light of this, DAFWA established a starling response task force enabling the reassignment of additional staff and resources to work on the problem.

Two full-scale surveillance exercises in March and April at Jerdacuttup and Bremer Bay, involving 27 and 15 personnel respectively, have been carried out in order to delineate the western edge of the infestation. The Jerdacuttup exercise resulted in the detection of a further starling population in the Jerdacuttup Lakes area near Hopetoun. The Bremer Bay surveillance did not detect any additional birds, although recent reports of sightings had been made. Starlings were previously eradicated from the Bremer Bay area in the early 1990s.

Radio tracking of starlings has been conducted over the past two years. This technique has been effective in detecting the expanded range of the infestation and in pinpointing locations where mass-destruction techniques can be targeted. Trapping, shooting, netting and poisoning have been employed to remove around 220 birds within the infested area since January this year. Trapping continues with approximately 66 traps containing live lure birds. Further traps are being deployed as their manufacture is completed. The trap run is now around 500 kilometres in length and it stretches from Coomalbidgup to Hopetoun. DAFWA is also employing the latest digital mapping technology to increase effectiveness of control operations.

Landholder awareness has been increased substantially via media releases, school visits in the infested area, letter drops and personal visits. DAFWA has appointed a communications coordinator for the starling response task force. Further coordinated surveillance is necessary throughout the area through the entire year to enable effective targeting of control programs. A starling workshop will be held on 1 June to further engage key stakeholders who will be adversely affected should starlings establish widely in the state. A revised starling control strategy and 2006-07 operational plan is being prepared and will be available prior to the commencement of the starling shooting season. Selection and training of additional DAFWA staff is under way.

DAFWA has also gained commitment to additional resources from the Department of Conservation and Environment to assist with increased surveillance and control. Surveillance and control of starlings are difficult and labour intensive and require skilled personnel and the latest in technological support systems to be effective. Much of the area concerned is remote, creating challenges in logistical and personnel management, communications, occupational health and safety, and operational efficiency.

- (2) DAFWA is finalising a detailed case for further appropriate additional funding from the state government.