

NATIONAL ACTION PLAN ON SALINITY AND WATER QUALITY

1350. Hon MURRAY CRIDDLE to the Leader of the House:

The State has not signed the intergovernmental agreement on the national action plan on salinity and water quality and, as such, coordinators and other personnel are leaving for the eastern States that have signed up. Given that a ministerial recommendation has been made that the Premier should sign the agreement, when will the Government sign the agreement and when will Landcare groups receive some guaranteed funding?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank the member for some notice of this question. This matter has been of concern to the Government. The difficulty surrounding the negotiations between the Commonwealth and the State on both the national action plan, which was mentioned in the question, and the national heritage trust mark 2, which was not, but I will take it as part of the question, has existed for some time. The Government of Western Australia has been trying to protect the interests of Western Australia in the Commonwealth Government's somewhat obscure requirements, and also its requirement for matching money that does not recognise the considerable increase in expenditure that occurred during the member's period in office in the previous Parliament.

The unfairness resulting from that issue is probably best demonstrated by comparing Western Australia's expenditure from 1996, when the State's expenditure really took off, to 2000 with that in South Australia. In those four years Western Australia's salinity expenditure effectively doubled to approximately \$30 million. In South Australia salinity expenditure fell from \$9 million to \$3 million. It was clear that South Australia was effectively bludging on the Commonwealth's increased payment through the NHT mark 1. That has led the Commonwealth to apply a prescription to all States, which has really caught Western Australia out. However, over the past few months there has been extensive consultation with the Commonwealth, aided by the discussions that the Minister for the Environment Dr Judy Edwards and I had with the federal Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Hon Warren Truss; the new Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Hon Dr David Kemp; and the Minister for Local Government, Senator Ian McDonald; and the negotiations, particularly with minister Kemp, have rapidly advanced the commonwealth-state agreement.

I am of the view that the intergovernmental agreement on the national action plan on salinity and water quality will be signed within days. Both Dr Edwards and I have made recommendations to the Premier - because this is a document to be signed by the Premier and the Prime Minister, not by Warren Truss and me - that we proceed to sign the NAP. Much of the work on the process to follow, the bilateral arrangements, has already reached an advanced stage. To put Western Australia's position in context with that of the other States, many of the other States had signed the intergovernmental agreement but had then stalled on the bilateral arrangements. We have effectively been negotiating bilaterals without signing the IGA. The member will appreciate that we will now proceed quite quickly, particularly as a result of those meetings in Hobart last week.

With respect to the position of the Landcare coordinators, the main effect of the signing of the national action plan will be to allow state money that has been reserved for permanent Landcare coordinators to be put into place, because it will be matched by the Commonwealth once the bilaterals have been completed. However, my understanding is that in the main most of the Landcare coordinators working in community groups were actually positions funded by NHT rather than the national action plan. Even though we made significant ground last week on NHT mark 2 negotiations, the Commonwealth has already said that it is prepared to fund the Landcare coordinator positions at least for an additional year while we sort out the arrangements for NHT mark 2. Basically, that is a good-news story, and we will be able to bring a lot more certainty to Landcare coordinators and groups about the future of commonwealth-state funding arrangements.