

STARLINGS - INFESTATION

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

- (1) Given that the number of starlings in WA has increased alarmingly, what new procedures are in place to remove these pests?
- (2) Will the minister ensure that every effort is made to keep WA starling free?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

- (1)-(2) I thank the member for the question. Starlings are an invasive species in south eastern Western Australia. They have been in Western Australia for, I think, some 34 years and control has been adequate. However, we have been unable to eliminate the species because new infestations continue to enter the state from across the Nullarbor. As a result of the extraordinarily good wet season on the Nullarbor this summer, a number of additional invasions have occurred. It is a serious problem. Although I do not entirely agree with their description as cane toads with wings, a comparison between the two has been made that is probably not too far off the mark.

Starlings are a major agricultural issue in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia. They also interfere with the public's enjoyment of open-air areas. There is also concern that they could damage the balance of our ecology by displacing native species. One of my concerns, particularly about Victoria and Tasmania, is that very few other birds can be seen in places where starlings have enjoyed a long-term presence. That bothers me, although I have received no professional advice on that matter. It nonetheless seems to be a problem.

We have increased funding for our ongoing, annual starling campaign in the south east of the state, from the Nullarbor through to Munghlinup. Last financial year about \$418 000 was spent on the campaign. This financial year, the budget has been increased to \$750 000. People from within the Department of Agriculture's biosecurity work force have been transferred to work on the starling campaign. Additional traps have been ordered, but I do not have the number with me. I hope those traps have been delivered. As I have implied, the means of control is trapping for which live starlings are used as bait. However, trapping must be monitored very carefully for animal welfare reasons.

Some limited shooting is carried out to control the starling population. Starlings tend to inhabit swampy areas. They are very difficult places in which to work because tiger snakes also inhabit that type of country. The people employed to control the starling population are generally up to their elbows in all kinds of difficult material. However, the new outbreak widens the area of alert for starlings by about 300 per cent. Two new colonies have been found, which is sufficient reason to be concerned. I have spoken to the department since the alert went out and I am not convinced that we have sufficiently funded the campaign to eradicate starlings, even though we have almost doubled the budget in that area. I am very concerned to at least pull back the area of infestation to the point at which it was prior to this recent outbreak.