

ACID SULFATE SOILS, MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

1299. Mr M.P. MURRAY to the Minister for the Environment:

I have read with some concern the recent media claims about possible impacts from acid sulfate soils on fish in the south west and the claim that the issue has not been addressed by previous Governments, despite the fact that it has been known for some time. How extensive is the problem of acid sulfate soils, what are the potential impacts and, most importantly, what is the Government doing about this significant environmental and human health issue?

Dr J.M. EDWARDS replied:

I thank the member for the question.

The issue of acid sulfate soils is emerging as quite a significant environmental problem for the State. Acid sulfate soils are naturally occurring soils that are quite benign until they are exposed to the air. When they are exposed to the air through various means, be it drainage, de-watering or other methods, it can result in the generation of sulfuric acid, and the water that flows through that soil can be quite acidic and can cause significant effects. It can cause environmental effects when it gets into rivers, such as those that have been demonstrated in the east, and has been associated with fish kills. It also has associations with loss of agricultural productivity.

I believe the problem was first discovered in Western Australia in 1917 when land near Albany was extensively cleared and drained, and crops were virtually wiped out. Since then it has basically been swept under the carpet. It came to some prominence in 1999 at the Beenup mine and again in 2002 with the problems at Stirling. As a result of its coming to our attention, we set aside \$650 000 in the last budget to map the extent of the problem. That mapping is now under way and we are looking at the coastal areas, which we believe are those at greatest risk. We are also looking at wheatbelt areas, because of proposals to drain in the area, but to date the problem does not seem to be as serious in those areas as it is in coastal areas.

We now have an extensive program to get on top of the problem, to let the community know about it and to ensure we are preventing it wherever we can. The soil mapping is under way and an acid sulfates working group has been set up with community, industry and various government agencies. This group has overseen the development of a guidance note and we are working very closely with the Department for Planning and Infrastructure to consider an acid sulfate soils planning strategy. A workshop was held on this issue in June and, fortunately, Western Australia is now seen across Australia as having some leaders in this field following the work presented at that workshop. We are also developing a state strategy for managing acid sulfate soils. A lot of communication is going on with the community, local government and developers to warn them that we have a problem with this issue, but that we have a strategy and will be taking the problem seriously to make sure we give the environment good protection.