

**ANIMAL WELFARE — CATTLE DEATHS —
NOONKANBAH STATION AND YANDEYARRA RESERVE**

Statement

HON JIM CHOWN (Agricultural) [10.03 pm]: We know this government misled the state of Western Australia when it pledged to implement a policy of gold-plated transparency. The lack of transparency demonstrated by this government has been an ongoing issue for the last three and a half years, especially regarding adequate answers to parliamentary questions. I have pursued an animal welfare issue with the Minister for Agriculture and Food through a series of parliamentary questions since February 2019. That animal welfare issue concerns the death of thousands of cattle on Noonkanbah and Yandeyarra stations. On these properties, large numbers of cattle died of thirst because the owners and operators neglected to maintain their water points during an unusually dry wet season. Cattle need regular clean water to survive, to gain weight, to grow and to remain healthy. Regular water is essential for lactating mothers with calves at foot. In fact, they can survive for only a maximum of seven days without water. On these two stations, there was not enough water available for the number of cattle seeking it at the designated water points. Over a period of months, that supply dissipated to the point at which animals, in their distressed and weakened condition, became bogged in the mud, unable to retrieve themselves.

They were dying on top of each other while they tried to drink the slop that remained to quench their insatiable thirst. Hundreds more, if not thousands, were scattered throughout the property and scrub, unable to even gain the strength to seek water at the watering points because of their severely weakened condition.

I have been informed by people who were involved in the clean-up that they found it hard to comprehend how such cruelty, which obviously occurred over a couple of months, had been allowed to happen. Photographs of hundreds of cattle dead and dying around various watering holes and watering points were taken. They recounted that after the dead animals had been removed and they commenced de-silting some of the watering points, they found layers of animals buried in the mud and slop. In their weakened state, they had been pushed below the surface by other cattle that were desperately seeking water. This unfortunate and disgusting episode is in my opinion the worst breach of the state's animal welfare legislation in living memory.

I have asked seven parliamentary questions seeking information from the minister about a number of matters regarding Noonkanbah and Yandeyarra cattle deaths and, to date, I do not believe that the responses that I have received have been factually correct. For example, the minister stated on 12 February 2019 that the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's total costs on Noonkanbah station was \$100 000. She repeated that in answer to another question later on. How can that be when a number of helicopters—four in total—flew around for a number of days with observers on board to watch the euthanasing and counting of cattle? In addition, a station consultant was employed and DPIRD staff provided backup at various locations throughout the state to monitor and give directions, at a cost to the state.

In answer to another parliamentary question, the minister responded by stating that 85 cattle were destroyed on Noonkanbah station. I had asked for the combined number of cattle deaths across both properties. In fact, DPIRD had records of 80 cattle at one dam alone and more than 100 at another dam. DPIRD's Broome manager, Rob Cossart, counted more than 500 dead cattle from his photographs alone. When a minister presents information that is not factual, especially about a matter of such a serious nature, it is only fair to assume that any further information received is questionable. In my pursuit to gain information through parliamentary questions, the Minister for Agriculture and Food has on more than one occasion attempted to label me a racist—I am not. I can only assume that she stooped to this personal attack because it is her only defence in not telling the truth. I am sure that the minister is aware that at the same time that she had carriage of the amendments to the Animal Welfare Act 2002 in November 2018, her department's Broome office was informed by email that a massive animal welfare incident was underway at Noonkanbah station. I fail to comprehend how a minister of the Crown can advocate as a champion of animal welfare while, at the same time, take two months to react in a positive manner to what I consider to be absolute cruelty in the Kimberley and the Pilbara. In response to my latest question on 4 November this year, which was in regard to the laying of charges under the act and whether the State Solicitor's Office was likely to make a recommendation, the minister responded in part —

The absolute deadline for a decision is obviously December or January because there is a two-year statute of limitation. However, there is no trying to step back from making a decision here —

So far there has been no decision and two years is nearly up —

it just turns out that it is a very factually complex matter. There are evidentiary problems and, to some extent, it goes back to the fact that the act is old-fashioned and is based on the notion of acts of cruelty, rather than being an act that entrenches codes of conduct that one has to meet. That is making the evidentiary problems difficult to resolve.

The people responsible for running Noonkanbah and Yandeyarra stations are known. The evidentiary problems that the minister stated in her response do not exist. DPIRD is on site at both properties. Its investigators interviewed everybody involved. It has witnesses and probably hundreds of photographs as evidence of what took place, and has spent almost \$1 million of public money rectifying the problem.

It is interesting to note that charges have recently been laid by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development on a similar matter in the wheatbelt whereby a well-known person who used to be a member of this place has been charged with the same offence of not providing water or food for his animals. Time is running out. As the minister is well aware, due to the two-year statute of limitations, the window to pursue justice is closing very quickly. The people of this state expect charges to be laid without hesitation. On that particular matter, the Animal Welfare Act contains a defence, which states —

the animal is stock of a kind that is ordinarily left to roam at large on a pastoral property ...

That is one of the defences to animal cruelty in the act. I say that that defence is fine, but if man-made waterholes are put in place on any property, they must be maintained by man. There is no defence that the animals are roaming and looking after themselves because that water is supplied by a person or persons and those animals would not survive without that water being supplied and its source maintained.

We need to send a clear message that animal cruelty will not be entertained, condoned or swept under the carpet by this government or any future government, regardless of who the perpetrators may be.