

OLD-GROWTH FOREST

Grievance

DR EDWARDS (Maylands) [9.07 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Forest Products, and concerns the disappearance of old-growth forest. In December 1999, the ministerial advisory group chaired by Professor Ian Ferguson, which produced the Ferguson committee report, recommended that logging in all old-growth and two-tiered karri-tingle forest should cease, and that all old-growth forest identified in 16 sensitive blocks should be excluded from logging. That notion was reinforced yesterday, with a media release from the minister saying that karri forest was secure in the 16 sensitive forest blocks. The minister went on to say that the Government accepted the outcome of the Ferguson report, and simply would not allow logging of old-growth karri and karri-tingle in that forest.

I recently compared some answers I received in 1995 to questions in this House with correspondence received by the Leader of the Opposition on 15 May 2000 from the Minister for the Environment. This comparison revealed large discrepancies in areas of old-growth forest. Today I ask the minister what changes over that period have resulted in these discrepancies. From the Opposition's calculations, nearly 3 000 hectares of old-growth forest have gone missing. I hope they are not missing in action, but rather missing preserved. In 1995, Giblett block, west of Pemberton, contained 2 100 hectares of unlogged karri forest.

I refer to question 2317 of 22 June 1995. In 1999, 1 360 hectares of sensitive old-growth karri forest was identified and excluded from logging. This figure is from a Department of Conservation and Land Management table, provided by the Minister for the Environment. The Opposition wants to know why there is a 740-hectare discrepancy in Giblett. The Opposition knows that 464 hectares of Giblett block was included in the Regional Forest Agreement, but that is not all old-growth forest. It also knows that there was a small amount of logging. However, none of that adds up to explain this discrepancy. I look forward to the minister's response. A similar situation has occurred with Carey block, which is adjacent to Giblett. Question 2901 of 22 August 1995 referred to 1 240 hectares of unlogged karri forest. However, in the 1999 table provided by CALM referred to in the minister's letter, 670 hectares of sensitive old-growth karri forest were excluded from logging and clearing. I have compared the definitions and my impression is that, particularly from the definition used in the Ferguson report, that figure should increase rather than decrease. The Opposition knows that some logging occurred in Carey after 1995. However, the figures that I have obtained do not explain the discrepancy. The third example I will put forward is that of Jane block, south of Pemberton. In question 2317 of 1995, Jane block had 3 100 hectares of unlogged karri forest. However in 1999, as shown in the table that I referred to, 1 660 hectares of sensitive old-growth karri in Jane block were identified and excluded from logging. In this case, the discrepancy is 1 440 hectares. It is less than that because one coupe has been cleared since 1995. However, this still does not explain the magnitude of the discrepancy. These three forest blocks are well known. They are the ones that people argued about and they are among the 16 sites identified in the Ferguson committee report as sensitive blocks that needed different treatment. When the Ferguson report was released, the Minister for the Environment hailed it as a great step forward for protecting karri. Labor was told that 90 per cent of old-growth karri would be protected. The maps released at that time looked reassuring - with their lovely colours, blue for the karri and green for the reservation - particularly in regard to these three forest blocks. I await the minister's explanation about what has happened. On the surface of it, there is a significant discrepancy.

I will raise two other issues. On Tuesday I received some answers to questions that I asked earlier this year about old-growth forest that was logged between the preparation of the RFA and December 1999. I have prepared a table from the answers that I have received. The table shows that during the preparation of the RFA, and up until the end of 1999, 500 hectares of old-growth forest were logged. Labor is concerned that so much was logged in this time, when it was reassured that the forest was being saved. There were 2 130 hectares of old-growth forest in Gardner block at the time of the RFA. By the end of 1999, this had fallen to 1 940 - a drop of 190 hectares. The total for the eight blocks that I asked about is 500 hectares.

Labor continues to have concerns about the 2001 karri sawlog yield. I read the statement made by the minister yesterday, and the article in yesterday's newspaper. However, the Labor Party has been given information that CALM plans to increase the karri sawlog cut in 2001 from 168 000 to 173 000 cubic metres. That information was provided by people who attended a meeting at Northcliffe. Labor understands that this increase was necessary to supply Blueleaf Corporation Pty Ltd, which has reopened the Greenbushes mill. The minister must explain why he guaranteed Blueleaf this amount of karri when he knew that it would conflict with the Government's previous commitment and promise to reduce the karri sawlog yield. There remains much concern about what is happening in this State's old-growth forests. I have raised three practical examples of where old-growth forest is not only disappearing, but also being defined out of existence.

MR OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood - Minister for Forest Products) [9.14 am]: I thank the member for Maylands for giving me some prior notice of the issues that she would raise in this grievance debate. I took it

upon myself to get people from the Department of Conservation and Land Management to go back to the office last night to research the comments made by the member for Maylands. I presume the member for Maylands realises that this is really a matter for the Minister for the Environment. The correspondence that Dr Gallop received - the letters of 15 May and 23 June, which included the table referred to - was from the Minister for the Environment. As Minister for Forest Products, I will share the responsibility to prepare a management plan with the Minister for the Environment, the Forest Products Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management. However, my main role covers the areas of logging, roads, and a whole range of other responsibilities of which the member is aware. I am more than happy to take on board the questions that the member has raised.

I presume that the member knows the difference between old-growth forest and unlogged forest. There is a difference and it was defined under the RFA. I will refer to the notes that were given to me about 10 minutes ago. The member for Maylands stated that a question on notice in 1995 identified areas of old-growth forest in Giblett, Carey and Jane blocks. However, the answer to the question on notice in 1995 - question 2317 of 22 August - did not provide information on old-growth forests, but on logged and unlogged forest. The terms "old-growth" and "unlogged" forest are not equivalent. Old-growth forest is forest that is ecologically mature and in which the effects of past disturbance, including logging, are now negligible. That is the description under the RFA. This definition involves two concepts - one of maturity and the other of disturbance. Areas of unlogged forest that are dominated by immature trees are not mapped as old growth. Subsequent to the letter of 15 May 2000 from the Minister for the Environment to the Leader of the Opposition, the Minister for the Environment wrote to the Leader of the Opposition on 23 June 2000 to inform him of additional areas of immature and two-tiered karri or karri-tingle to be excluded from harvesting in those three blocks. The figures in the answer to the 1995 question on notice, also derived from data sets, were superseded by major refinements and additions to the Regional Forest Agreement process, including the disturbance, growth stage and land tenure databases. The letter of 15 May 2000 from the Minister for the Environment to the Leader of the Opposition listed the additional area of old-growth karri or karri-tingle forest within the three forest blocks, which were set aside from harvesting following the Government's acceptance of the key recommendations of the ministerial advisory group chaired by Professor Ferguson. Therefore, the figures were additional to other areas of state forest that are old growth and that had been set aside from harvesting under the forest management plan 1994-2003 and the Regional Forest Agreement. No logging of previously unlogged karri forest has occurred in Jane or Giblett forest blocks since 1995. Logging of previously unlogged karri forest was undertaken in 1995 and 1996. They were the explanatory notes that were given to me. If the member for Maylands is still unsure of the answers - and before she runs off to the media with misinformation, like Hon Christine Sharp has done - I would be more than happy to provide a further briefing for her, which I am sure would be agreed to by the Minister for the Environment.

I refer to the question. The forest is not disappearing. The Government will cut some old-growth forest between now and 2003 to meet the contracts set down under the management plan. I understand that is the Labor Party's policy. Is it the Labor Party's policy to continue logging to meet the contracts? I understand that Kevin Reynolds and the Labor Party leader agreed to that. I do not know whether they are still on talking terms. I expect that the Leader of the Opposition is about to give Mr Reynolds a good, hard spanking, to please the general public. The coalition knows what will happen after the election. Kevin Reynolds will continue to run the Labor Party.

I understand clearly that Kevin Reynolds and the Labor Party agreed to a policy that they would meet all the contracts between now and 2003. Is that correct?

Dr Edwards: Kevin Reynolds was not in the State when we held our Labor Party conference.

Mr OMODEI: Okay. I understand he had significant input.

Mr McGinty: You do not know much.

Mr OMODEI: Tell me, then, what is the Labor Party's policy on logging old-growth forest between now and 2003? It is a simple question. All I am trying to get out of the Labor Party is whether it will log to meet the contracts between now and 2003.

Dr Edwards: Of course we will log between now and 2003 to meet the contracts.

Mr OMODEI: Those are carefully chosen words. Of course the Labor Party will log. Of course it will not close down the timber industry completely. I will tell members what the Labor Party's policy will do to families and communities in the south west. It will absolutely devastate them. Let the record show that the Labor Party is not prepared to tell the people of Western Australia what is its policy on logging old-growth forest between now and 2003. I reiterate that the Government's policy is that it will continue to provide for the contracts between now and 2003.

With regard to the direct question about the 173 000 cubic metres, it is actually 170 400 cubic metres, and we are working actively, through business exits, to ensure that the figure comes down to 149 000 cubic metres. The position on the logging of karri and tingle in old-growth karri and tingle is rock solid: After 2003, there will be no logging of karri and tingle in old-growth forest.