

COLLIE CATCHMENT AREA - LOGGING

Grievance

DR EDWARDS (Maylands) [9.06.am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Forest Products, and concerns logging in the Collie catchment and the risk of rising salinity levels. The Department of Conservation and Land Management intends to log around 1 100 hectares in Palmer blocks 1 and 3, for jarrah sawlogs of various grades. Logging will commence in October 2000 and finish in June 2001. The logging activity will be in the vicinity of the Collie River east, and at two points will be very close to the river, depending on the buffers used. My concern is that the area around Collie, including Palmer block, is in the Collie recovery catchment, which was identified in the state salinity action plan as a catchment requiring priority management to reduce salinity levels.

In 1996 the salinity level in the Collie River was estimated to be 790 milligrams per litre of total soluble salts, and increasing at a rate of 24 milligrams per litre each year. The target for public drinking water supply is 500 milligrams per litre. The state salinity action plan has set a target of restoring river water in the Wellington Dam catchment, which is in this Collie recovery area, to drinking quality by the year 2015. This is not new, because efforts to restore water quality in the Wellington Dam and its catchment area have been going on for more than 20 years. As part of this there are very stringent controls on clearing within that catchment, which do not apply to the Department of Conservation and Land Management.

Palmer block is located in a part of the Collie recovery catchment that is zoned A. The catchment area is divided into four zones, and zone A is the area most at risk of stream salinity hazard. The Water and Rivers Commission has guidelines for the granting of licences to clear indigenous vegetation in control catchments such as this. The Water and Rivers Commission points out that in zone A, applications to clear for the purpose of establishing plantations for chip wood or other commercial timber - that is, clearing where regrowth is proposed - would not normally be granted. The Water and Rivers Commission does not make individual assessment of blocks like these when they are about to be logged. When I have raised this with the Minister for Water Resources, he has told me that research has shown that logging like this has no significant long-term impact on salinity.

In the book *Managing our rivers: a guide to the nature and management of the streams of south-west Western Australia* - which was published in 1999 and launched by the Minister for Water Resources - the author, Dr Luke Pen, writes that significant ground water rise can occur when logging or mining operations temporarily thin or clear an area of forest. Dr Pen goes on to say that ground water rise under thinned or cleared forest is rapid and can lead to increased saline flushes of stream systems. Reports have been released indicating that streams in this area have salinity readings of 900 parts per million. What will happen when saline flushes occur? They will almost certainly occur as a result of clearing in Palmer block.

Landowners in this catchment were rightly refused permission to clear their own land, but they are now asking the Minister for Forest Products what assurance he can give them that their area will be protected against problems associated with the large-scale clearing that is associated with forestry activities. The Minister for Water Resources stated in correspondence to me that areas identified by the Water and Rivers Commission that are susceptible to saline flushes have wider stream buffers than normal. However, he then went on to say that Palmer block, despite being in a zone A recovery catchment, is not one of the catchments identified by the commission that requires wider stream zones. Other evidence shows that streams within Palmer block are already showing saline levels of 330 ppm. The Water and Rivers Commission in Bunbury said that in areas in that region that are unaffected by clearing, expected levels would be between 150 and 300 ppm. However, already there is a stream in this block that has a salinity level above that which would be expected, and soon 1 100 hectares of forest in that area will be cleared.

The Opposition has similar concerns about Leach block. The Leader of the Opposition's office was contacted by a resident who lives next door to Leach block, which the Department of Conservation and Land Management intends to log. This resident has a ground water bore on his property that he cannot use because the water is 15 000 ppm salt, which is half the level of salinity of sea water. He cannot even use that water for his septic system. This person was not allowed to clear any trees on his land to get electricity to his property. Western Power gave him a grant to install solar power because it recognised the difficulty he had in getting an electricity supply to his property. Again, this is a zone A catchment area like Palmer catchment, which is within the Collie recovery catchment. The Government is pouring money into the Collie recovery catchment. There are stringent controls on clearing - which are rightly there - because we need to protect the water in that catchment to bring the level back up. The Government has given priority to this logging. I call on it to implement a salinity risk assessment of this recovery catchment before that logging begins.

The assurances that have been given - that there will only be a short-term dip associated with logging and that regeneration will then take over - are somewhat hollow. It takes time for regenerated trees to reach the ground water. Only when the trees reach the ground water can they start to rectify the damage that will potentially be

caused through clearing. I cite as evidence the fact that people in this area are not allowed to clear their own land. I call on the Government to implement a risk assessment of Palmer block and surrounding blocks in the Collie recovery catchment that are about to be logged, to reassure the community that salinity levels will not rise as a result of the proposed logging.

MR OMODEI (Warren-Blackwood - Minister for Forest Products) [9.13 am]: I thank the member for Maylands for the grievance. I ask her in future to give me some detail about the locality under discussion, to enable me to answer the question more definitively. I have a letter that was written to the member for Maylands by the Minister for the Environment on 18 September, and I suggest that the member read it very carefully, because the first paragraph states that -

You have raised the issue of salinity in relation to timber harvesting. Salinity is widely recognised as occurring as a result of the permanent “clearing” of perennial, deep-rooted vegetation from salt susceptible landscapes.

Dr Edwards: Read Dr Pen’s book.

Mr OMODEI: I am reading from a letter that the member for Maylands should have read before she raised this matter in Parliament.

Dr Edwards: Of course I have read it.

Mr OMODEI: The letter continues -

When jarrah/marri forests are harvested they are not clearfelled and they are always regenerated, so any change to the area brought about during the harvesting operation is not permanent, unlike clearing for agriculture.

The member for Maylands raised the issue of large-scale clearing, but that does not occur when forests are harvested. The letter states that -

The misunderstanding most commonly occurs when comparing clear felling in the case of karri forest with clearing for agriculture.

Long term trials have consistently shown that there is no evidence of salinity following regeneration of harvested forest be it jarrah or karri, whereas the opposite is true for clearing for agriculture. In fact the CSIRO salinity trial plot referred to in the second paragraph of your letter is one of the studies that supports this now common understanding. Not one stream in a fully forested catchment is saline, even though forests have been used to provide timber for 150 years.

Dr Edwards: If that is true, why do we have high salinity levels in Palmer already?

Mr OMODEI: The letter continues -

The quality of the water that flows from forest catchments is maintained by ensuring that the forests are regenerated and by providing reserves along all streams and rivers.

In the Collie area there are “paired catchments”, whereby land cleared for agriculture and land managed as multiple use forest are directly compared for salinity impacts. These and other experiments have formed the basis of the prescriptions that are designed to protect catchments from salinity, and are applied in all native forest timber harvesting operations.

The CSIRO salinity trial plot south of Ernie Road that you referred to was cleared for this trial over two decades ago, prior to the requirements to retain stream reserves. The clearing of the creek lines that you question was deliberately planned in order to emulate an agricultural landscape.

The letter continues for another two pages and was sent to the member for Maylands on 18 September 2000. I must ask why the member has raised this matter in the way that she has. I would say that it is purely for political purposes, to enable the member opposite to placate the concerns of some of the people in the Collie area who are sympathetic to the Labor Party.

I have had a full briefing on the Collie group and of Mr Waterhouse’s concerns - I presume that is the person to whom the member is referring. He was consulted about the public participation planned for Palmer forest. He raised a number of questions and presented a petition signed by 200 people. There has been a partnership between the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Collie Shire on this issue. Representatives met with Mr Waterhouse to discuss general issues, and a further meeting was held to discuss and inspect issues. Maps of the proposed operations were provided to Mr Waterhouse and an invitation was extended to him to bring one or two locals to meet with CALM to discuss queries, and for CALM to provide information. A letter between CALM and the Collie Shire was provided to him, and a meeting was held with Mr

Waterhouse, local people, the Collie Shire and CALM's landscape architects. That took place on 11 September 2000, and ongoing meetings will be conducted as required. CALM provided concept plans for landscaped tourist drives, safety, noise, dust and so on and ensured that all the queries from Mr Waterhouse and other people were answered. CALM then proceeded to modify operations as required. Mr Waterhouse raised specific questions about flora and fauna - I will not go through all of them - landscape management, logging in Lane-Poole reserve, access to Lane-Poole reserve, the proposed national park just east of the Norms Road area, and tourist routes, which were all discussed.

The statement that water in the Collie catchment is saline is not true. The Harris Dam is within the Collie catchment area, and it holds some of the freshest water available in the south west. The water is used for domestic and metropolitan consumption. The catchment is completely forested, and the forest has been harvested and regenerated for 150 years. The member for Maylands' comment about large-scale clearing is not correct; it does not occur.

Dr Edwards: Why do you think the salinity levels are so high?

Mr OMODEI: As opposition spokesperson for forests and the environment, the member should know that jarrah coupes are very small and a degree of select cutting takes place in jarrah forests. The level of salinity is one of the primary concerns considered when logging jarrah.

Dr Edwards: The difficulty is that you are ignoring the evidence of your own experts. Dr Pen is a highly credible person.

Mr OMODEI: Dr Pen is a very competent person and I know him very well. Most of the salinity in the Collie River comes from land that was cleared well and truly to the east, north and south east of Collie, and these catchments flow into the river. It is exactly the same as the salinity in the Blackwood River. Salinity in the Blackwood River does not occur as a result of clearfelling or the harvesting of timber, it occurs as a result of clearing land for agriculture. The member for Maylands knows that very well and should have mentioned that in her speech.

Dr Edwards: Show us the evidence.

Mr OMODEI: The evidence is there; we know that Collie River is saline. However, it is not saline as a result of the harvesting of forests. Will the member acknowledge that the salinity of the Collie River is not as a result of the harvesting of forests?

Dr Edwards: No, I will not, given the evidence before me.

Mr OMODEI: Does it have nothing to do with the cleared land? It goes to show the depth of knowledge of the member opposite about forest matters and salinity in Western Australia. The salinity occurs as a result of land clearing for agriculture, not as a result of harvesting for timber.