

WHALE STRANDINGS — CHEYNES BEACH

Statement by Minister for Environment

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldivis — Minister for Environment) [9.19 am]: I today update the house on the tragic mass stranding of long-finned pilot whales that occurred last month at Cheynes Beach about 50 kilometres east of Albany, and the two-day response effort. Following reports of an unusual pilot whale aggregation off the WA south coast, a pod of 97 long-finned pilot whales stranded on Cheynes Beach on the afternoon of Tuesday, 25 July 2023. Unfortunately, 52 whales died over the first night. Despite the best efforts of responders to move the remaining whales to deeper water on Wednesday, 26 July, all these whales re-stranded further along the beach that evening and a further two whales died. Following assessment by staff of the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and a team of local and Perth Zoo veterinarians, it was determined that euthanasia was the appropriate course of action available to ensure the most humane outcome for the remaining re-stranded whales.

I was in Albany on the Wednesday and had the opportunity to see the extraordinary response efforts led by DBCA, supported by Perth Zoo veterinarians, more than 250 registered volunteers from the Albany and great southern region, staff from the City of Albany, Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Department of Transport, Western Australia Police, St John Ambulance, Surf Life Saving, Binalup Aboriginal Rangers, Albany Sea Rescue and the RSPCA. Numerous local businesses also supported the response effort, including the Cheynes Beach Caravan Park, Dog Rock Vet Clinic, Harvest Road, Albany and Regional Volunteer Service, traffic management contractors and heavy machinery contractors.

Mass whale strandings are a natural phenomenon and in most cases the reason they occur is unknown. The information collected from this incident is highly valuable to improve scientific understanding of strandings and whale health and ecology. I extend my sincere thanks to all the people and organisations involved as part of the response, and I appreciate the words and offers of support from people all over the world who took an interest in this very tragic event. Responding to a mass whale stranding can be an emotional experience. DBCA had welfare support on site during the response, and the Australian Red Cross provided free support services to volunteers impacted by the incident. A community-led vigil was held on Saturday, 29 July at Cheynes Beach to honour the whales and support the healing process.