

MYRTLE RUST

Statement by Minister for Environment

MR R.R. WHITBY (Baldvis — Minister for Environment) [9.17 am]: Today I would like to inform the house of a significant biosecurity alert that threatens iconic plants in Western Australia. The fungal disease *Austropuccinia psidii*, commonly known as myrtle rust, has been confirmed in WA at a remote location north-east of Kununurra during targeted surveillance carried out by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. Until this detection, WA had been free of myrtle rust. To date, myrtle rust has been detected at just one location, where infected melaleuca trees were recently burnt. New growth after fire is known to be vulnerable to this disease. The pathogen is likely to have been introduced to the area via windborne spores from the Northern Territory, where myrtle rust has been confirmed approximately 100 kilometres east of the WA border. A further 208 locations in the East Kimberley have been surveyed, with no myrtle rust detected. Myrtle rust infects plants within the Myrtaceae family, which includes eucalypts, paperbarks, peppermint trees and Geraldton waxes. This group of plants is a key feature of WA ecosystems and gardens.

Myrtle rust was first detected in New South Wales in 2010 and has quickly established itself along the east coast. Heavy infections across large areas in New South Wales and Queensland have caused widespread loss of plants and have had major implications for ecosystem health. If myrtle rust becomes widely established in WA, it will significantly alter entire landscapes, particularly in the biodiverse south west, which is climatically highly suitable for the pathogen. DBCA and DPIRD are currently working with national experts to establish the best response possible for WA to deal with this threat. Globally, the only successful myrtle rust eradication program was achieved on Lord Howe Island in 2016. Collaboration and communication will be key to a successful management program covering such a vast area as the Kimberley region. DBCA and DPIRD have commenced communications with traditional owner groups and plan to engage with key parties, including pastoralists, tourism operators, nurseries and citizen scientists such as birdwatchers. It is important that Western Australians travelling to and from the Kimberley region are aware that they could spread the pathogen and know what to do if they encounter it. Seed has been collected from 106 species susceptible to myrtle rust in the south west and a further 31 species from the Kimberley, complementing existing collections in the WA Seed Centre. Further surveillance across the Kimberley region is currently planned for 2023.