

WITTENOOM CLOSURE BILL 2021

Receipt and First Reading

Bill received from the Assembly; and, on motion by **Hon Alannah MacTiernan (Minister for Regional Development)**, read a first time.

Second Reading

HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (South West — Minister for Regional Development) [6.34 pm]: I move —

That the bill be now read a second time.

The purpose of this bill is to allow for the acquisition of the last remaining privately held properties within the former Wittenoom town site. Acquisition of the 14 remaining freehold properties will occur by using the compulsory acquisition provisions of the Land Administration Act 1997. The previous version of this bill was introduced by Hon Ben Wyatt during the last Parliament, and although it was passed by the Legislative Assembly, it was unable to progress through the Legislative Council prior to the Parliament being dissolved ahead of the 2021 state election. In introducing this updated bill, it is my intention to finalise the acquisition of the last remaining private properties within Wittenoom as soon as possible.

It has been more than 100 years since blue asbestos was first identified in the Hamersley Ranges and more than 80 years since it was first mined and milled in the area's gorges and surrounds. What followed that initial discovery and mining was a replication of what was occurring elsewhere in Western Australia when a new mineral deposit was found; that is, a workers' camp was established, which then evolved into a thriving town site. In this case, it led to the establishment of the town of Wittenoom, which, at its peak, was reported to be home to 20 000 workers and residents.

The mining of asbestos in Wittenoom ceased in 1966 as the significant health impacts on workers and residents became more evident. In 1978, the government of Western Australia made the unprecedented decision to phase down the town. As part of the phasing-down process, the government closed the Wittenoom town site—it was formally abolished as a town in 2007—withdrew the provision of services, installed significant warning signs and, more importantly, purchased a significant number of the privately held Wittenoom properties from owners who sold voluntarily.

Since the previous version of this bill was first introduced into Parliament, two of the remaining property owners have taken up an offer from the government and subsequently transferred their properties to the state. There now remain three property owners, who collectively own 14 properties within the former town site and with whom the government has been unable to reach a final agreement. Given the ongoing health risks associated with residing in and visiting Wittenoom, the intention of this bill is to compulsorily acquire these last remaining properties as a public work under the provisions of the Land Administration Act. The bill will also provide each landowner with compensation to be paid commensurate to the value of each property, based on property type. Once the bill is passed and the private properties have been acquired, the government will remove all remaining above-ground infrastructure within the former town site to limit the attraction and opportunity for people to visit and stay in the area.

By no means will this bill put an end to the contamination issue in the area; it is part of a larger body of work required to mitigate future public health risks and manage the contamination caused by the mining and use of asbestos in and around Wittenoom. Further, the bill is a significant step in resolving the unfortunate legacy of one of Australia's worst industrial disasters, which has led to thousands of deaths and the area's reputation as the largest contaminated area in the Southern Hemisphere.

I wish to acknowledge the Banjima people, who are the traditional owners of the land on which the former town of Wittenoom is situated and who have been, and continue to be, heavily impacted by exposure to asbestos. It is essential that the Banjima people are part of the decision-making process in finding a suitable outcome to the ongoing management of asbestos contamination on their country. The government has committed to work with the Banjima people to address this longstanding industrial legacy and support them in their aims when possible.

Pursuant to standing order 126(1), I advise that this bill is not a uniform legislation bill. It does not ratify or give effect to an intergovernmental or multilateral agreement to which the government of the state is a party; nor does this bill, by reason of its subject matter, introduce a uniform scheme or uniform laws throughout the commonwealth.

I commend the bill to the house and table the explanatory memorandum.

[See paper [829](#).]

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

House adjourned at 6.39 pm

