

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
Question on notice

Tuesday, 8 September 2015

3370. Hon Robin Chappie to the Minister for Mental Health representing the Minister for Environment.

Noting the Minister's joint media announcement of 21 August 2015, *Land tenure boost for irrigated agriculture* and subsequent coverage in *The West Australian* entitled "Land Tenure Deal to Drive Investment", I ask:

- (a) was the Minister aware at the time of the announcement that the Government is considering more than 10 million hectares of Western Australian public (Crown) land for possible conversion to intensive irrigated agriculture;
- (b) if the Government is not considering more than 10 million hectares of land for possible conversion to intensive irrigated agriculture as reported, what is the correct figure for area under consideration for possible conversion to intensive irrigated agriculture;
- (c) of this area, how much is currently under native vegetation;
- (d) how many hectares of native vegetation would need to be cleared to achieve the irrigation area the Government is seeking to create;
- (e) is the Minister aware of any studies or assessments that have been done either by his department or by the Ministers for Lands or Water on the conservation significance of this large area of native vegetation; for example its biodiversity and threatened species habitat values;
- (f) if yes to (e), will the Minister table those studies;
- (g) if no to (f), why not;
- (h) given the large area of native vegetation clearing involved, and the large volumes of groundwater involved, does the Minister expect the proposed conversion of these areas to intensive irrigation to be referred by the relevant government department or Minister to the Environmental Protection Authority for assessment as a strategic proposal;
- (i) if no to (h), why not;
- (j) will any proposal for conversion be required to comply with the native vegetation clearing principles set out in the *Environment Protection Act 1986*;
- (k) if no to (j), why not;
- (l) over what timeframe is the Government planning for this conversion of millions of hectares of public land to intensive irrigated, and possibly freehold, land to occur;
- (m) is the Minister aware of any economic analysis of this potential large scale clearing of native vegetation in terms of either its carbon emissions impacts or its impacts on the regional tourism industry;
- (n) if yes to (m), will the Minister table those analyses;
- (o) if no to (n), why not;
- (p) is the Minister aware of studies done on the carbon sequestration status of areas such as the Great Western Woodlands showing that these rangelands and pastoral ecosystems store carbon at a level of around 60 tonnes, on average, per hectare in soil and vegetation;
- (q) is the Minister concerned that the conversion of up to or more than 10 million hectares of native vegetation across Western Australia's rangelands could equate in total to hundreds of millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions, which is many

times greater than Western Australia's current total annual carbon dioxide emissions;

(r) if yes to (q), what does the Minister expect the Government to do in order to ensure this massive carbon dioxide emissions outcome does not occur;

(s) is the Minister aware as to whether the Western Australian Government has advised the Federal Environment Minister, Hon Greg Hunt, that it is considering a proposal to create hundreds of millions of tonnes of additional carbon dioxide emissions via this irrigated agriculture proposal;

(t) if yes to (s), when was the Federal Environment Minister advised;

(u) when does the Minister expect the Government to refer this proposal for assessment under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act);

(v) does any of the 10 million or so hectares under consideration by the Government for intensive irrigation fall within any of the below categories and, if so, in each case, what area, in hectares, is involved:

(i) former pastoral properties purchased by the Department for Conservation and Land Management (CALM), Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW) for transfer to the conservation estate;

(ii) current conservation reserve of any kind;

(iii) Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) or CALM/DEC/DPaW proposed conservation reserve; for example Red Book or subsequent recommended areas;

(iv) national heritage-listed areas, such as the Fitzroy River;

(v) the Great Western Woodlands;

(vi) areas identified by Tourism Western Australia or the tourism industry as having significant and strategic tourism and aesthetic values, for example widely promoted regional wildflower tourism destinations; and

(vii) areas known to be at risk of serious and repeated flooding as mapped or otherwise documented by the Department of Water or other responsible state or federal government agencies;

(w) what legal protections does the Minister expect the Government will put in place to ensure the public is protected from liability if areas identified by the Government for conversion to freehold and/or intensive irrigation subsequently fail due to flooding, inadequate soils, insufficient sustainable water supplies, in quality or quantity, attack by known pests and diseases or lack of adequate supporting infrastructure;

(x) to the best of the Minister's knowledge, do any of the 10 million hectares of potential irrigation land rely on the construction of new dams on any rivers or other major watercourses; and

(y) if yes to (x), which rivers or other major watercourses, by region, have been identified as having potential dam sites?

Answer

The Minister for Environment has provided the following response.

- (a) Up to 10 million hectares of land was identified as potentially suitable for irrigated agriculture in the State Water Strategy Irrigation Review Final Report published in July 2005.

There is no development proposal to develop 10 million hectares of land across Western Australia's rangelands.

- (b) This question should be referred to the Minister for Water. I understand this question has been directed to the Minister for Agriculture and Food representing the Minister for Water under Legislative Council Question on Notice 3371.
- (c)-(e) Without a development proposal, I am unable to advise on any area of native vegetation nor related studies.
- (f)-(g) Not applicable
- (h)-(i) No as there is no proposal to be referred.
- (j) Development proposals must comply with statutory requirements, including the native vegetation clearing provisions of the *Environmental Protection Act 1986*.
- (k) Not applicable
- (l) There is no development proposal to develop 10 million hectares of land across Western Australia's rangelands.
- (m) No
- (n) Not applicable
- (o) There is no development proposal on which to base an economic analysis of the carbon emissions arising from clearing of native vegetation or impacts on the regional tourism industry.
- (p) Yes
- (q) There is no development proposal to clear 10 million hectares of native vegetation across Western Australia's rangelands.
- (r) Not applicable
- (s) There is no development proposal to clear 10 million hectares of native vegetation across Western Australia's rangelands.
- (t) Not applicable
- (u) Any irrigated agriculture development proposal will need to comply with all relevant Commonwealth Government statutory approvals processes, including the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* as relevant.

(v) (i-vii) There is no development proposal to convert 10 million hectares to intensive irrigation.

(w)-(y) There is currently no development proposal. Any irrigated agriculture development proposal will need to comply with all statutory approvals processes.

AG