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HANSARD

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PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE: RIVERINE RECOVERY PROJECT WETLANDS PHASE 1B INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:35): I rise also to support the 485th report of the Public Works Committee entitled 'Riverine Recovery Project Wetlands Phase 1B'. Certainly I applaud any work that can be done to recover water, so long as it is done in a sustainable way. When I say 'a sustainable way', we must make sure everyone gets a win out of this—the environment in the first instance, but also irrigators have to have a win and there must be social equity right throughout the river with regard to water savings.

For too long some people, certainly with the Murray-Darling Basin Authority, have taken the easy approach in getting water out of the river with buy-backs. The hard work John Howard pioneered back in 2007, of infrastructure upgrades, should be and should have been well on the way by now. Sadly, that has not happened near as fast as it should have because of the bureaucratic lockups in Canberra, and certainly some bureaucratic lockups here with our Labor government. We need to get these environmental and riverine recovery project water savings in place so that we can get the river back to good health.

I remember during the devastating drought, where the river dropped over a metre and a half below its level of plus 0.75 AHD (Australian height datum), that it was an absolute disaster, especially below Lock 1. At that time, according to the government, Adelaide's water supply was under threat. I made the suggestion at the time that all they needed to do was lower the pumps, and was told that that could not happen. Funnily enough, they then found some engineers who said that it could happen. There were some other flawed policies that were put out there, like a weir at Wellington, which just disregarded everyone south of there in my electorate.

Mr Pengilly: And in mine.

Mr PEDERICK: And in the electorate of the member for Finniss. This would have been utter devastation. A lot of the problem here was that the state government did not negotiate enough water to keep the river running. I think the water was there—not much, I will admit. I remember trying to get 30 gigalitres of water just to cover the base of Lake Albert, just to keep it alive, and I was told that that was too hard. Yet, when you look upstream, when the Murrumbidgee irrigators, with their high-security water, were on 95 per cent water and we were restricted with our so-called high-security water on 18 per cent, you have to wonder what is going on in this country.

I think things are moving on, though, and we are getting some better environmental outcomes. With environmental outcomes we should have social wins, recreational wins and also economic wins for the river, but it will take a lot of work. The only way the river came back to health last time was because it rained in September 2010 and brought it back to health. It was a great thing to happen because there would have been absolute utter devastation by now if the river had not come back. It is not back to perfect health yet, but it is getting there.

We talk about environmental water. I look at areas of significance in my electorate, like Lake Albert, still running, last time I looked, at 2,700 EC as far as the salt count is concerned, and this is three years down the track from when flows came back. It shows that so much work needs to be done. I know that some work is being done on plans around a connector through to the Coorong, and that needs to be carefully researched so the right outcomes are made if that goes ahead and so that Lake Albert is not just a terminal lake.

Certainly for all the life that relies on the river, all the bird life, the turtles, we do need these environmental watering programs to make sure that the ecology and nature can come back to wellbeing again. I think with the talk of getting thousands of gigalitres of water back into the river—and for every thousand gigalitres, to paint a picture, that is essentially two Sydney Harbours—a lot more of this work can be done with infrastructure upgrades, especially in the Eastern States.

You must commend South Australian irrigators for what they have done over the last 40 years. They are really an icon site as far as river management in this country, because we have had to manage our water so well in the first instance, yet when times got tough, we were the ones who were penalised, and we were still penalised with different projects coming down from a federal scale because supposedly we did not qualify for funding because we were so far ahead of the game as far as irrigation infrastructure and strategies to manage our water. I certainly applaud this initiative, but there is a lot of work to be done and we must make sure that these savings work in concert with our economic base and our social base so that we can have a triple bottom line success rate.

I think some of this might get down to how the desalination plant in Adelaide is managed. We have a desalination plant that is basically puffing along on less than half a cylinder at the moment just because they have been running 25 gigalitres (I think) through it for the last year in precommissioning phase, so essentially mothballed.

I do not want to reach a point where our river is suffering, yet we do not see our government crank up the desalination plant to put water into Adelaide so that we can still have those economic outcomes along the river. It is something that governments are going to really have to think about hard because, yes, desalinated water is the most expensive water, and we have it coming out of I think the most expensive desalination plant in the country at over \$2 billion all up with the pipework. A lot of progress still has to be made.

We cannot stand back and think, 'Everything is alright, the water is back in the river', because it will get dry again, and the first thing that suffers when it gets dry is the wetlands. They got locked out during the drought, especially below Lock 1 right throughout my electorate. It was just amazing to see the dry expanses where water usually lies but was no longer. Certainly, I understand that when it gets really dry, some of those wetlands will be locked out again as far as wetting and drying management, but I believe that is part of this Riverine Recovery Project.

At the end of the day, everyone throughout the country, let alone South Australia, has to manage water a lot better, because we do not need to face the disaster that we faced between 2006 and late 2010, because, quite frankly, I do not think the community would cope. It nearly busted the community wide open last time, and we need to have better outcomes right along the River Murray.
Motion carried.

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