

GOOLWA BARRAGES - June 6 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): It saddens me to have to revisit a subject so recently raised in this place, but the problem is a serious and immediate one and there has been no real progress in the meantime. I revisit the subject of the leaking barrages at Goolwa for several reasons, one of which is to point out that the minister's reassurance that action was being taken has proven hollow to those who depend on water quality at the river's end. The matter of salt water entering the lakes in some volume has serious consequences, both immediate and future. It has an immediate and disastrous effect on farmers around the lower reaches of the lake and its tributaries, the Finniss River and Currency Creek. On 28 May, Minister Maywald declared that three out of the five barrages had had remedial work done and that work on the remaining two would be completed within days.

Let me say that if the sealing method for these last two is the same as was used on the first three, they may as well stop work now. It is quite apparent that the early attempts to stem the flow have been ineffective as sea water continues to pour in at many of the barrage bays. The minister explained that she did not have a hand in the barrages' design but she pointed out that they are being asked to do a job that they were not designed to do, namely, to hold back sea water.

Broadly speaking, that is incorrect. The specific purpose was exactly that, to prevent sea water from getting into the lakes, particularly at times of low flow. However, it is fair to say that not only did our forefathers not anticipate the unprecedented situation presented by the excessive over-allocation of water from the Murray-Darling system, highlighted by this severe drought, they also did not expect that those barrages might need to be completely watertight.

The design of these gates is such that hasty, last-minute attempts to seal them up have proven almost futile. The plastic wedges and log-stops have been dislodged by the vigorous wave action on the sea water side, brought about by recent stormy weather. I suppose the government will now argue that it could not be expected to anticipate stormy weather in winter.

The whole dilemma is the product of the government's lack of anticipation. It is not about fickle weather but about low flows, low lake levels, design limitations and the needs of local farmers. They knew weeks or even months ago that low flows, low levels and farmers' needs would come to be. They were also given a plausible, workable solution to the problem of shifting wedges but they have ignored that simple suggestion, too. As always, the minister knows better, even though she has not been there (to my knowledge) to see for herself and to talk to the locals.

On top of this, promised standpipes are only just being installed, even after Hindmarsh Island landholders have already carted over half a million litres of water for stock. You can imagine locals' frustrations when their reasonable suggestions to overcome the problem fall on deaf ears. The end results—and bear in mind the maximum salinity livestock can tolerate is about 5 000 ECu—is that salinity readings at Hindmarsh Island are currently 12 000 EC; the reading at the top of the barrages is 18 000 EC, and at the bottom it is 40 000 EC; readings along the lower reaches of the river are over 14 000 EC at Currency Creek and 10 000 EC at Finniss.

Apart from the dire immediate consequences of this situation, there are other more serious implications long term. Consider that salt water, because of its density, settles near the bottom, and it will stay there insulated from the sun by the layer of fresh water on top. The only way to shift it is for a substantial flush of fresh water from upstream.

Moreover, because the lake's freshness has not been adequately protected through the government's procrastination and mismanagement, we now have to send to islanders precious water that might otherwise have been helpful elsewhere had it not been needed there. The long-awaited standpipe, which is only now being installed and is yet to deliver any water, still requires expensive and time-consuming carting.

I urge the minister and her department to work with the locals to find a workable solution to the immediate problem of the leaking barrages. Given that the now serious salinity problem cannot be rectified within six to 12 months at the very least, I also urge the government to liaise with islanders, farmers and residents about extending the mains water supply that already exists on the island.