

LOWER MURRAY SWAMPS – May 29th, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): I wish to speak today on the rehabilitation works on the Lower Murray swamps, which are part of the Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigation Areas program. The need for such a program was first raised as a possibility in the late nineties and was discussed with the then state Liberal government. It is part of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and would bring about the rehabilitation of river swampland that had been affected by decades of intensive farming.

When the current Labor government took over the program, it conducted a desktop review of the proposals from an office in Sydney—quite remote from the Lower Murray swamps in the region upstream and downstream from Murray Bridge. In subsequent consultations, Lower Murray irrigators were told that they could not discuss issues raised in these consultative meetings with fellow irrigators. Later involvement of the Lower Murray Irrigators Group facilitated a manageable cost-sharing arrangement for farmers.

A distinction was drawn between private and government irrigators, and it became apparent that the Labor government wanted to get out of irrigating river flats at all and that this was its main focus, rather than pursuing a sustainable future for this very productive land. Early on, it was Minister Hill's portfolio, and there was a great deal of upset and unrest, as many irrigators found his approach more confrontational than consultative.

The program eventually began about 3½ years ago and has had a difficult time progressing. Last week, the minister launched the first successful rehabilitation area at Cowirra (and I am still waiting for my invitation; I guess it is in the mail) and announced that, 'It has been an incredibly long journey and has had significant ups and downs.' As far as many of the irrigators are concerned, the slowness of completion has come about, in part, because of what they see as the department's intransigence and inflexibility in negotiations with landholders who, it must be said, are keen to see the land rehabilitated for the sake of the river's health and for irrigation efficiencies. With the 1 July deadline looming, some irrigators still find themselves at risk of being cut off for a variety of reasons, including finding contractors able to complete the works.

Many other issues have been raised in a review of the program. Mental health concerns were not considered until they became all too obvious. One case involves a dairy farmer who went missing for quite a few days in the region because the mental impact was not assessed at all by the government on this issue. Some levee banks are at risk of collapsing, as the lack of moisture on the adjacent land has allowed drying and cracking, and some of these cracks in this country can extend up to three metres deep. There is quite a risk to this land, which has had a significant hydraulic or continuous wetting effect, that it will not go on and that it will upset the natural landscape.

Some contracts have been paid for but are yet to be signed off. One contractor has not had any of his works signed off by the Environmental Protection Authority. There are also reports of other works that have not been delivered properly. Discrepancies exist in funding amounts, and people are being told that there are not funds to complete works. I have one constituent who has over 150 hectares of works that have not been funded because of the way the government juggles the numbers to get away from funding him for about half a million dollars.

Perhaps most damning of all is the availability of the all-important meters which is making a mockery of the government's declaration on the 30 June deadline: 'No meter, no water'. It will be a huge issue in undeveloped country. Up to 500 hectares are able to be rehabilitated, with un-rehabilitated land occurring in random strips throughout the region. People with a genuine interest in rehabilitating land are not been funded and buy-out arrangements have left some land un-rehabilitated with no further funds to finish the job. The cost is way beyond the means of farmers alone.

With the guarantee of federal support due to expire in June 2008, a thorough and complete review is urgently required to see this vital program through. The program does not have to be funded as part of the South Australian Murray-Darling Basin Natural Resources Management Board investment strategy.

Question - June 7th **Mr PEDERICK (Hammond):** Can the Minister for the River Murray advise how many irrigators in the Long Flat and Burdett irrigation areas near Murray Bridge are still to receive their rehabilitation deeds? The Long Flat Irrigation Trust still has not been able to strike acceptable terms with the Department of Water, Land and Biodiversity Conservation to proceed with the rehabilitation of land, which is desired by both parties. According to the irrigators concerned, these negotiations have been drawn out by what they perceive to be the department's inflexibility and apparent erroneous handling of the detail.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD (Minister for the River Murray): I thank the member for Hammond for his questions. I will seek the details from the department and bring them back to the house.