

Wellington Weir Proposal – February 6, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): When the Premier announced his weir proposal, the figure was \$20 million. Since then, it has become apparent that this was a wild guess and an ill-conceived plan. I will give my thoughts on the proposed weir and site. I believe that one option, which is probably the main option, is 2.1 kilometres of rock walls with a gap of 500 metres left for sheet steel piling in the middle. About 10 kilometres of roads would need to be constructed coming in from either side and approximately 1.5 kilometres of causeway across a reed swamp. The present causeway has mud sitting on two metres of sand which will obviously leak. I believe that, as stated in question time, there will be 700 000 tonnes of rock dumped into the river. We have information that a contractor has quoted \$15 million to quarry, transport and deliver rock to the site. At the eastern end is Wellington Lodge, the take-off point for the eastern wing, which is right next to the home of a workman and his family. Rock dumping will go on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Has the government factored in the cost of relocating this man and his family?

The effect on the Lower Lakes communities will be huge. Local councils and community groups from Meningie to Goolwa have come out against the weir. There are many implications. The obvious one is the environmental implications for the lakes and the Coorong (which is a Ramsar wetland), and there are also the employment, health and social implications. A question to be asked is whether a full environmental impact statement on the effects of the weir is being commissioned.

Adelaide's reservoirs hold about 198 gegalitres and, at present, they are at 56 per cent capacity at least. Pumps are currently running flat out to lift reservoir capacity, and I applaud that action. SA Water is doing the right thing by dropping the pump off-takes 1.5 metres. I believe that we should be looking at ways in which to lower the pumps or to get more water to the pumps using coffer dams and external pumps to keep the water up. Even if the water level in the Murray drops to the natural weir level between Wellington Lodge and Nalpa Station, the capacity from Lock 1 to Wellington is 1 305 gegalitres. We need to access this weir pool.

A lot of questions need to be answered before any rock is dumped on the river bed. Will the water become too saline and toxic for use, either by irrigators or for recreation; will the Ramsar wetlands of the Coorong and Lower Lakes be destroyed; which animal, plant and fish species will become extinct; and will the economic and social character of the 30 000 people below Wellington ever recover?

Another factor is the wind-driven surge that provides life to the lower river by pushing up to a metre of water as far as Lock 1, helping to flush the river system. Even a partial weir will severely affect this vital action forever. I urge the government to look at all possible options before it makes another State Bank-like decision and begins to build the weir, which will have ramifications on the health of the River Murray for years to come. The possibility of this weir's costing \$100 million plus may mean that the government suddenly finds ways to access water at the four off-takes below Lock 1.

We should learn from history. The Aral Sea in Russia was the fourth largest lake in the world before the government decided to interfere with nature. It thought it could grow cotton and rice in the desert, and it fiddled with nature and interfered with the lake's tributaries. By late in the twentieth century, three-quarters of the lake had disappeared, taking with it the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people. Large ships now sit on a dry, dusty plain, rusting away. The regional climate has changed: it experiences colder winters and hotter summers. The land is too saline for any growth and huge dust storms are common, and the government blames nature. If that is not ringing any bells on the other side of the house, members of the government should get their hearing tested.

This government keeps blaming the drought. When the river's flow returns to normal and the effects of this incomplete weir wall become more obvious, will the government still blame the drought? When the river floods—as it inevitably will—and flood waters cause chaos above the constriction of the incomplete weir wall, will the government still blame the drought? I urge the government to help nature to overcome this drought, and not set the state up for another man-made disaster. It is a 19th century solution to a 21st century problem.