

Estimates 13/10/10

Advisory Board of Agriculture – Food Council

Mr PEDERICK: I refer to Budget Paper 6, page 74, and the saving of \$2.1 million which has been noted. Part of this is the cessation of government support for the Advisory Board of Agriculture. This board is the governing body of the Agricultural Bureau and provides policy advice and recommendations on agricultural matters to the state government and direct advice to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries. Where will the government and the minister get their advice in the future, will they still take advice from this body, if it still manages to exist, and does this withdrawal of funding affect the advisory board's viability?

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: Fortuitously, I flagged where I intend to take both the department and the sources of external advice in an article in *The Advertiser* today. We have made a decision that the Food Council has probably run its race. The article, by Nigel Austin, indicated that there had been resignations from industry heavy hitters on the basis that they did not believe the Food Council was getting results, and I was very much aware of that sentiment within industry.

I have determined, and we are currently working up the proposition, that, in place of the Food Council and a large number of advisory boards, including the Advisory Board of Agriculture, we will constitute what may ultimately be called the Agribusiness and Seafood Board. In establishing that board I intend to ensure that I not only have advice from people within industry who have something of value to say but also use their expertise to do what is done by the Economic Development Board—which is to determine opportunities for agribusiness and fisheries/aquaculture and economic development opportunities for South Australia and then pursue those opportunities with some enthusiasm.

What we are doing is reconstituting the structures that advise me to give them a more clearly defined role which, in addition to letting me know what is going on on the ground, basically assist me in identifying strategic industry or business opportunities within South Australia and then using PIRSA as a facilitator and DTED to attract investment into those particular opportunities. So, the Advisory Board of Agriculture may continue to exist if its members see that it has a future, but it will not be funded by the South Australian government.

Mr PEDERICK: In light of that answer, it seems to me that the government decided long ago that the advisory board will cease to exist and that both it and the Premier's Food Council (which has had plenty of hoopla in the past twelve years of its existence) are not needed for any advice. I think that the government, in light of the present cuts to PIRSA, needs plenty of advice from these bodies. I note from the quoted article in the paper this morning that the government has no real direction at this stage as to where this new body is going and who is going to take part in it, and that bothers me deeply. To turn its back on such a body as the Advisory Board of Agriculture I think is disgusting.

Will the cessation of funding affect the operations of the Agriculture Bureau of South Australia? Can you assure regional South Australia that this cessation of funding to the Advisory Board of Agriculture will not compromise the level of support given to community development building capabilities and skills and policy development?

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: I am going to pass this over to Don Plowman, but I would like to make the comment that I think we have an opportunity to redefine what we do as an agency. I was very much of the view that the Food Council had lost focus, but there are organisations out there, like Elders, operating in the agribusiness sector at the upper levels of the Australian economy, and we really do not have a mechanism to call in that expertise.

I have a concern that, in states other than South Australia, there are a lot of activities occurring that I do not see occurring on the ground in South Australia. My intention, with this new agribusiness and fisheries council (whatever we ultimately call it—it will certainly have 'agribusiness' in it) will certainly have a focus on not only driving the finished food sector, which I believe is where the Premier's Food Council ultimately settled, but it will go back to having focus on what happens prior to farm gate. It will be a council that will cover all aspects of South Australian agribusiness and fisheries activities. On the specific matters that you refer to, I will pass it over to Don Plowman.

Dr PLOWMAN: In specific relation to the Advisory Board of Agriculture and the bureau movement, the advisory board has two functions: one is to provide advice to the minister, and the second one is the governance arrangements for the bureau movement. There is no reason for the bureau movement's arrangements to change at all as a result of these arrangements. In fact, we would see the bureau as a very effective and extensive network through the rural community, with which PIRSA and other government agencies will continue to collaborate and use to deliver information and to seek advice.

In terms of skills development, we have a very broad range of programs, and they include both our direct programs, but also where we collaborate with regional bodies, local governments and industry groups in the development of programs that create capacity and capability within the rural community, and we will continue to do that.

Mr PEDERICK: I refer to Budget Paper 6, page 74, the cessation of funding. I note the minister mentioned the replacement body, which is as yet nameless and frameless. What funding, if any, has been provided for the replacement body for the food council, and does it appear in the budget?

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: The way that we intend to handle this is to reorient existing resources. We have a case management unit within the department, which I think is an exemplary example of what the Public Service can do to facilitate investment in this state. It is there to identify investment opportunities and to facilitate them by removing all possible boundaries. It has had a large number of successes to date.

I intend to fully utilise a resource such as that in servicing the objectives of this new council. So, I am fully confident that we have the resources existing within the department, and it is just a matter of harnessing those. We have an extremely high skill level amongst the individuals in that particular unit and in our policy units, and it is just a simple matter of harnessing their particular expertise for a more focused investment-driven set of potential outcomes.

Mr PEDERICK: Has funding been allocated directly in the budget for it? These things will not just establish on their own.

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: Member for Hammond, I think I made the point that my view is that resources are there. We set ourselves up until 31 December to determine the structure and objectives of this new council. We are in the process of redefining the structure of the department. We have called in an external consultancy, the Nous Group, who I think are Melbourne-based who have done some work for the South Australian government.

I had experience with them when I was heading up the planning review. They came in and assisted in the restructuring of what was then Planning SA. They are on the ground at this particular point in time assisting the department in this restructuring activity. I am confident that the resources are there—they have been budgeted for; it is just basically reframing the organisational structure of the department and reorienting existing resources to a slight refocus of the department. They have been budgeted for within the overall budget context.

Mr VENNING: I have a general question, minister, on Budget Paper 2, across it all. I believe that the member for Hammond has already asked you this morning about the cutting of funds to the Advisory Board of Agriculture. I did not hear the answer; sorry, I had other distractions today. Minister, is there any chance to reverse this decision, or is there any way of finding alternative funding?

Also, while I am on my feet, I would like to put on the record our appreciation of the long service and leadership of Dr Don Plowman. I/we have appreciated his efforts on behalf of primary industries and rural people in general, particularly me, because we go back a long, long way—a long time before I came into this place.

The CHAIR: Thank you, member for Schubert. Minister, did you want to take that question on notice?

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: I will take it on notice. I am sure that the reference to Don was not a question. We do highly value his service.