

LOCUST PLAGUE

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (17:13): Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I congratulate you on taking your exalted position. My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries. What is the minister, and his department, doing to combat a locust plague across the state's farmland? Locust larvae must be sprayed with pesticide to prevent them hatching and destroying farmland. In the major locust plague of the year 2000 over 500,000 hectares of South Australian farmland was treated with insecticide in an effort to halt the locusts' advance. Some 420,000 hectares of this land was sprayed by the government of the day.

The conditions that spawned the current plague have been evident since early this year; however, the opposition has been advised that the government has not committed the personnel, the pesticide or the equipment required to combat the plague before it potentially wipes out billions of dollars worth of crop and pasture.

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN (Napier—Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Minister for Forests, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for the Northern Suburbs) (17:15): I welcome the question—

An honourable member interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: A couple of years with Elders at an international level does one wonders in coming into this portfolio. I welcome the question from the member for Hammond. I was in the Riverland a fortnight ago and met with the new member. I spent an hour with him giving what I hope was a reasonably substantial briefing on the Riverland Futures Task Force project. I attended a number of meetings and at one of those meetings that particular proposition was put to me. I am also aware that on either Monday or Tuesday night there was a meeting of about 250 farmers in the Riverland which was reported extensively in the rural media and at which the same proposition was advanced. The response from PIRSA officers at that meeting is exactly the same as the reply I will give. We have to deal with this issue in a manner which results in what we hope will be around 90 per cent eradication. At the moment, these locusts are widespread and dealing with them by way of pesticide on a statewide basis would be both extremely expensive and highly ineffective. We also know—

Mr Pederick interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: The advice that I have been given by technical officers within PIRSA is that, with the onset of a period of cold and wet weather which we are currently experiencing, it will kill what locusts are currently swarming. Tomorrow I will be seeking advice from PIRSA officers in the field as to what the effect of this cold spell has been. Has it dealt with the issue of swarming? I am expecting the reply to be that it has largely dealt with the issue.

What we have in front of us is the emergence of literally billions of locusts come spring. We are putting in place a strategy. There have been 11 major locust plagues since European settlement. I am advised that this is probably different from the previous 11 in that, with the previous 11 (or the bulk of them) the swarming came from the north-west and impacted on grazing country. The response was fairly straightforward: we went through with aerial spraying. What is happening in this particular instance—and it could be the result of long-term drought and then heavy rain in the Gulf Country to our north—is that we are facing a locust plague on two fronts (which we have never had to confront before), one of which is impacting on high quality horticultural and broadacre land around the Riverland and the Mallee.

It is a challenge that we have not faced in the recent past. To deal with this particular issue we are dividing the state into two fronts, if I could refer to it in that way, one of which is the Upper North grazing land which will be dealt with by way of aerial spraying. The other front is the Mallee and the Riverland, which, in some instances, will be dealt with by way of an aerial onslaught but, given the nature of the chemical that has to be employed on cropping land, it cannot be used close to waterways or urban centres. So, there will have to be large, widespread utilisation of particularly local government resources and the resources of farmers to do spraying on the ground.

I think members opposite are also aware that, with the onset of warm weather, these locusts basically group together. I am informed that, in some instances, you can have a line running

10 or 15 kilometres long by six or seven metres wide. We have to wait for that phenomenon to occur. We will map the location of these particular concentrations of locusts. I think we have something like a two or three week window of opportunity to attack them while they have grouped together in this manner.

At the moment we are securing the chemical. Western Australia has advised us that they have a large stockpile which is available to South Australia. We are booking the aircraft and I am travelling to Canberra to meet with the Australian Locust Plague Commission. I am also meeting with my New South Wales and Victorian counterparts to ensure that we have a coordinated attack in early spring. The last thing I want to see is that South Australia has its house in order but that the Victorians have failed to deal with the issue in the Victorian Mallee and we have swarms across the border—and similarly with New South Wales.

I am hoping within a fortnight to have concluded those meetings and to have gained the assurance that the other two states and the commonwealth are doing their part. I will also be seeking assurance that the chemical is on order because it has to be imported. We have the surety of knowing there is a large stockpile in Western Australia.

I also want to be assured that the aircraft are being secured. The Country Fire Service are going to assist us. They have expertise in the targeted water bombing of fires and will be employing that technology and technique in the field, on the ground, directing aircraft into these particular concentrations of locusts.

I am prepared, at any time, to give members of the opposition thorough briefings, because this is an issue that is going to impact on the electorates of a large number of people on the other side of the house. I will be available at any time to sit down and listen to your concerns. When I come to your electorates—because I intend to get out in the field to be doubly assured that local government and our agencies in the field are dealing with this—I will be calling on you, explaining in some depth what is happening locally and asking for your feedback. I want to be assured that you are firmly of the view that, locally, efforts are being put in place to deal with this issue come spring.