

RIVER MURRAY - Algal bloom threat; February 5, 2009

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (14:49): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I promise to be on my best behaviour. My question is for the Minister for Water Security. How much water does the government have in reserve to flush the River Murray and counter the effects of algal blooms that have already started happening in the weir pools below the South Australian/Victorian border?

It was reported recently that an algal bloom had appeared near Waikerie. It has been suggested that this may well be the first of many as the river flow diminishes.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD (Chaffey—Minister for the River Murray, Minister for Water Security) (14:50): The South Australian government is being very cautious in its approach to the management of algal blooms. For the record, I would like to correct the explanation that the member gave to his question. There was not an algal bloom reported near Waikerie: there was a high count of algal micro-organisms reported in one monitoring spot. That does not constitute a bloom. As was advised by the—

Members interjecting:

The SPEAKER: Order!

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: It would be useful if the opposition would seek to inform themselves about these matters properly rather than trying to confuse and disturb the community. If they would like to listen to the answer they may very—

Members interjecting:

The SPEAKER: Order!

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: It would be useful if the opposition listened to the answers.

Mr Williams interjecting:

The SPEAKER: The member for MacKillop.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: The incident to which the member for Hammond is referring is that results of regular monitoring which is happening up and down the length of the river exposed that at Waikerie there was, in one instance, a higher count than the reportable account, which is 2,000. It was actually at 2,220 units. That does not constitute a bloom. We notified the Department of Health, which investigated the matter and declared it not to be a risk to human health. A subsequent monitoring at that same site on 28 January demonstrated that the algal bloom count had dropped down to around 900, well below the 2,000 units of interest. What we are doing—

Members interjecting:

The SPEAKER: Order!

Ms Chapman interjecting:

The SPEAKER: The deputy leader will come to order!

The Hon. M.J. Atkinson interjecting:

The SPEAKER: Order! The Attorney will come to order as well. Members on my left will not pepper the minister with constant interjections. If they want to ask the minister follow-up questions, I am more than happy to give them the call, by way of either a question or a supplementary, but I will not have the minister being peppered with interjections which are purely designed to interrupt her. The Minister for Water Security.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: Allocated to South Australia is 696 gigalitres for dilution flow for the duration of this 12-month period. We are managing that 696 gigalitres to ensure that we have enough in reserve at any one time. It will differ in quantity month by month, but we are managing that dilution flow to ensure that we have reserves available to us.

At this point in time I think it is in the vicinity of around 50 gigalitres; however, that does change from month to month, depending on evaporation levels. It is held in reserve to ensure that we can manage flows through the River Murray system. If we were to see a bloom that caused a health risk in South Australia then we would have sufficient water to be able to act and flush the system to enable the algal bloom to be dispersed.

These are very difficult and trying times. Algal blooms are a huge risk. We have a very slow-flowing river. We have very little water available in the system and we have very high temperatures. All the elements are there for an algal bloom to occur, just as they were last year. We managed through last year and we are endeavouring to manage through this year. We will do our best to make sure that the contingencies that we have in place are adequate to ensure that an algal bloom risk is not a risk to drinking water supplies.