

Estimates – 11 Oct 2010

River Murray levee banks

Mr PEDERICK: I refer to Budget Paper 4, Volume 4, Sub-program 2.2: River Management and Operations. The performance commentary in paragraph 6 refers to the riverbank collapse hazard program, in particular, that the plan focuses on hazard management, including mitigation and prevention works.

What is the government doing about the serious deterioration that is becoming evident in levee banks along the river below Lock 1, some of which are already showing signs of major cracking and failure, which has already lead to serious flooding at Pompoota, and now threatens many other river communities and businesses?

The Hon. P. CAICA: I thank the honourable member for his question. Of course, being the local member there, he would know that the cracks and the deterioration of those banks has occurred for a long time and is one of the consequences of the unprecedented drought that this state and nation found itself in. I also make the point that the problem is now being exacerbated because we are now having water—for which we are thankful—coming down the channel and through the system. I was told that on the weekend the levels below Lock 1 are back to what is their historical level and people are very pleased about that.

An honourable member: Absolutely.

The Hon. P. CAICA: Well, I would like to take credit for it, but if you take credit for the water you have to take credit for the drought and I am certainly not going to take credit for the drought. What we can take credit for, I think, is the way in which we have managed the consequences of the drought, the way in which the state has worked toward making sure that the river—that river that is under our control—lives to fight another day, and that includes the Lower Lakes as well.

The riverbank collapse on the River Murray below Lock 1 emerged as a state hazard largely due to the unprecedented low water levels from 2008 to 2010, as I mentioned. The collapse has a program, to which my friend refers, and is administered by the Department for Water and is responsible for preparing for, recording and investigating riverbank collapses and incidents and publicly maintaining an online incident register. The program provides advice to the local landowners on required site mitigation activities in the interest of public safety.

The hazard plan provides the framework for maintaining public safety. A riverbank collapse communications plan has been developed and implemented to deliver important safety information to the public and now, with river levels below Lock 1 restored to the long-term pool level, the stability of the riverbanks is being restored.

I am advised that the stability of the riverbanks is being restored. Where riverbanks become unstable during drought conditions, further collapses may occur. We are going to spend \$1.286 million during 2010-11 on this particular matter.

In regard to the ones you have identified as a major breakthrough breaks or breaches, I understand that a significant amount of that water in the main occasions is actually seeping underneath, more so than over the top. We have not seen any

breaches over the top except for one, but again, it created no problems to life or property.

What we actually want is to contain the water behind or inside the channel because my big fear previously was that, if we are talking about wasting water, if the banks did breach in the way in which some people thought they may, we would have had a significant amount of water that would have been wasted, if you like, onto those plains out there.

We are monitoring it, Adrian, and I appreciate the calls we get to our office that alert us to what is going on there. I appreciate the calls that we get from you, and I think that on those occasions we have returned those calls to the people who work that land. Part of it has been who is responsible because we know that roughly 70 per cent of the levee banks are owned by the state; the other 30 per cent are privately-owned.

One of the questions I asked earlier was, 'Why the heck aren't we repairing them now?' But we did do some work and, in fact, because of the drought, any repair work we were doing was exacerbating the problem anyway; it was not remedying it. As I understand it—and you know more than me—the influx of water can often be a good thing, too, because it starts that clay and that soil to—what was the word you used?

Mr PEDERICK: It helps start to seal it up.

The Hon. P. CAICA: Yes, seal it up. We are continuing to monitor that. We hope that, naturally, it will do that, but there is still no doubt that over a period of time we are going to have to continue to do work on those levee banks to ensure that the damage that has occurred, where it is going to create a problem, is fixed as a priority and that, where it is not so much problem, it still gets fixed over a period of time.