

River Murray, Weir, Lower Murray Reclaimed Irrigtn Areas

Tuesday May 29, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): My question is to the Minister for Water Security. Will secondary industries along the River Murray, which are extracting water from the river as licensees, be treated as irrigators, or will they be treated like industry in Adelaide with no restrictions?

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD (Minister for Water Security): The issue of how industry will be treated under the water restrictions, should they apply on 1 July, is currently under negotiation, and that information will be provided once the policy is determined.

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): Again, my question is to the Minister for Water Security. How does the government propose to maintain the quality of river water held above the proposed weir near Wellington once the weir gate is shut? The opposition has been advised that, once the river's flow is stopped, salinity and toxicity levels upstream of the weir will soar, promoting blue-green algae growth and accumulating 1 000 tonnes of salt, which normally passes Wellington daily, to be disbursed by the Lower Lakes.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD (Minister for Water Security): The Wellington weir will be subject to the Environment Protection Biodiversity Act of the commonwealth government. We will be sending the referral to the commonwealth government. It will be putting in place a process for an environmental assessment of the system. The issue we are facing in South Australia next year—and I mean the next water year commencing 1 July—if the drought continues is one of a lack of flow across the border which will create enormous problems for us in relation to water quality, whether or not we have a weir.

Mr PEDERICK: My question is to the Minister for Water Security. Why did the government not plan for the leakage of saltwater through the barrages at the Lower Lakes; and now that the water adjacent to the barrages is unsuitable what is the government doing to help local residents and farmers?

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: Because I was not around in 1930 when they built the barrages I do not know why they did not build them for reverse head—which we are currently having with the low flows. Unfortunately, when the barrages were built they were not built for the current situation of no rain. We have an extenuating drought circumstance occurring at present that will result in very low inflows to the state. We have been working with the Lower Lakes communities for a considerable time in relation to alternative water supply mechanisms. We have built standpipes at Meningie on the end of the Narrung Jetty, Hindmarsh Island and Goolwa. We are putting in a pipeline to Clayton. We are doing all we can to assist communities around the lake that will be significantly impacted by the low flows coming into South Australia as a consequence of extreme drought circumstances.

Mr PEDERICK: My question is to the Minister for Water Security. Why has the government declined the offer of experienced advice about the river, its problems and options from one of the most knowledgeable groups along the river? The Murray Skippers Association has over 80 members, whose combined experience on the river exceeds 2 000 years and draws on knowledge accumulated by several generations of river skippers.

The Hon. K.O. Foley interjecting:

Mr PEDERICK: Obviously, the Treasurer is not a riverboat man. This group has provided assistance to other government departments on maritime and navigation matters. It has made numerous offers to contribute to the debate with information about the river and suggestions to improve its flow, holding capacity and condition. None of these offers has been taken up.

The Hon. K.A. MAYWALD: During this time of extreme drought we are seeking advice from a range of different sources, including the community. The community has had the opportunity to participate in many of the different public forums we have held. We are taking a significant amount of advice from across the nation in relation to managing the current drought situation, and we are working collaboratively with the best scientific heads around the nation. We are doing that in conjunction with the federal government. We have established a senior officials group, which includes the Prime Minister's officers and South Australian officers, as well as officers from New South Wales, Queensland, ACT and Victoria. We are seeking advice through the Murray-Darling Basin Commission. I assure members opposite that there are plenty of experts out there providing us with information.