



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Great Artesian Basin

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Evertton—ALP) (Minister for Environment and Heritage and Minister for Natural Resources) (10.03 a.m.), by leave: The Great Artesian Basin is one of our most valuable natural assets. It lies beneath 20% of Australia across four States. It is the largest source of artesian freshwater in the world. It is of enormous environmental, economic, cultural and social significance for Queensland and the rest of Australia. It provides water needs for more than 200,000 Australians—for the pastoral industry, rural communities, mining companies and indigenous people.

However, the Great Artesian Basin is under great stress and its viability is being threatened by enormous wastage from uncontrolled bores that have been taken for granted for more than 100 years. Alarming drops in artesian pressure are threatening entire ecosystems and reducing economic opportunities. This trend is one that has to be reversed. If it is not, some time next century it could lead to one of the greatest environmental disasters that this country has seen.

Last year Queensland took a lead role in addressing this problem by forming the Great Artesian Basin Consultative Council. Its chair is a western Queensland pastoralist, John Seccombe. The Commonwealth, Northern Territory, South Australian, New South Wales and Queensland Governments are all represented, as are local government, the community, indigenous, environmental and industry groups. The first task of the consultative council has been to prepare a draft strategic management plan to save the basin and protect the economic benefits Queensland derives from it. The plan has recently been endorsed by the Beattie Cabinet and it will be released by me and other State Ministers in Adelaide at the Murray/Darling Basin Ministerial Council meeting tomorrow. Public submissions are being called on this plan until the end of April next year. The draft plan proposes a shared responsibility between both the public and private sectors. It also includes proposals for education programs, clarification of water entitlements, greater monitoring of water pressures and water use.

We have no choice other than to pick up the pace of rehabilitating uncontrolled bores and improving water distribution systems. We need better management practices and better institutional arrangements. It is a partnership between the Federal and State Governments, industry and water users which will be vital if we are to find solutions in the future. Full implementation of the draft plan could save up to 300,000 megalitres of water a year—equivalent to the volume of water in Sydney Harbour. It will stop the decline in artesian pressures and allow for new uses, such as mining developments, allow the environment to recover and will open up economic benefits, such as ecotourism.

The Queensland Great Artesian Basin Advisory Committee, BHP and the Queensland Government have also developed a new initiative called Adopt a Bore. This promotes corporate industry involvement in the repair of uncontrolled bores. BHP is providing significant industry leadership with its involvement. The sponsorship is a clear industry commitment towards rehabilitation of the Great Artesian Basin. The draft strategic plan which I will launch tomorrow has significance to all of Australia but especially to Queensland, because 70% of the Great Artesian Basin lies under our State. Its rehabilitation is also crucial to maintaining the social, cultural and environmental values of people who live in this arid region of our State. The draft strategic management plan for the Great Artesian Basin is a positive step towards Queensland's economic and environmental wellbeing and the Beattie Government's aim of creating new jobs and securing jobs and opportunities for communities into the future.