



Speech by

Mr M. HORAN

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APPROPRIATION BILLS [ESTIMATES COMMITTEE E]

Mr HORAN (Toowoomba South—NPA) (Leader of the Opposition) (2.35 p.m.): Although I was not a member of this committee, I join in the debate—along with other members—in thanking those committee staff members who made it a good process. I want to speak particularly on some of the issues relating to the DNR&M and, in particular, the issues regarding SunWater.

There is some considerable concern these days in various parts of the state about the water pricing system that SunWater has implemented under the COAG arrangements. Water was supposed to be provided at the actual cost of provision, allowing for the operational and maintenance costs of that water and no more. But a price regime is being put forward and promoted which appears to the irrigators to be well and truly above that. They have great concerns about the fact that the board of SunWater does not include an experienced irrigator who could provide some good practical knowledge. They are concerned that the SunWater administration itself consists of too many staff and is therefore becoming administratively costly, thereby forcing up the price of water. They are also of the belief—and I think they are right—that there is a dividend to be delivered to the government as part of SunWater being a government owned corporation.

So all in all, adding all that together, this has created some real concerns amongst irrigators, especially in places such as Mareeba, Emerald, the Burdekin and Proserpine areas, and in the Bundaberg City Council, where the water charges being proposed in that pricing regime are way over the top. That is one of the real problems of this government, and it is something that certainly has to be addressed, and this estimates debate provides the opportunity to do just that.

I also want to make comment about the Great Artesian Basin and the lack of funding in this particular budget towards the process of capping some of those bores. One of the greatest natural resources in the world is the underground water that has been provided for sustenance in the outback areas of Queensland for many, many years. Recently, I was talking to some very experienced people in those areas, including Cloncurry. Some of the managers of the bigger pastoral stations out there, such as the Stanbroke Pastoral Company, have a great concern. They are ordinary hardworking managers of properties who rely upon the bore systems. They have great concerns that this program is slowing down. And if there is anything that can save that special part of our environment it is the process of bringing the bores under control. This needs a regular contribution by the state government, along with the contributions that are being made by the federal government. The federal government is doing its share by putting forward funding, but this sort of funding is simply not coming through in this budget from the state government.

The water management plans—the WAMPs—have been a serious problem in Queensland, particularly in the Condamine-Balonne area. The government was forced to withdraw from a recent court case because the science that it was putting forward in that case was not correct. That is what the irrigators along those streams have been saying for years. They are paying themselves to get the proper hydrological science. They are paying to get their figures right and to do their best to maintain a good healthy river and use only the amount of water that is actually available, but they are battling against inaccurate science.

The WAMP has the potential to take away the asset value of these properties. The asset value of these irrigation properties is a combination of the value of the land, the improvements to the land

and its water allocation. The WAMP has the potential to take away the asset value of these people's properties, the ability of their property to produce and the security of their water supply. If anything has to be right, it is these WAMPs. Everybody is prepared to work in to produce a healthy water environment in the Condamine-Balonne system. They just want the other side, that is the government, to do the same and to have some honesty and accuracy in the way in which the WAMPs are prepared.

There is also a lot of concern about the management of weeds. I was speaking to people at Cloncurry who were concerned about the weeds in the Channel Country in the outback. Again, we do not see the amount of funds being allocated to that area that there should be. DNR should also be looking at speeding up the EIS process and the river action plans in many areas, but particularly in that area around the Paradise Dam and the Walla Weir. At the moment, that process has been held up. Also, the government lacks the commitment to fund the construction of those facilities—only \$4 million for the Walla Weir. However, such facilities, not only there but also in other parts of the state, are held up because of the EIS and RAPS.
