NATIVE FISH

24 October 2007

The Hon. A.L. EVANS: As the minister and members are no doubt aware, this week is National Water Week—a week to promote the protection and conservation of our precious water resources. In the midst of the present crippling drought, National Water Week takes on considerably heightened significance as we not only consider the protection and conservation of the environment but also ensure water security for our own future and the future of our families and children.

In various waterways in this state—the most significant of which is the Murray River—considerable work has been done to improve native fish stocks. I understand that as we hold back water in the river and cut environmental flows to wetlands, and water levels decrease through evaporation and use for domestic, industrial and horticultural purposes, this artificial manipulation of waterways is generally not favourable to the spawning and population increase of native fish. It encourages the strengthening of introduced species, such as the European carp. Family First supports, first and foremost, water security but we are concerned to ensure that the government is doing everything it can to ensure that the good work that has been done in conserving native fish species is not undone due to the drought. My questions are:

1. To what extent is the current method of management of water resources in our waterways affecting the survival of native species in our waterways?

2. What steps is the minister taking to protect the survival and strengthening of native fish species numbers?

The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health) (15:08): Indeed, the drought is having a catastrophic impact on all aspects of our life and society, not only economically but also socially and environmentally. A continuation of current drought conditions is likely to have a significant impact on native fish species in the Murray-Darling watercourse. Two species of native fish—in particular, the Yarra pygmy perch and the Murray hardyhead—live in the Lower Lakes. High temperatures and no rain are likely to place them in a critically endangered situation. Both species of fish are listed as vulnerable under the Australian government's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

The Yarra pygmy perch is currently protected under the Fisheries Act, as well. The Murray hardyhead is not protected under the Fisheries Act. Populations of the Murray hardyhead do occur in other parts of Australia, although the population of the Yarra pygmy perch in the Lower Lakes have a distinct genetic line and are in greater abundance than in other areas.

To minimise the impact of endangerment of these species, according to the last report I received, a total of 39 Yarra pygmy perch were translocated from the Finnis River and northern shores of Hindmarsh Island to an off-site holding facility. Further rescue attempts are also being undertaken, bringing the number of fish in captivity up to about 130, I understand. Obviously this is a high risk strategy. However, so far, the fish are reported to be doing well.

DEH has also been developing proposals to safeguard critical habitat and individual populations of several threatened species of fish across the state and is assessing the status of most targeted populations on a regular basis. The Australian broadshell tortoise is also currently listed as vulnerable under the threatened species schedule in the National Parks and Wildlife Act. Conversely, this species could benefit from the drought as receding water levels increase foraging opportunities, with small fish and insects becoming more accessible to those sorts of species. Habitat change, predation on eggs and young by foxes and human interference are having a greater effect on this species than the drought.

A number of strategies have been undertaken to improve the quality of our coastal watercourses, including government investment in the upgrade of the Christies Beach waste water treatment plant to assist in reducing the nutrient load going out to the marine environment; waterproofing the south, which is aiming to increase the use of stormwater and also waste water, therefore reducing discharge to sea; and the Adelaide Mount Lofty Ranges NRM board has put together a task force which is aiming to reduce sediment discharge by Christies Creek into Gulf St Vincent. There are a number of strategies which result in improving the quality of our waters and protecting our fish species, including our native fish species.