



- Speech -

GLEN ELMES

Member for Noosa

Shadow Minister for Climate Change & Sustainability

Hansard – Tuesday, 24 November 2009

Matters of Public Interest – Department of Environment & Resource Management

Mr ELMES (Noosa--LNP) (12.09 pm): This afternoon I rise to speak about the grave concerns that I hold for the environment of Queensland as it suffers blow after blow from a Labor government that is interested only in withdrawing funds from front-line services. The reported deaths today of thousands of marine species at a lake at Beachmere near Bribie Island north of Brisbane is a clear indication of how this failing is harming the environment.

Residents of the area have complained for weeks about the smell emanating from a sewage pumping station that the Moreton Bay Regional Council has been working on for the past three months. The smell is nothing compared to what confronted them today: whiting, mangrove jacks, crabs, prawns, puffer fish all floating on the surface of this lake, all dead.

Could anything have been done to stop this disaster from occurring? We will never know, because the EPA failed to act in the three weeks between when it was first alerted to this impending disaster and today's outcome. Residents have contacted the EPA to report the problems at Beachmere.

Residents who have lived in the area for over seven years and who have never encountered such a foul odour emanating from this pumping station have done the right thing in contacting the EPA to voice their concerns. What has occurred? Nothing? No-one has responded to those residents. No-one has told those residents what the problem may be.

Ms JONES: I rise to a point of order. The honourable member is misleading the House. The EPA has gone out to investigate this morning.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Wendt): Order! Minister, that is not a point of order at this stage.

Ms JONES: So if he is misleading the House, what do I do?

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: You have to write to the Speaker.

Ms JONES: I will write to the Speaker. The EPA has gone out this morning--DERM.

Mr ELMES: I was referring to what happened prior to this morning's fish kill. No-one has told these residents what the problem may be and now the environment is paying the price.

If we want to know why the EPA is failing to protect the environment, we need only to examine its annual report for 2008-09. It shows that the EPA employed an additional 72 administrative staff while ranger and technical staff numbers decreased. That decrease is on top of environmental funding falling in each of the past three years. The EPA annual report

for the period 1 July 2008 to 26 March 2009 tells the truth about Labor's preference for process over outcome. It shows that, while administrative staff numbers rose from 929 to 1,001 in the period, technical staff numbers fell from 82 to 78 and ranger numbers decreased from 810 to 807.

I also see from the report that there was an increase of \$12,000 spent on management consultants. That funding is further evidence that the government is spending more on management while reducing resources on the thin green line. It does not appear that the EPA has the staff to investigate incidents such as the one that occurred at Beachmere until it is too late. Far North Queensland has only one ranger to police 240,000 hectares of land and 29 kilometres of coastline. What chance do endangered dugongs and turtles have in this region?

Spin does not cut it. There must be action as well. A fundamental part of this action is an adequate number of park rangers. In September this year the minister was heard to say the following on the ABC Stateline program-- My view is we are doing a good job our staff are working very hard and I think that going forward we will continue to put in budget bids for increase in staff. It may be that the minister's bid for staffing increases is succeeding. However, it would seem that those extra staff are, in fact, bureaucrats polishing chairs in offices, filling out reports and forms and are not the desperately needed rangers to care for our national parks and forests.

How is it possible to believe claims of concerned stewardship by this Labor government when it so clearly demonstrates such ineffective management practices? A couple of weeks ago the minister announced that more than 172,000 hectares across Queensland would gain extra protection as nature refuges and that that will be done by means of voluntary conservation agreements with landholders. The government is to be congratulated on such an initiative. But it will have to be George Street administrators rather than qualified conservation officers who will partner the landholders in the care of these nature refuges.

It is not just park rangers who are under stress from dwindling resources but the parks themselves. I notice in the 2008-09 annual report that there was a significant underspend on maintenance per visitor in parks and forests. The March 2009 target was underspent by approximately 27 per cent per visitor.

Additionally, this annual report from the EPA asserts that there was a net operating surplus of \$4 million. Why was that money not spent on protecting the environment?

That lone ranger in Far North Queensland could have used the money to visit the areas that he is supposed to protect. What is being delivered is the message that, under Bligh and Labor, bureaucrats receive greater protection than Queensland's parks and forests and their endangered native species.

There is no good news here for the people of Beachmere or the environment.
