



House of Assembly

Tuesday 27 September 2011

QUESTIONS WITHOUT NOTICE

GREAT ARTESIAN BASIN

Mr PICCOLO (Light) (15:37): My question is to the Minister for Water. What is the South Australian government doing to ensure that the Great Artesian Basin's water is managed sustainably for future generations?

The Hon. P. CAICA (Colton—Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for the River Murray, Minister for Water) (15:37): I thank the honourable member for his important question.

The Great Artesian Basin is one of the largest underground water reservoirs in the world. It occupies over 1.7 million square kilometres beneath Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Historically, artesian water that came to the surface under natural pressure flowed uncontrolled into open drains and creeks for distribution to stock. However, up to 95 per cent of this water was wasted through evaporation and seepage.

By the early 1900s, it was recognised that this was unsustainable. There was a reduction in water pressure and volume due to the increasing number of free-flowing bores drilled. This, in turn, caused environmental damage. To assist in improving pressure in the basin, since 1999 the Australian state and territory governments have been funding the 15-year Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative (GABSI). This initiative aims to conserve and manage the basin's water resources on a sustainable basis.

The first two phases of this initiative were a big success in South Australia. Free-flowing artesian bores were rehabilitated and controlled and pipe watering systems were installed across the basin to maximise water savings. I am pleased to inform the house that works have recently commenced in South Australia on the third phase of this initiative. The government has committed a further \$1 million, matched by the federal government, to continue this important work into the third phase. This funding will help save water in the Great Artesian Basin and protect the region's precious ecosystems and industry.

South Australia is undertaking works to backfill two large free-flowing wells on the western side of the basin. South Australia will also rehabilitate a high pressure well in the centre of the basin. The capping of these two large free-flowing bore drains, alone, will preserve an additional 3.8 megalitres of water per day, or 45 litres per second of artesian groundwater. The state has also recently completed a program to reduce the number of leaking wells on five pastoral stations, and these works include replacing three artesian wells and backfilling eight uncontrolled wells.

Phase 3 of the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative will help to preserve the basin's water for where it is needed most, for the local pastoral community and the continuing to thrive mining and resources industry and, of course, for the region's very important ecosystems and tourism. These past and continuing efforts all help to recover artesian pressures and reduce water wastage. It is initiatives such as this one that are critical in minimising water losses and protecting our precious ecosystems.