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AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr JP Kelly MP (Chair)
Mrs J Gilbert MP
Mr R Katter MP
Mr JE Madden MP
Mr LL Millar MP
Mr PT Weir MP

Staff present:

Mr R Hansen (Committee Secretary)
Ms S Stephan (Assistant Committee Secretary)

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE AUDITOR- GENERAL REPORT 16—2015-16: FLOOD RESILIENCE OF RIVER CATCHMENTS

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 25 OCTOBER 2017

Brisbane

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Committee met at 8.59 am

CHAIR: I declare open this meeting of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. My name is Joe Kelly; I am the member for Greenslopes and the chair of the Agriculture and Environment Committee. With me here today are Mr Pat Weir, the deputy chair and member for Condamine; Mrs Julieanne Gilbert, the member for Mackay; Mr Lachlan Millar, the member for Gregory; Mr Jim Madden, the member for Ipswich West; and joining us shortly will be Mr Robbie Katter, the member for Mount Isa.

I remind everyone that these proceedings today are similar to parliament and are subject to the Legislative Assembly's standing rules and orders. The proceedings are being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the parliament's website. The media may be present and will be subject to my direction at all times. The media rules are endorsed by the committee and are available from committee staff if required. All those present today should note that it is possible you may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings. I would ask everyone to turn off their mobile phones. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in proceedings. As parliamentary proceedings, under the standing orders any person may be excluded from the hearing at my discretion or by order of the committee.

MILLIGAN, Mr Graeme, Executive Director, Resilience, Queensland Reconstruction Authority

CHAIR: The purpose of these hearings is to hear from the Queensland Reconstruction Authority. I would like to welcome Mr Graeme Milligan. We understand that your CEO, Mr Brendan Moon, could not be here today, but we do appreciate your time here. We are attempting to finalise our report in relation to the Auditor-General's report into flood resilience. Some of the committee members had questions around the role of your organisation. I would like to invite you to make an opening statement and then we will go to the committee for some questions.

Mr Milligan: Your questions were foreshadowed in an email to us. I recognise that it is a complex and challenging topic that we are working on, so I have some material here to go through to answer those questions. It is a fair bit of information, but I thought it would be useful for the committee because of the work that the Queensland Reconstruction Authority has done over the last six to 12 months to bring everybody up to date. With your leave, I have a few pages to go through. We will set it up, provide you with information, and then we will be happy to answer questions after that.

In terms of the response to the first question about the Queensland Reconstruction Authority's lead agency role, we are the lead agency responsible for statewide disaster recovery, resilience and mitigation policy. We are responsible for a number of key flood resilience initiatives that were previously the responsibility of the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning. We work closely with other state and local government agencies and key stakeholders to develop and implement best practice disaster resilience and recovery policy across Queensland. I will provide some examples of that going forward.

To support the recovery activities, which a lot of the resilience work is set up to do, our chief executive, Mr Moon, is the State Recovery Policy and Planning Coordinator, which is a new role. This assists in the rapid recovery of communities following natural disasters by working collaboratively in the disaster recovery and resilience environment to coordinate the efforts of government and non-government agencies, linking policy development with on-the-ground recovery.

We also chair the Queensland Flood Resilience Coordination Committee, which contributes to enhanced community resilience, safety and flood mitigation and prevention capability across Queensland communities in relation to freshwater floods. This committee has been established to bring together state agencies involved in managing flood risk as well as other key stakeholders from the Bureau of Meteorology, the Local Government Association of Queensland and the Insurance Council of Australia. I am painting a picture that this will take a very collaborative and multidisciplinary approach.

In July this year the Queensland Reconstruction Authority updated the original Queensland strategy for disaster resilience that was developed in 2014 to incorporate climate change risk and deliver a comprehensive all-hazards approach, including floods, to build disaster resilience throughout Queensland. The strategy was updated to include consideration of the impacts of climate change which are likely to exacerbate flooding.

The vision is for Queensland to be the most disaster-resilient state in Australia, and the strategy is underpinned by four key objectives: Queenslanders understanding their disaster risk, and we will have some examples of that with our Brisbane River work soon; strengthening disaster risk management; Queenslanders being invested in disaster risk reduction; and continuous improvement in disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

We are currently consulting with key partners including state agencies, local government and private sector organisations to develop an implementation plan for the Queensland strategy. This will provide a road map for how we will work together to achieve the objectives set out in the strategy. In addition, the Queensland Reconstruction Authority has taken over administrative responsibility for the 2017-18 Get Ready program from the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning. In 2017-18 the program will provide \$2 million in state funding to help local governments improve their communities' resilience and aligns with QRA's mission to make Queensland the most disaster-resilient state in Australia. The Get Ready Queensland program is a year-round, all-hazards resilience-building initiative to help communities prepare for natural disasters. The 2017-18 Get Ready Queensland Week was held between 8 and 15 October.

We have also taken over administration of the Natural Disaster Resilience Program from the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning, which is currently closing out projects from earlier funding rounds. In addition, as part of how we are connecting with other activities, Mr Moon, our CEO, has recently been invited to participate as a member of the South-East Queensland Council of Mayors Resilient Rivers Taskforce on behalf of the Reconstruction Authority as a representative for flood resilience. This is an initiative of the SEQ Council of Mayors that aims to improve the health of South-East Queensland's waterways by delivering a coordinated approach to catchment management. We are starting to see there are a few people involved in catchment management activities.

That is the answer to the first question. There are links to what we are doing in terms of providing a more coordinated approach focused on the Brisbane catchment, so I will continue with that.

We know that Queensland is the most disaster-prone state in Australia. It is critical that we work in new ways to work together to improve the safety and resilience of our communities across Queensland. We are collaborating across the state to develop research, policy and project delivery models to achieve a more coordinated approach across catchments with a focus on reducing the cost of disasters and improving community safety. That is our main focus.

There is a statewide strategic policy framework for integrated flood risk, management and community resilience that was released last year, and this guides best practice in riverine flood risk management and provides strategic direction across all of Queensland. The first objective in that policy framework is to take a catchment approach, so we are very serious about that.

I will zero in on the Brisbane River. We are delivering what we call a Queensland Flood Resilience Program. It is focused on achieving greater coordination for how we manage the impact of floods through a catchment approach to flood plain management. The principles for our catchment scale approach include co-design and shared ownership of resilience implementation activities. We are working with councils very closely to build capacity from the ground up. We are building organisational resilience at the local level to improve capability and capacity. We are building true community resilience and ownership of the risk and responsibility through a more community orientated focus of resilience practice. It is only through the action of people on the ground understanding their risks and knowing what to do that we will get to the point where we are improving community safety and reducing costs into the future. We take a regionally coordinated flood plain management outcome approach for Queensland.

As an example, some of the projects we are delivering include the Brisbane River flood studies work. The first step of that was delivered in May this year. That was a flood study that set out how far from the Brisbane River-Wivenhoe Dam down the floods go, what is the depth and what is the velocity. The next step then is to work with the councils to develop a strategic flood plain management plan that will create a consistent and common approach for managing flood plains across the four local government areas located within the flood plain. We are taking a regional catchment based approach there again.

There is the flood gauge warning network project, which focuses on developing a best practice approach to the management of the flood warning gauge network in Queensland. Again we are taking a collaborative approach with stakeholders across the state. The aim is to ensure people in flood-prone communities across Queensland have appropriate warnings of flood events. We are taking a catchment based approach to that as well. We have just commenced—and we are working under the direction and guidance of the Wide Bay-Burnett Regional Organisation of Councils—the Burnett River catchment pilot project. It is aimed at being delivered in partnership with the four councils—Bundaberg, Cherbourg Aboriginal Shire Council, North Burnett and South Burnett—to develop a regionally consistent coordinated catchment based approach to flood risk management.

That has given us a bigger picture; now we will deal with the Brisbane River catchment. We are leading the delivery of the Brisbane River Strategic Floodplain Management Plan in partnership with the four councils. Interestingly, the four councils we are dealing with are Brisbane, Ipswich, Lockyer and Somerset. The four councils that the QAO audit considered were Ipswich, Lockyer, Somerset and Scenic, so there is a slight overlap there. The work we are doing is consistent with the principles outlined in the Queensland Audit Office report for flood resilience and is being further guided by emerging best practice.

The three key principles from the QAO report were: recognising and balancing the relationship between cause and effect impacting on ecosystems; a coordinated approach from all levels of government; and community and private sector engagement. An additional key principle for strategic flood plain management was set out recently by Sayers in a report of 2017 earlier this year from an *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: Natural Hazard Science* paper titled 'The Evolution of Strategic Flood Plain Management in Support of Social Justice, Ecosystem Health, and Resilience'. One of the key elements there was to reflect the local context and integrate with other planning processes, so once again they are supporting what we are doing. This is one of their so-called 10 golden rules for managing floods.

The planning approach being undertaken for the Strategic Floodplain Management Plan acknowledges that the Brisbane River flood plain is dynamic, with multiple interests, and that a collaborative and coordinated approach is essential in protecting the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the region. While the plan focuses primarily on flood plain management, it also captures interlinkages with other planning processes, identifies where other interests need to be considered and recognises where options can offer multiple benefits in addition to flood mitigation such as landscape management and water supply and quality.

As I mentioned before, the primary focus of our work in the Strategic Floodplain Management Plan that we are still developing—it will not come out until next year—is about public safety and the reduction of flood damage. The other planning processes and related activities at the catchment scale to which we are linking are the Resilient Rivers Initiative—you heard submissions from them; the Shaping SEQ Regional Plan; and the work of Seqwater in their dam safety and catchment management activities.

To demonstrate the coordinated approach undertaken by the QRA, it is appropriate to understand the primary drivers of these other planning processes so we know where we can link into those. The Resilient Rivers Initiative—this is taken from their website—aims to improve the health of their waterways while achieving the following goals: to promote partnerships with strong leadership to deliver a coordinated approach to catchment management in South-East Queensland; to keep soil on our land and out of our waterways; to help protect our region's water security so it can support the current and future population of South-East Queensland; and to improve the climate resilience of our region.

We can see that the Resilient Rivers Initiative is indeed taking an integrated catchment approach focused on their elements, which are about landscape management, but they are linking back to other implementation opportunities through land use planning and that sort of thing as well, so there are a number of things that need to be coordinated.

For the South East Queensland Regional Plan, implementation of the Brisbane River Strategic Floodplain Management Plan is specifically mentioned and there is an action under the South East Queensland Regional Plan, ShapingSEQ. That provides a regional framework for growth management and sets planning direction for sustainable growth, global economic competitiveness and high-quality living. It is supported by provisions in the Planning Regulation 2017 which apply to certain types of development in South-East Queensland. In this case, the aim is to ensure the resilience of South-East Queensland communities to flooding through a coordinated approach to the management of flood risk to acceptable levels. Importantly, in addition the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning is to work with the department of main roads and Brisbane

other infrastructure providers to investigate alignment strategies, outcomes and infrastructure proposals with the Brisbane River Strategic Floodplain Management Plan. There is a whole lot of land use planning. We have a landscape management world and a land use planning world.

The last one is Seqwater, which manages \$12 billion of bulk water supply infrastructure and the natural catchments for the region's water supply sources to ensure reliable quality water supply for more than three million consumers across the region. Seqwater manages open catchments, allowing the community to enjoy lakes and catchment land while ensuring quality bulk water supply for the region. Water treatment begins at the source—that is, on the ground—and Seqwater takes a whole-of-catchment approach to water quality. You can see that Seqwater is about water security. Water quality is an important issue for them because of the cost of treatment.

There are some common elements in all of these planning processes, if you think about all the work that I have spoken about. The common areas of interest are water quality, ecosystem health and catchment condition including the relationship between upper catchment vegetation clearing and increased run-off. Importantly, that was noted by the Assistant Auditor-General, Ms Bird, in one of her submissions to the committee as being one of the key drivers for their audit. Another example goes to the Seqwater situation. The sedimentation of Mount Crosby Weir threatened South-East Queensland's water supply in 2013. We can see that there are a lot of linkages.

In our work, we are partnering with these agencies to deliver the Brisbane River Strategic Floodplain Management Plan. We want to identify how to best manage flood risk on a regional scale and in a more coordinated way. We are investigating a range of elements including flood risk assessment, flood damage as an economic assessment, structural options, disaster management, land use planning, community awareness and resilience and, importantly, making sure we integrate with these other planning processes at a landscape scale. That means we have to deal with a lot of different people so we are taking a multidisciplinary approach which includes land use planning, engineering, natural resource management, disaster management, and community engagement and education.

CHAIR: Mr Milligan, have you got much more to go?

Mr Milligan: No.

CHAIR: I am mindful of the time and I want to give committee members a chance to ask some questions.

Mr Milligan: I am right down to the last bit now. We are collaborating across a number of agencies and with government. Importantly, in terms of the multidisciplinary and multiobjective approach, multicriteria assessment is being used to inform decisions about regional scale land use mitigation options for the catchment. Landscape restoration—putting the trees back and riparian restoration—is being considered along with other structural flood mitigation options. The multicriteria assessment considers a broad range of issues including social, economic, safety and feasibility options. As an example, our environment and natural resource management is included in that multicriteria assessment to show how we are linking with the other landscape condition elements around vegetation and habitat impacts, ecosystem health and connectivity, reduction in landscape salinity, improved moisture retention and groundwater recharge, and reduction in the erosive capacity and soil movement.

In conclusion, the Queensland Reconstruction Authority, as part of its flood resilience responsibility, is achieving a more coordinated approach to catchment management by delivering a suite of coordinated and multidisciplinary risk reduction measures including structural options, land use planning, disaster management and community resilience. We are including water quality and ecosystem health criteria to recognise the relationships between cause and effect impacting on ecosystems within the catchment, acknowledging the catchment action plans developed by the Resilient Rivers Initiative and other landscape restoration work delivered by the SEQ Healthy Land and Water organisation. We are leading a coordinated approach by engaging with all levels of government, and we are aligning with other related planning activities, primarily the Resilient Rivers Initiative, ShapingSEQ, the South East Queensland Regional Plan and the activities of Seqwater. Sorry I took a bit of time, but I thought it was important to cover all of those issues. I am happy to answer any questions.

Mr WEIR: Thank you for that, Graeme. One of the reasons you have been called in is that I have some concerns. You have covered a lot of territory there. You talked about planning. You talked about building infrastructure such as roads and so forth. You talked about vegetation management. To start with vegetation management, who is the authority and what is your role?

Mr Milligan: Our role from a policy perspective is that we take a very pragmatic management approach. We facilitate, we coordinate, and we bring people together to make sure that whatever the statutory framework is in—the land use planning area or the vegetation management area—everything is set up for a common and consistent approach. We do not have any statutory powers at all in this area. In simple terms, we are about helping people understand where the dots are and join the dots to make sure there are no unintentional, unintended consequences of things happening in one space that might impact on others. That is why we are very much taking a multidisciplinary approach and trying to deal with all the relevant entities as best we can.

The Vegetation Management Act is administered by Natural Resources and Mines, I understand. Land use planning is administered by the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning. In terms of infrastructure for roads, the Department of Transport and Main Roads have their own infrastructure programs. Any new infrastructure from a private perspective goes through the environmental impact assessment processes, and flooding is one of the elements that is part of that. We provide input to those major projects as they come through as well.

Mr WEIR: So you have input—you comment on them—but you have no statutory powers to recommend changes?

Mr Milligan: Correct.

Mr WEIR: With rivers and streams, Natural Resources have always had oversight over those. If you interfere with a river or a stream, you will have a knock on the door from Natural Resources. Is that still the case because you are working in those systems?

Mr Milligan: That is still the case. We are doing the coordination of the planning activities. Let us say, for argument's sake, that some of the elements were some structural options out of the Brisbane River Strategic Floodplain Management Plan. Let us say there were some works identified along Warrill Creek. Whoever was following through with the implementation of that structure—let us say that it is a levee bank or retention basin—would need the normal statutory approvals. The work we are doing is identifying at a prefeasibility stage that it might be a good idea to put a retention basin in there. Further action is done by the respective owner, whether it is the council or State Development, and they would go through those normal statutory processes. If there is a requirement under the Water Act for that, Natural Resources and Mines would administer that.

Mr WEIR: Would they refer to you for your input or your assessment on any impacts of those projects?

Mr Milligan: We would probably provide some input to confirm its consistency with what our prefeasibility work might have been, but that is as far as we would go. We are very much about bringing everybody together to make sure there is a common and consistent direction to go in. Once that direction is set, we step back and let those responsible entities proceed with their work.

Mr WEIR: We are looking at the Brisbane Valley catchment but you operate in a lot of other areas, obviously.

Mr Milligan: Yes, we have a statewide overview.

Mr WEIR: Are they in areas, regions and catchments like you are describing with Brisbane?

Mr Milligan: Yes. I mentioned before that we are doing this pilot work in the Burnett catchment. We have done the work in the Brisbane River. That has been going on since 2012. We took it over from DILGP last year. A lot of work has been done in Brisbane with a lot of money. There is a lot of information and a strong level of capability and capacity within the councils we are dealing with. We know across the state, from our experience in dealing with councils, that some councils are challenged in terms of their capability and capacity to deliver on flood resilience. We went on what we called a listening tour. One of the principles I spoke of before was 'co-produced and ground up'. We listened to the councils, who have basically said to us, 'Don't dream up a policy, throw it over the fence and expect us to implement it. Work it up with us.' We are developing and piloting in the Burnett—this is our first step into a catchment based approach outside of South-East Queensland—what is the best approach for working with councils on a catchment basis to look at all these issues. We will do an evaluation of that in May-June next year and then we will work out how we are going to roll it out across the rest of the state.

CHAIR: In terms of the coordination role you talked about, it sounds like you do not have the authority to direct; you are more trying to get people to work together. If you found that there a limitation, particularly in legislation, that was inhibiting what your organisation felt should be happening, would you see it as your role to recommend to either your minister or the appropriate minister legislative changes and work that up from a policy perspective?

Mr Milligan: That is a good question. In terms of the way that we are operating, I can use the Brisbane River work as an example without getting into the specifics because it is all live at the moment. If I use land use planning as an example, our role is to bring all the players together. We are trying to get the Department of Infrastructure, Local Government and Planning and the four councils to agree on what should be done across the whole area. It is not so much for the Queensland Reconstruction Authority to run the policy arguments from a land use planning perspective. It is more appropriate, because the legislation rests with that department, for them to address the issues. We are but the mere project managers. We try to bring people together. If we see issues that need to be resolved, we will talk to those respective departments and work with them to resolve the issues, whether it is with a council, another department or whatever.

CHAIR: What is your professional background and what are the professional backgrounds of the people who work in your organisation?

Mr Milligan: Diverse. As an example, I started off life as a cadastral surveyor. I did a surveying degree at QIT here as it was at the time. I worked in the private sector. I joined the Water Resources Commission over 30 years ago, in 1986. I got into water management and enjoyed that. I did a masters in natural resource management. I have a particular passion in this because my masters project was an integrated catchment management plan for Tenthill Creek in the Lockyer. I did that in 1989-90. I have worked in the water reform space, and I joined the Reconstruction Authority the week it was established in February 2011.

I have become what is sometimes called a multidisciplinary team of one. In terms of the people we have in the Reconstruction Authority, we are only a small entity. For all the work I set out before across the Brisbane River, the Burnett pilot, the flood warning gauge network project—and I am also doing bushfire management plans for North Stradbroke Island—I am doing that with one temporary public servant and about eight contractors. Then we engage other contractors. Our business model is very much around engaging the people with the skill sets we need when we need them, because such a multidisciplinary approach is required. We do not have a lot of staff and we buy in people with the skills that we need when we need them.

CHAIR: Do you feel you have the team that you need to achieve the objectives of your organisation?

Mr Milligan: It is probably not for me to say.

CHAIR: You are able to acquire people with the skill sets that you need—

Mr Milligan: We are delivering the projects on our plate now by being able to buy in the skill sets as required.

CHAIR: I guess this responsibility has only sat with your authority for a reasonably short period of time. Do you feel we are in a position where we can accurately determine whether or not your organisation is achieving the objectives that it is setting out to achieve?

Mr Milligan: That would be the subject of a more detailed audit, I think. It is probably a bit hard for me to respond. If you have any specific questions we can take them on notice and get back to you.

CHAIR: Your organisation has assumed this new role, and from what you are telling us and what we have investigated it seems like you are heading in the right direction, but as a committee it feels like we have not had enough time yet to give you the tick of approval. What I am driving at is: internally as an organisation do you feel like you are achieving the objectives of the organisation?

Mr Milligan: From my perspective, absolutely. I can talk about the feedback we get from local governments and from our political masters. We are respected for delivering projects, for making things happen on the ground and for having good working relationships with people on the ground, primarily local governments and other agencies. That is evidenced by the fact that we are repeatedly asked to do additional tasks.

Mr MILLAR: I think the Queensland Reconstruction Authority does some fantastic work when it comes to natural disasters and you guys need to be commended for that. My concern is for regional Queensland and the diversion of watercourses and infrastructure build, especially in the farming community, such as ring tanks and dams, and you have a background in that. My concern is that the Queensland Reconstruction Authority will be another bureaucratic layer for the approval process to be able to increase productivity in regional Queensland such as the farming sector. That is my concern. Why do not we just leave it to the department of natural resources?

Mr Milligan: To make one point clear, Mr Millar, we do not have any statutory approval so there is no additional layer—

Mr MILLAR: But it is part of the process to get through.

Mr Milligan: At a detailed project level, we are on the distribution list across all of government for commentary on new coalmines or new infrastructure so there is no additional bureaucratic burden there. We are trying to make sure that potential risks are identified in advance to make it easier and more appropriate for development to proceed where it needs to proceed. I think our role is very much about reducing the bureaucratic load, and that is evidenced by our role in terms of facilitating, coordinating and working with councils and with agencies to understand where potential risks are and to try to get them mitigated, understood and dealt with as early possible in the process.

Mr MILLAR: My only concern was whether we have another layer of bureaucracy and you have answered that.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Milligan, for coming in today. It has been very informative and I am sure it helps the committee in our understanding of the role of your organisation. That concludes today's hearing. A transcript of these proceedings will be published on the committee's parliamentary web page as soon as it is available. I declare this public hearing closed.

Committee adjourned at 9.32 am