LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

No. 314

WRITTEN QUESTION

J Davis to the Minister for Water Resources, Hon Joshua Burgoyne MLA:

Cambrian Limestone Aquifer and Lake Woods

1. What assessment has been undertaken of the long-term impacts of groundwater extraction on the Cambrian Limestone Aquifer and groundwater-dependent ecosystems?

    a. Has the Department identified ecological thresholds beyond which groundwater extraction would be considered unacceptable?

    b. What monitoring is being undertaken to detect impacts before irreversible damage occurs?

2. What evidence can the Department provide that current allocation limits will protect groundwater-dependent ecosystems over the next 30 to 40 years?

    a. Have ecological water requirements been determined for the groundwater-dependent ecosystems identified through the Strategic Regional Environmental and Baseline Assessment (SREBA)?

    b. If not, how can the Department be confident current extraction levels are sustainable?

3. The Independent Expert Scientific Committee's advice of 2024 on unconventional gas exploration and appraisal in the Beetaloo Basin (IESC 2024-150) records that "Detailed local-scale environmental studies are needed to ensure adequate understanding and protection of the Basin's surface and groundwater water resources in areas where unconventional gas development is planned".

    a. Which local-scale environmental studies of the Basin's water resources have been commenced or completed since that advice, by whom, and on what dates?

    b. What scientific uncertainties does the Department consider remain regarding the Cambrian Limestone Aquifer, and in which document are they recorded?

c. Where a water extraction licence application is assessed in an area for which those studies have not been completed, what does the Controller rely on in their place?

4. Lake Woods is recognised as an internationally significant wetland and biodiversity area. Has the Government considered formal protection of Lake Woods and its catchments?

    a. If not, why not?

    b. What assessment has been undertaken of risks to Lake Woods from future groundwater extraction?

    c. If that assessment has not been undertaken, on what basis does the Department conclude there is no risk?

5. The Georgina Wiso Water Allocation Plan 2023–2031 (“the Plan’) sets an estimated sustainable yield of 210,000 megalitres per year across the Georgina Basin and Wiso Basin water management zones, and Table 2 allocates 10,000 megalitres per year to petroleum activity as a beneficial use.

    a. What is the current total of granted allocations, and of pending applications, in the Plan area? Please provide as a table by licence or application number, volume, purpose and water management zone, including any applications associated with irrigated agriculture or data centre development.

    b. Clause 5.1 of the Plan provides that a review may occur where the actual volume of water taken under water licences within the water accounting period “exceeds 70% of the estimated sustainable yield” or “exceeds 70% of the volume allocated to the beneficial use category as per Table 2, excluding use for public water supply”. What was the actual volume of water taken under water licences in each water accounting period since the Plan was declared, in each water management zone?

    c. What volume was taken under licences for petroleum activity in each of those periods, against the 10,000 megalitre allocation in Table 2?

    d. Has the Minister considered initiating a review of the Plan under clause 5.1 since it was declared; if so, on what date and with what outcome?

    e. Will a cumulative assessment across all allocations and applications be completed before further licences are granted?

6. What assessment has the Department undertaken of the intergenerational impacts of Beetaloo development on water resources, biodiversity and environmental values over the next 30 to 40 years?

    a. Can that assessment be tabled?

    b. If no such assessment exists, how can the Government assure Territorians that current decisions will not leave future generations with depleted water resources or degraded ecosystems?