



## National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust) Bill.

### Second Reading

**Mr BOB DEBUS** (Blue Mountains—Attorney General, and Minister for the Environment) [10.53 a.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

The National Parks and Wildlife Amendment (Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust) Bill has been introduced to assist the Government's karst reserve management restructure. The bill proposes minor amendments to sections 8 and 58ZA of the National Parks and Wildlife Act to allow the Minister to appoint the Director-General of the Department of Environment and Conservation as an alternate to the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust Board. The trust previously held responsibility for the care, control and management of the Jenolan, Wombeyan, Borenore and Abercrombie karst conservation reserves. The amendment will effectively transfer the management of these reserves to the Department of Environment and Conservation, and is part of a package of measures to revitalise karst management in New South Wales.

The Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust was established in 1989 as a self-financing and independent entity relying on income from visitor charges as well as lease revenue from Caves House, which is operated under a 99-year lease. In recent years, however, the trust has only been able to meet its financial resource requirements by deferring capital works and relying on government grants to carry out some essential works. Supplementation was required from the Government in 2003-04. Consequently, the trust board expressed concern to me about the long-term financial sustainability of the trust under its existing business model. Last July the Government commissioned the Council on the Cost and Quality of Government to carry out a special review of the trust.

The review found that although the trust had performed well within the constraint of its existing financial arrangements, the financial structure itself could not be sustained indefinitely. Jenolan was expected to subsidise the maintenance of the other reserves I have mentioned. However, Jenolan was not recovering enough revenue to reinvest sufficiently even in its own infrastructure and product development, and was forced instead to rely, as I have indicated, on government grants to cover the shortfall. Consequently, a backlog of capital works and maintenance has arisen across all four reserves. The review also found that well-recognised karst management and scientific expertise existed within the trust and its staff.

The Council on the Cost and Quality of Government recommended that the four karst conservation reserves should be transferred from the Jenolan Caves Reserve Trust to the Department of Environment and Conservation to address the cross-subsidisation issues that I have mentioned and to enable the management of the majority of karst areas in New South Wales to be located in one agency. There is already assistance being provided to the trust from the Department of Environment and Conservation in the form of grants and resources to control feral pests and, via the Sydney Catchment Authority, weeds on the reserves. The Council on the Cost and Quality of Government recommended a capital works program to address outstanding infrastructure works.

The council also recommended that when the term of the trust board expired in January 2004, an administrator should be appointed to review the management of trust, the Jenolan Caves commercial area in detail and to develop a strategy for implementation of the Government's policy decisions. The administrator has made an analysis of the trust's financial and structural arrangements and confirmed the recommendations of the council. Further work is being undertaken to consider the future arrangements for cave tours and other visitor services at Jenolan. The Government proposes to increase the efficiency of management of karst reserves in New South Wales while continuing to maintain the highest levels of environmental protection.

Last week I announced a revitalisation package to conserve the natural and iconic assets of the caves, and to assist local economies by providing regional employment and increased tourism opportunities. The package includes an \$18 million program of works on Jenolan Caves Road; a \$4 million capital works program to upgrade important cave and above-ground infrastructure; the establishment of a new specialist unit within the Department of Environment and Conservation to ensure best practice management of karst areas throughout the State of New South Wales; the establishment of a Karst Management Advisory Committee under section 24 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974, comprised of key stakeholder representatives, including speleologists, local government, traditional owners and the National Trust; and the consolidation of the management of karst reserve areas, ensuring that Abercrombie, Wombeyan, Borenore and Jenolan karst reserves are managed, along with the State's 30 other significant cave systems, by the one organisation

I am pleased that additional recurrent funding has been allocated to the Department of Environment and Conservation to support and implement the revitalisation package I have outlined. To facilitate this comprehensive initiative, the minor

amendments to the National Parks and Wildlife Act I have described are required to transfer management responsibility from the Jenolan Reserve Caves Trust to the Department of Environment and Conservation. I commend this bill to the House.

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