

Agreement in Principle

Mr PHILLIP COSTA (Wollondilly—Minister for Water, and Minister for Regional Development) [4.26 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now agreed to in principle.

The Hawkesbury-Nepean River is an iconic waterway and an important ecological and community asset. Sydney is very fortunate to have such an asset in its backyard. It is a river that can supply most of our drinking water needs, irrigate a productive food bowl—estimated to be worth in the order of \$259 million per year—and provide recreation for many residents. However, this also means the operation and management of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system is complex because there are so many competing demands. Providing a water supply for Australia's largest city, irrigation, recreation and a home for the plants and animals that depend on the river is a major challenge. The New South Wales Government is determined to address this challenge. It is for that reason that I bring the bill before the House today.

The bill establishes a new Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean, and gives it the power to coordinate the whole-of-government action needed to manage this critical and iconic waterway. The bill has four objectives and it gives the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean the clearly defined functions it will need to achieve each of those objectives. Firstly, the office will improve coordination and implementation of management strategies relating to the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system. To achieve this, the office will coordinate the management of aquatic weeds and manage the implementation of any agreed arrangements between New South Wales and the Commonwealth, or local government, to improve the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system.

Secondly, the office will improve public access to information and advice about management strategies concerning the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system. To achieve this, the office will act as a single point of information and advice about management strategies, respond to inquiries for advice and provide advice about management strategies, and compile information on management strategies and provide that information to the public. Thirdly, the office will provide increased opportunities for the public to be involved in the development of management strategies to improve the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system. To achieve this, the office will carry out public consultation to determine the views of the public or stakeholders, and report to me, as the relevant Minister, and relevant public authorities on the results of any public consultation.

Finally, the bill provides for the office to improve the management of in-stream development in the Hawkesbury-Nepean waters. The bill provides for the office to do this by liaising with planning authorities to ensure they fulfil their responsibilities in an integrated and efficient manner, providing information and assistance on development to members of the public who propose to carry out in-stream development, and accepting development applications for developments in the Hawkesbury-Nepean waters and forwarding them to the relevant consent authority, together with associated documents and fees. Before elaborating on these functions, I will briefly outline the administrative arrangements established by the bill.

The bill establishes the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean as a corporation, under my direction with an advisory board and a director. The advisory board will include representatives of the Department of Water and Energy as chair of the board, the Department of Environment and Climate Change, the Department of Primary Industries, the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the Department of Planning, the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Authority, the Sydney Catchment Authority and the Sydney Water Corporation. The bill defines the area to which the functions of the new Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean will apply.

The first three core functions—that is, coordination, provision of information and public consultation—will be applied to the entire Hawkesbury-Nepean river system. The last of the office's functions—that is, the promotion of effective management of in-stream development—will apply to the waters of the river and its tributaries. These waters are defined in the bill. They include the waters downstream of the upper Nepean dams—Cataract, Cordeaux, Avon, Nepean—and Warragamba Dam, but upstream of Brooklyn. Under the bill, these waters also include land that is permanently or intermittently submerged by those waters within a distance of 40 metres inland from the top of the bank in non-tidal areas and 40 metres from the high water mark in tidal areas.

Under the bill the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean is subject to the control and direction of my portfolio. Very importantly, the bill requires agencies to cooperate with the office. This agency cooperation is critical, and the inclusion of this power in the bill will allow the office to succeed in its coordination role. In addition, the Premier and I will closely monitor the progress of the office to ensure better outcomes are delivered for western Sydney. By establishing an office with these functions and administrative arrangements, the Government today is taking a big step forward in managing the Hawkesbury-Nepean. The four key reasons the office is a great thing for people in my part of Sydney are: first, the office will deliver improved coordination across government; second, it will provide a single point of contact; third, it will provide opportunities for the public to be involved; and, finally, it will facilitate consideration of in-stream developments.

In relation to the coordination of the management of the Hawkesbury-Nepean, the bill provides for the new Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean to coordinate the range of government programs that are already in place to improve river health. They include the Hawkesbury-Nepean Nutrient Management Strategy, the Diffuse Source Water Pollution Strategy, the development of an environmental flows regime, the water-sharing plan for the Hawkesbury-Nepean, the Sydney Metropolitan Water Plan and the Weirs Modification Program. The bill also provides that the office will have the power to require cooperation from other agencies. This means the office will be able to coordinate appropriate government activities in relation to works on riverbanks.

Agencies, including the Department of Planning and the Department of Lands, will be brought together to ensure effective working relations on issues associated with river health. It also means the office will be able to coordinate agency effort to support the delivery of the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Action Plan. In doing so, the office will work closely with the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Authority to ensure consistency of effort and reduce duplication. Importantly, the bill gives the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean the ability to administer funding programs and on-ground works, which may contribute to significant water quality benefits.

My colleagues the member for Penrith, the member for Londonderry and the member for Riverstone have been long-term advocates for a single point of call for the river. I am pleased to say that is exactly what the office will be. By establishing the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean, this bill will create a one-stop shop for members of the community, bringing the programs and expertise of the New South Wales Government together under the one roof. The office will act as a single point of access to government services, including those relating to water quality and quantity management and river use issues. This will provide the residents of the area with an access point for services and inquiries related to the river. Being located in the community, it will be aware of the issues facing river communities and be able to bring these issues to the Government.

The bill also provides for improved community input into the management of the river. The people of the Hawkesbury-Nepean are passionate about their river. The bill recognises this by establishing a stakeholder committee to advise the Government on the best way to manage the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River. One of the specific functions of the office will be to engage with the local community through effective communication and education campaigns. This will create a two-way dialogue from which the community gains a greater understanding of the current government strategies and actions on the river and the Government learns about community concerns.

In response to the community, this bill provides for the new office to simplify the application process for people undertaking in-stream developments. Under the current planning system, an individual with a development application for in-stream developments—such as building a jetty on a river—must first apply for landowner's consent from the Department of Lands. The department manages the riverbed, as it is Crown land. Once landowner's consent has been granted, the applicant must lodge a development application with the local council, which acts as a consent authority. The new Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean will provide assistance to individuals seeking landowner's consent, including the ability to arrange one-on-one consultation with officers from the Department of Lands. The office also will work with officers from the Department of Lands to ensure that the processes for granting landowner's consent are clear and streamlined. The bill will not override existing statutory powers, such as councils' development consent role, under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act.

The integrated development framework has been refined in the 12 years since its commencement, and the Government is not going to create another level of bureaucracy. Rather, the primary role of the office is to make this legislation work more smoothly. For example, the office may accept development applications for developments in the Hawkesbury-Nepean waters and forward them to the relevant consent authority, together with associated documents and fees. However, if the office advises the Government that existing planning, pollution, fisheries or water management legislation are part of the problem, we will act to address the issues. Further, the Office of the Hawkesbury-Nepean may work with councils, relevant agencies and the community to identify ongoing concerns with the approvals process for in-stream developments.

Such work may feed back into broader whole-of-government work on strategic issues within planning, land use and natural resource management. In summary, this new office is a great opportunity for the people from my part of Sydney. It gives them real access to the decision makers and it gives all the authorities involved in managing the river a chance to coordinate their activities. By improving information flow and coordination and by providing on-ground restoration services, such as weed management, the office will deliver to the people of western Sydney and the broader community a better river. I commend the bill to the House.