**IRRIGATION ACT AMENDMENT BILL 1981**

**House of Assembly, 25 February 1981, pages 3208-9**

Second reading

The Hon. P. B. ARNOLD (Minister of Water Resources) obtained leave and introduced a Bill for an Act to amend the Irrigation Act, 1930-1978. Read a first time.

The Hon. P. B. ARNOLD: I move: That this Bill be now read a second time. I seek leave to have the second reading explanation inserted in Hansard without my reading it. Leave granted.

Explanation of Bill

It replaces Part VI of the Irrigation Act, 1930-1978. Part VI provides for financial assistance to lessees of land under the principal Act. The existing provisions are complicated and prolix and provide unrealistic limits on the amount of money that can be provided. The Leases of Reclaimed Lands Loan Fund which was the operating fund for assistance given under Part VI was closed in the early nineteen sixties and the present provisions have not been made use of since then.

In 1973, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works approved an overall programme for rehabilitation of the headworks in the majority of the Government irrigation areas in the Riverland Region. This work has progressed to the point that the Kingston and Waikerie irrigation areas are completed and the Berri irrigation area is approximately one-half completed. Cobdogla, Moorook and Loxton irrigation areas are yet to be commenced.

Throughout the rehabilitation programme the overriding principle has been that no farmer would be disadvantaged by rehabilitation. To meet this requirement Government policy is to install connecting pipework on each farmer’s property to deliver water to his existing watering points. The cost of this on-block pipework (referred to as the “farm connection”) varies from virtually zero to $15 000 a block, with a total cost to date in the Berri irrigation area estimated at $1 200 000.

The major deficiency of this policy is that it tends to perpetuate the continued use of inefficient irrigation practices. It is widely recognised however that the benefits to the farms and to the public resulting from rehabilitation could be significantly increased by encouraging farmers to convert to improved irrigation practices. Authorities in the U.S.A. have also recognised the potential benefits of such on-farm conversion and have provided significant inducements in the forms of grants to encourage farmers to convert.

The usual method of irrigation at the moment is by the use of open channels. Some of the water flowing along these channels soaks into the subsoil and is eventually drained back into the River Murray. This requires the construction and maintenance of an extensive drainage system and also aggravates the salinity problem in the river. The irrigation water soaking through the soil and finally draining back to the river leaches salts from the soil which then travel with it back to the river. Modern irrigation methods carry the water through pipes and water is directed more efficiently to each individual plant. The amount of water which soaks away and eventually finds its way back to the river is therefore reduced to a minimum.

The amendments will give the Minister the option of granting each farmer a sum of money in lieu of the Government constructing the farm connection, providing that the farmer installs an approved irrigation system and is responsible for its connection to the farm outlet. Alternatively the farmer may still request the Government to construct his farm connection in accordance with existing policy.

The farmers who would be eligible for this grant option would be those whose on-farm irrigation systems have not yet been connected to rehabilitated headworks. The question of assistance to farmers whose irrigation systems have already been connected is being considered by the Government. The new provisions will also allow the provision of finance to farmers for concessional rates of interest for the purpose of modernising the irrigation system on their blocks. The scheme will be administered by the Minister of Agriculture on advice from the Director-General of Agriculture.

Clauses 1 and 2 of the Bill are formal. Clause 3 replaces Part VI of the principal Act with a new Part VI that consists of one section. The new Part gives the Minister a general power to grant financial assistance to a lessee to make improvements to the land, repay an existing loan or to purchase implements, plants and other things necessary for farming. The new provisions have as wide an application as the old provisions but have the advantage of being much shorter and less complicated to administer.

The Hon. J. D. WRIGHT secured the adjournment of the debate.