WEEDS ACT AMENDMENT BILL 1963

House of Assembly, 6 November 1963, page 1512

Second reading

**The Hon. D. N. BROOKMAN (Minister of Agriculture):** I move:

*That this Bill be now read a second time*

Before I explain the details of this Bill, I should make a few general comments. The Weeds Act was enacted in 1956 and has not been amended until now. It recognizes the principle that the primary responsibility for weed control lies with the occupier of the land or with the landholder himself. No other person can possibly undertake that responsibility. The legislation is administered by local councils. That has proved effective because local councils are close to the properties and are familiar with the problems of their districts. Since the Weeds Act of 1956 was passed council activity has been enormously increased. There was a comparatively slow beginning; the Agriculture Department had weeds officers who went from council to council, first putting the problem before them, suggesting that they appoint officers to undertake weed control work in their districts, and offering technical assistance of every possible kind.

The number of councils that have taken advantage of this advice has increased considerably. For instance, one year after the regulations were proclaimed (in 1958), more than 20 councils had not even appointed an inspector. It is believed that at that time fewer than 10 councils had active weed control programmes that were well-informed and in continuous operation. Twelve months later 22 of the district councils were working actively, and by December, 1961, this number had increased to 36. In these council areas results could be seen in the field, and it was reported at the time that a further 35 councils were getting under way. At this stage weed control officers had spent about 800 days in the field giving direct technical assistance to local councils. To assess the present situation a detailed survey was carried out during July, 1963. The results can be summarized as follows:

Twenty-eight district councils are now rated as active. Those councils are carrying out every phase of weed control needed in their districts; 57 councils are carrying out weed control, but their programme is at present considered inadequate; 15 councils are rated as inactive.

The Government appointed staff to deal with the problem and to assist these councils in every possible way, and the result has been that the problem of weeks has become considerably lessserious than it was earlier. No one will say that we have a diminishing problem with weeds; I think we have a continuous problem. However, we are attacking in many directions at present, and at the same time we protecting the State from the ingress of weeds from outside. I was particularly struck by the comment of two weeds inspectors who came from interstate not long ago to study our methods. Their comment, in effect, was:

Your strength lies in the way in which local government is prepared to do the job without sitting back waiting to see how much they can get from the State Government.

That, to my mind, is a genuine tribute to the work of councils. The purpose of this Bill is to provide for financial assistance to councils in their work. At this stage, I refer to some of the more serious weeds, each of which is known, to honourable members in one-way or another. First, we have heard much about noogoora burr, which does not grow in South Australia to any extent; there has been only one infestation that could be rated as having been known for some time, and it is still occurring. Other infestations have appeared from time and have been eradicated immediately have been detected. These spots are visited again and again in order to see that there are new germinations. Also, odd plants grow from time to time; these just appear, and do not represent a serious infestation. This burr will stick in the wool of sheep and will greatly lower the value of sheep if widespread. The problem has been intensified by the tremendous spread weed in some of the Eastern States.

Noogoora burr is not the only worries us: other burrs that we have seen in South Australia could also become a menace to this State. As a result, we spent much money in having inspectors examine sheep and cattle, as well as having others visit properties looking for the weed itself and doing all kinds of extension work in this respect. We have an officer stationed at Jamestown especially for this purpose, and he has visited 150 properties in a tour of inspection and given instruction in the matter. We have regulations which prevent the movement of livestock carrying noogoora burr.

Skeleton weed came into this State not many years ago and has become widespread in certain areas. It occurs in many parts of the cereal-growing areas; it is a particularly serious weed, and possibly it could make cereal growing uneconomic if it were allowed to spread unchecked. That weed is particularly difficult to eradicate. A special committee appointed under the Agriculture Council is doing research into skeleton weed, and the Wheat Industry Fund has provided an officer for that research work in this State.

Other weeds are known to us only too well. Some of them are extremely dangerous and others are not considered dangerous in certain districts. For instance, salvation jane is edible for stock and can be considered to have some value in certain areas, whereas in other areas it is a serious weed. The technical advances lately have made it possible to deal with nearly all of these weeds in one way or another. Salvation jane, cape tulip, and the thistle family can all be readily dealt with in one way or another, albeit at considerable expense. The newest sprays for African daisy consist of a mixture of two chemicals—amitrol and ammonium thiocyanate—and although they are effective, they are expensive. Three-cornered jack can be dealt with by a spray that has recently been developed. Another weed of some importance which has occurred on the border of South Australia and New South Wales is called mesquite. This weed has caused us some worry, and we have placed it on our dangerous weeds list. It has established itself over 70,000,000 acres in the United States of America. Every year some new chemical treatment is devised or some other means are found to deal with weeds.

At this stage I turn to the details of the Bill, from which it will be clear what is proposed. Its main objects are to encourage councils (and to provide them with financial assistance) to carry out more regular and intensive programmes of weed control within their areas and to increase representation on the Weeds Advisory Committee. Section 6 of the principal Act provides for the constitution and appointment of the Weeds Advisory Committee. Subsection (2) of that section provides that the committee shall consist of such number of members, not exceeding seven, as the Minister from time to time determines. At present the committee consists of seven members, of whom the Director of Agriculture is Chairman, one is a member of the Pastoral Board and five are primary producers from various agricultural districts in the State. The Government considers, it desirable to increase the number of primary producers on the committee to six, and to enable this to be done clause 3 amends section 6 (2) by increasing the maximum number of members from seven to eight.

Clause 4 inserts in the Act a new section that will empower the Minister to pay subsidies to councils that employ local authorized officers for the purposes of weed control inspections and of enforcing the provisions of the Act. The new provision, it is felt, would encourage councils to carry out more regular and strenuous programmes of weed control in their areas and enable them to secure the services of officers with training or experience in this field. The new provision sets out the limits subject to which any such subsidy would be payable. The subsidy will not exceed 50 per cent of the remuneration paid by a council to its local authorized officer for carrying out weed control work. It will not be paid in respect of any local authorized officer who is also the district clerk or town clerk of the council nor will it be paid unless an authorized officer is employed for at least a period of 60 days or for at least one day in each week of the relevant financial year. This will ensure that a council must carry out a definite weed control programme in order to qualify for a subsidy. It is considered most desirable that authorized officers should be possessed of suitable qualifications. The new section accordingly provides that, after a period of five years, no subsidy will be paid in respect of authorized officers who are not qualified unless they are employed with the written permission of the Minister, who will have regard to the availability or otherwise of suitably qualified persons when permission is sought.

Section 19 of the principal Act sets out the basis on which contributions towards the destruction and control of weeds on public roads are to be made to district councils by owners of land abutting the road, and requires the councils concerned within one month of incurring any expense in this connection to give notice to the respective owners or occupiers of the amount of their contribution. The period of one month does not give councils sufficient time to assess the results of any treatment for weed destruction or control or whether fresh treatment would be necessary, and gives rise to additional work for councils when extra accounts have to be rendered for subsequent treatments. Clause 5 (a) accordingly extends this period to three months.

Section 19 applies only to contributions to district councils by adjoining landowners for weed control on public roads. Municipality were excluded from its application because of the administrative difficulties of recovering small contributions from many thousands of ratepayers in the more closely settled towns. However, the Corporation of the Town of Renmark is responsible for the largest area in the State, which includes much land used for agricultural and horticultural purposes, and the Government feels that this corporation should therefore be enabled to recover contributions from adjoining landowners for weed control on public roads. Clause 5 (6) accordingly extends the application of section 19 to that corporation.

At present, district councils are obliged to bear the cost of weed control on roads abutted by Crown lands. Clause 6 enacts a new section that empowers the Minister to reimburse those councils their expenses in that connection. A council will not be entitled to such reimbursement unless the manner and programme of the weed control are previously approved by the Minister.

Members will see that the Bill is in accordance with previously established principles, that the responsibility for weed control lies in the first instance with the landowner, and that control is administered through local government. Its provisions are a marked contribution to the work of local government in carrying out its functions, as a subsidy of up to one-half of the cost of its authorized officers will be made. On the other hand, it does not provide for the eradication of weeds, which is left as the responsibility of the landholder. I think the Bill will assist weed control in this State in a significant way. I believe we have made considerable progress in the last few years, and I think we have nothing to be ashamed of by comparison with other States. However, I believe we have a long way to go, and I think the programme envisaged in the Bill will be of significant assistance in reaching our eventual goal.

Mr. FRANK WALSH secured the adjournment of the debate.