

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Red faces over wetlands neglect

Amanda O'Brien

WEST Australian Auditor-General Des Pearson is not known for pulling punches and his final report to parliament this week was no exception. His scrutiny of state and federal government management of 12 internationally acclaimed wetlands is damning.

Pearson not only exposed serious failings to protect the wetlands and a worrying deterioration in at least two important sites, he also revealed a communications breakdown that has led to Australia not meeting its reporting obligations under an international treaty. This, he said, had diminished the value of the International Convention on Wetlands, to which 150 countries are signatories.

State Greens MP Paul Llewellyn summed up the mess: "If the Government can't get it right with our internationally recognised wetlands we're very concerned they're not going to get it right for the rest of our wetlands." The 12 internationally listed wetlands in Western Australia are just the tip of the iceberg. Another 108 wetlands in the state are deemed of national importance.

Pearson points out one reason wetlands are

so important is they provide a litmus test of the health of the rest of the environment. Both the state and federal environment ministers were quick to echo that sentiment. But that just makes it more difficult to fathom the mismanagement now exposed.

The WA sites, covering 496,000ha from the far north Kimberley to agricultural regions in the south, were listed in 1990 and 2000.

Yet Pearson has found half the sites have no management plans, there has been minimal expenditure of \$27,500 to \$40,000 a year at seven sites, and no dedicated funding from the state or commonwealth.

While criticising the lack of commitment from both governments, Pearson is most damning of the state. "While there is every evidence the people working on the management of these internationally recognised wetlands are committed to their protection, I am not assured that the state is equally committed," he said.

And it's hard to argue when Pearson also found the WA Government had failed for seven years to report to the commonwealth on the "known worsening in ecological character" of some sites. This had resulted in

the federal Government failing to report the changed conditions to the convention, as it is required to do.

Across Australia, 64 wetlands are listed under the international treaty, which is known as the Ramsar Convention. Pearson points out there is no agreed national methodology or indicators for assessing the wetlands and says this needs to be addressed. He also calls for the respective state and federal funding responsibilities to be clarified.

Following the report's release, the federal Government can look forward to advising the convention of its reporting failures. And the Victorian Government can look forward to Pearson taking up his role there as auditor-general. His exposure of the failings of both Liberal and Labor governments has kept the Perth media enthralled for 15 years.

Left to explain his Government's failings this week, WA Environment Minister Mark McGowan could say little: "These wetlands are basically the lifeblood of some of the birdlife that flies between different continents. We are keen to make sure they are managed better in the future."

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