



Ellis defends WA rail infrastructure

AGRICULTURAL Region MLC Brian Ellis raised the issue of grain transport in the Legislative Council recently in a move to clarify accusations from CBH that the rail network was to blame for shipping delays.

Before going into Parliament in 2007, Mr Ellis was a third-generation Bindi Bindi farmer.

His family have been grain producers for three generations, giving him a practical understanding of regional grain transport issues.

Mr Ellis said he was encouraged by the answer he received from Transport Minister Simon O'Brien last week, but was concerned the response was contrary to what CBH had been saying about the network's condition.

"Given the rumours of closures and downgrading, I asked Mr O'Brien to clarify the government's intentions regarding the rail infrastructure," Mr Ellis said.

"If CBH are going to blame the rail network for the grain handling problems we experienced this last harvest they are going down the wrong path.

"I would suggest it has more to do with teething problems with Grain Express and the newly deregulated wheat export market.

"I hope they will be better prepared for the next harvest than they were for this one."

WA's rail network is operated by WestNet Rail under a 49-year lease with the State Government.

The lease, which started in 2000, requires WestNet Rail to maintain the infrastructure at required standards.

Mr Ellis said he welcomed the Mr O'Brien's clarification that there was no plan to close the network and that he was committed to keeping the system operational.

"I am pleased that the Minister is examining the possibilities of further investment aimed at lifting standards and improving the overall network," Mr Ellis said.

"And I am particularly delighted that this may include finding new partners to invest in extending the line to the Mid West.

"The Minister has advised that he has already been speaking to the Federal Government about funding contributions, and I will be asking a further Parliamentary question regarding the outcome of his meeting in the near future with Federal Minister Anthony Albanese."

Mr Ellis said he questioned what

CBH were up to and why they were blaming the rail network for shipping delays.

"Maybe CBH need to look at their own management and the Grain Express model, and ask if there may be any other problems involved," he said.

"I am a strong supporter of CBH but questions need to be asked."

In a transcript of the questions, Mr O'Brien said there had been some incorrect reporting which suggested WestNet Rail, the rail network operator, would shut down lines that have not been used.

"I want to make a point quite clear to correct an error in that," Mr O'Brien said.

"I informed members that it is the Government's decision as to whether rail lines remained open or closed.

"That is the Government's decision.

"As the Minister, I want to make two things quite clear:

"Firstly, I will not support, in general, the closure of grain rail lines.

"There may be some incidental exceptions to that whereby we have a short spur line, but as a general rule, on behalf of the Government, I want to maintain the totality of the grain rail network."



□ Geraldton farmer Bruce Ley.