

22.03.29

11 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Infrastructure regarding sea lettuce in St. Aubin's Bay (OQ.56/2022)

Will the Minister advise what action is being taken to avoid a bloom of sea lettuce in St. Aubin's Bay as the time of year approaches when increasing light levels and higher temperatures drive its growth?

Deputy K.C. Lewis (The Minister for Infrastructure):

The Environment Department will be producing a report supported by scientific data which is intending to confirm where we are and help us to emphasise the importance of managing and avoiding the bloom. However, it must be remembered that this is not always within the Island's gift. As touched upon in the question, many natural factors play a part in producing the microalgae blooms and so are not within our control and, therefore, it is difficult to say how we can avoid a bloom. Natural events such as when water temperatures and weather conditions are particularly unfavourable for algae growth could avoid a bloom or, conversely, if they are favourable, they could encourage a bloom. In the meantime, officers from the Operations and Transport team will do what they can to minimise the impact through active clearance.

3.11.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I must say that, sometimes, I think we are using up our supplementaries to get an initial answer to a question but we will do it again. Can I ask the Minister at what point does he see the beach becoming unusable, as it is each year because it will become unusable again? Is the Minister saying that he has no control over that except clearance and, if it is clearance, can he give a schedule of that clearance so that we know when the beach will be usable again?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I think the Deputy is looking at the wrong end of the telescope. Operations and Transport are clearing this up. We are not causing this. Nitrates on the land is something that causes this and our colleagues in Environment and Planning are constantly talking to farmers and growers to reduce the quantity of nitrates they do put on the land. This is having an effect and nitrates are reducing. There are quite a few factors involved. Obviously, the bay warms up very, very easily during the summer months. The Island slopes from north to south so most of the runoff comes out in St. Aubin's Bay. We have at least 4 runoff pipes taking fresh water off the land there, we have the sewerage treatment works which comes out to the bay, there are nutrients there as well and this is all part of the problem that we are trying to control. We do have a new sewerage treatment plant coming online in the not-too-distant future but that is not really the problem. Nitrates on the land is the problem. Growers, farmers and dairy farmers are all doing their best to reduce the nitrate because we have to watch what goes into our fresh drinking water. Our colleagues at Jersey Water do their very best to minimise the amount of nitrates going into the water. We also have to watch what goes into boreholes, so the use of nitrates is critical. As I say, we are the clear-up team basically. We do our best to keep the beaches clean. It is very difficult.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I think I will have to ask you to draw your answer to that supplementary to a conclusion.

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Within all that time, the answer to the question of the schedule of clearance was not answered.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

I think you will get another shot at the end, Deputy.

3.11.2 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am beginning to think this is part of the Government's strategy to create more green open spaces in and around St. Helier and let us just hope they do not end up getting built on and rezoned for affordable housing. There clearly is a disconnect between the Minister's department and the Environment Department and I sympathise that it is his job to clean the beaches up and he has acknowledged that the problem at the base is nitrates getting into our waters. Does he believe, like me, that it is a problem when the Environment Department routinely issue dispensations to Jersey Water when they go above the legal limit of nitrates they are allowed to have in the water? What that does is it fundamentally stops anybody, including them, addressing the problem. Were they to be fined by the department, they would then start talking to farmers saying: "It is completely unacceptable that these nitrates are getting into the water table in the first place."

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I cannot speak for Jersey Water. I know they do their very best to minimise nitrates coming into the system but they can only work with what they have. We only have one water supply on Island and that comes from rainfall and runoffs through the land. I am not sure where the Deputy wants me to go with this but we do our very best. There is no disconnect. My team are in constant conversations with the environment team and I know that the Environment Department are doing their best working with stakeholders. I think we are down by a quarter the amount of nitrates that enters the water supply so, obviously, there is still a way to go but this is a problem that affects many countries in the world from the United States, Australia and China. Where you have largescale agriculture next to the sea, this quite often happens. I am not saying it is an excuse. We do our best to minimise it and if we can eradicate it completely, we will do.

3.11.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

I heard of this phenomenon in the past called OneGov but I am not sure what that is. It is just another once upon a time fairy story in Jersey because it seems that we do not have a joined-up government. The question I would ask is that, in terms of what the Minister is directly in control of - and it seems to me to be the sewer network and the water overflow network - is he able to do anything in his department to start to find those who pollute in terms of whether it is an ecocide policy about nitrates and other pollutants getting into the water table which then not only cause problems like the sea lettuce in St. Aubin's Bay but are very costly to then remedy?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Fining comes under the remit of the Environment Department and I know they do fine people. We have several reservoirs on the Island and one or 2 have become polluted over the years with pesticides, glyphosates, et cetera, and various other products that have been put on the land. They have been, I am glad to say, eradicated but sometimes Jersey Water has to flush out some of the reservoirs and blend it with other reservoirs to make sure that any toxins are kept to an absolute

minimum. I cannot speak for Jersey Water. I know they do their very best to provide an excellent product. As I say, I am not sure where the Deputy wants me to go. We are not disjointed. We know what the problem is. The Environment Department are trying to solve it and we are trying to solve it.

3.11.4 The Constable of St. Brelade:

The Minister alluded earlier to the new sewerage treatment works. Can he be a bit more accurate as to when it will become on stream and will it contribute towards the mitigation of this problem?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

It will contribute towards alleviating the problem. The water that goes into St. Aubin's Bay is obviously clean before it goes out but there are nutrients in the water than can aggravate the problem. We do have a new sewerage treatment works coming online in the not-too-distant future. I am happy to show Members around that very soon. It is coming along very nicely but, as I say, we are limited in what we can do. We are at the bottom end, if you like. We just clear up the bay. Obviously, there is a contributing effect from the sewerage treatment works. If you are showering, water has nitrates in it and when it reaches Bellozanne, we cannot take it out or very little anyway so this is a problem we have to tackle at the source in both senses of the word.

3.11.5 The Constable of St. Brelade:

Can I ask the Minister to expand on "not-too-distant future" with regard to the operation of the sewerage treatment works please?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I believe 2023.

3.11.6 Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade:

Could the Minister advise how much it cost the Jersey taxpayers last year to clean it up and how much has been included in this year's budget to do the same?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I do not have the exact figure. I have it written down here but it is going to take me a while to find it. I need to come back to the Deputy on that but I believe it is about 2,500 tonnes that has been moved.

3.11.7 The Deputy of St. Martin:

The Minister answered a question from Deputy Tadier about Jersey Water exceeding nitrate levels in drinking water but is the Minister aware that Jersey Water have had to seek any dispensation in recent years?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Yes, and as I mentioned, our colleagues in Environment are monitoring that very carefully but, as I say, we are just dealing with the remnants of that.

3.11.8 The Deputy of St. Martin:

It is just a question, Minister. Is the Minister saying yes, he is aware of dispensations being given to Jersey Water in recent years?

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I believe that is the case, I am not totally sure. My information is probably no better than the Deputy's.

3.11.9 Deputy R.J. Ward:

It is clear from the answers that you cannot stop the cause, so can I ask the Minister whether he will produce a schedule of clearance when it happens for the residents, the businesses, and indeed my dog who hurt his leg on it last year, slipping when he was out for a walk? We know we can use the beaches in a way that is not just, well, unusable, to be quite frank.

Deputy K.C. Lewis:

I do not have a schedule for cleaning; cleaning is done as and when required. We clean the beaches on behalf of tourism and the people of Jersey. We do not dictate when it arrives.

[11:30]

Sometimes it can be quite bad and we know there is a huge storm coming the following day and that normally clears it but it is awful. I want to see golden, sandy beaches as much as everybody else but it is a problem and it is a problem we are dealing with.

Deputy M. Tadier:

If it helps the Deputy of St. Martin, there was a dispensation in 2020 issue for pollutants.

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

Thank you for that, Deputy, but we have finished the question now.