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Auditor General finds agencies need to do more to manage the growing impact of salinity

In the latest report tabled in Parliament today the Auditor General found that without some level of intervention, the area of land affected by salinity in the South West of WA could more than double over the next 50 to 100 years.

Acting Auditor General, Sandra Labuschagne said intervention on such a scale is a huge task and needs to be balanced against the possible cost, which could also be large.

‘Estimates show that salinity affects between 1 and 2 million hectares, potentially rising to 5 million, and costs over half a billion dollars a year just in lost agricultural production,’ she said.

‘The scale of the problem is daunting, but so is the scale of the action that would be needed to eliminate salinity and Government needs to decide what is feasible and economically sound.’

Dryland salinity adds significant costs to agriculture, causes damage to road, rail and building infrastructure and affects water resources and biodiversity.

It is caused by the clearing of deep rooted native vegetation for shallow rooted annual crops and pasture, which changes the water balance. As water tables rise, salt stored deep in the sub-soil is carried up to the surface and eventually discharged into waterways.

The Auditor General’s report found that since 2008, there had been a lack of strategic direction and agencies had reduced monitoring the extent and impact of salinity.

‘Although the State Salinity Strategy stopped 10 years ago, and salinity has received little attention since, it remains a significant threat and can’t be ignored,’ Ms Labuschagne said.

‘Managing dryland salinity is a shared responsibility, with shared benefits, and experience to date indicates that effectiveness relies on coordinated local action.

‘In the absence of strategic direction, agencies have focused on protecting individual assets with some success, however there needs to be coordination of effort between agencies and landholders.

‘Any recovery will take decades at best, so agencies, landholders and communities will have to adapt to salinity, and focus on mitigating its spread and impact.

‘To do this, agencies need to take urgent steps to understand the extent and impact of salinity, the best options in tackling it, and develop effective partnerships to get things done.

‘Without this, the impact of salinity on agriculture, the environment and communities will continue to grow,’ Ms Labuschagne said.

The Auditor General’s report, *Management of Salinity* (Report 8 – May 2018), is available on the Office of the Auditor General website at www.audit.wa.gov.au

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