

MERGER FALLOUT

Alarm over axed rivers watchdog

■ **Kate Emery and Gareth Parker**

WA's foremost water researcher says the axing of a stand-alone body to manage the Swan and Canning rivers is a backward step for a river system "close to disaster".

University of WA's Centre for Water Research director Jorg Imberger suggested the State Government had chosen to merge the Swan River Trust with the Department of Parks and Wildlife because the trust had become "a nuisance" for a Government that did not care about fixing the river.

Professor Imberger said the Government's stance was no different under past governments, which had also been unwilling to do what was necessary, but the lack of concern for the river was "an absolute disgrace".

"It's a sad situation all around," he said.

Conservation Council of WA director Piers Verstegen shared Professor Imberger's concerns, suggesting the decision was "motivated by political convenience".

"One of the most important roles that the trust has is to provide independent monitoring and information on the state of the river," Mr Verstegen said.

"It appears that government has given up on tackling the serious issues facing the river and now they are trying to make the issue go away by removing the body that monitors the condition of the river."

Environment Minister Albert Jacob said the decision would enhance protection of the river because the trust's 50 staff would now be able to draw on expertise among the Department of Parks and Wildlife's 1500 staff.

He said the decision was consistent with the Government's plan to streamline management of river parks into the same agency responsible for national parks, nature reserves and other conservation areas.

"The new joint workforce will bring together scientists, conservation and ecosystem management experts, planners and landscape architects as well as project managers with expertise in delivering significant capital works," he said.

Mr Jacob said the decision, which comes after the State Budget failed to include \$16 million of election commitments for the rivers, was budget-neutral and jobs would not be lost.

The Opposition said the river

would suffer from the abolition of a "focused" body with protection of the Swan catchment as its sole aim.

"The Government is killing the guardian of our State's major river," Opposition Leader and former environment minister Mark McGowan said.

The reaction was not all negative, with Tourism Council WA chief executive Evan Hall suggesting it would encourage ecotourism on the Swan and Canning rivers. "The amalgamation will streamline red tape for new tourism operators while raising the environmental standards for tourism on the river," Mr Hall said.

The West Australian believes trust staff learnt of the decision yesterday.

SWAN RIVER BUST

- Swan River Trust agency will be axed.
- Most trust staff will join Department of Parks and Wildlife.
- Department will take over river management.
- Trust board will advise Environment Minister.