

# Protection of our rivers must be paramount

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The declining health of the Swan River has been the subject of environmental and political debate for too many years. While the talk has gone on, and various solutions proposed, tried and sometimes discarded, the iconic waterway has endured mass fish deaths, algal blooms, chemical contamination, stagnation and even unexplained dolphin deaths.

The State Government is constantly under pressure to do more to save the system from permanent decline. At first glance, this makes its decision to scrap the Swan River Trust and absorb it into the Department of Parks and Wildlife seem like a backward step.

The Trust is the government agency with the sole purpose of managing the Swan-Canning system. Its 50-odd staff monitor river health and advise government on policy.

Environment Minister Albert Jacob says the decision to bring it under the Parks and Wildlife banner will improve resources for the management and protection of the rivers and catchments. This may be true but many observers say its focus may not be as sharp within a bigger department as it is in a single agency with one specific goal.

Mr Jacob also makes the curious claim that the move delivers on an election commitment — curious because the scrapping of the Trust was not suggested before or during this year's election campaign. In fact, the Government promised to boost Swan River funding by \$16 million but failed to provide the money in the Budget last month. It also scrapped plans for a third oxygenation plant,

a move that saved \$1 million.

There is good reason for thinking that dumping the Swan River Trust is primarily an effort to save money at a time when the Government faces serious Budget problems.

That does not necessarily make it the wrong decision. The question that must be considered by those who argue the Trust should be left untouched is whether it is achieving anything tangible. That is open to interpretation but one thing appears clear — the Swan's health is not getting any better.

Despite the efforts to maintain the river system, the Trust said in its annual report last October that it was not meeting many indicators of river health, including nitrogen, phosphorous and chlorophyll levels. It conceded that these measures were unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future.

One expert recently described the Swan as “being like a cemetery” — healthy looking on the surface but decaying underneath.

The Trust is active in monitoring and measuring the health of the waterways but there is no clear sign that it is able to do anything practical to arrest their decline.

A new form of management may not be a bad thing but the Government must not use the move to reduce efforts to protect the river and hide the fact within a wider bureaucracy.

The people of Perth and WA have always treasured the Swan River and will demand that serious effort is made to protect it. If anything, this effort should be strengthened, not weakened. Any government which underestimates the importance of this issue will suffer a public backlash.