

SENATOR R. JOHNSON: Mr. President, I just wanted to clarify some things that have been mentioned on this issue. As the bill was originally introduced, it would have allowed the department to go on a permissive basis as opposed to a mandated basis as it is now and participate...sort of a supervisor or a role over the counties on this situation. To answer Senator Warner's question about other programs that we have the ability to hold funds from, I can't give you a specific answer, Senator Warner. However, in an Attorney General's Opinion that was sent to Senator Vickers, the Attorney General highlighted that, in his words, we have no concerns with the mechanism for withholding funds for the failure to enforce the laws. Such procedures are now available in other situations under state law. I don't know what those other situations might be at this time, but I do have some concerns with the bill overall if this amendment and the committee amendment is finally adopted because, certainly, it changes the whole mechanism of the bill, the whole gist of the bill. Certainly, we all who live in rural areas have a great deal of concern with noxious weeds, specifically musk thistle, which seems to be one of the most prevalent problems we have in the state and I am not sure who is going to be judging or who is going to be out there trying to get those counties to participate in this program and who is going to be reporting to the Director of Agriculture as to how...what counties are and are not participating in the programs and doing their responsibility. With the budget cuts that we made in the noxious weed program during the most recent special session, it is pretty clear that the department is not going to have the funds to put field representatives out there to regulate this program. However, I suppose we can go back in and either shift some funds around in the department or maybe even appropriate new funds or other funds to support this program if this bill should pass. But I doubt very much that you are going to see too many counties coming to the Director of Agriculture and sort of report themselves as not participating in the program because I am assuming they are the only people who are going to have an interest in this issue. However, there may be some landowners out there or concerned citizens who may report to the Director of Agriculture that the county has not been doing a very good job of keeping the noxious weed population down. We all want to do what we can to address this issue and the committee, as a whole when we argued over this whole issue,