

**INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF THE CRONULLA
FISHERIES RESEARCH CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE**

Name: Dr Steve Montgomery

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SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON CRONULLA FISHERIES CLOSURE

Dr S. Montgomery

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

My submission concentrates upon issues affecting scientific staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Institute (CFRC). I submit that the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSWDPI) failed to follow the policy titled 'Agency Change Management Guidelines' of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and that the NSW government's actions in relocating scientific staff at the CFRC is not consistent with the government's 'NSW 2021 Plan'. If the procedures detailed in the policy had been adhered to, then the relocation of scientific staff from the CFRC would have been found not to be sensible. The decision to relocate staff at the CFRC was made without a business case, without budget estimates, without a cabinet submission, without an organisational plan that considered the relocations and with little analysis of the likely impact on staff. The relocation is inconsistent with the vision of the 'NSW 2021 Plan' for better service delivery and a world class public service. World experts in population biology at CFRC will not relocate, causing service delivery to diminish and the international reputation of CFRC to be lost. The lack of robust data will force the government to invoke the precautionary principle when managing the state's seafood resources and the government will not be able to meet its legislative responsibilities of reporting on the sustainability of these resources. Relocating fisheries positions to Orange in the 1990s showed at great cost to the tax payer that this strategy severely reduces service delivery. Apart from not following procedures or being consistent with the 'NSW 2021 Plan', CFRC has significant historical importance. The CFRC is an important indigenous cultural site and is part of European, Australian history. The site has several indigenous middens, is the birth place of the Australian fishing industry and the first fisheries research centre in the southern hemisphere. The CFRC needs to be maintained so that (i) high quality service delivery continues, (ii) the centre's international reputation as a world leader in fish population biology remains and (iii) Australia's cultural heritage is preserved.

SUBMISSION

I have been a scientist with the NSW government agency responsible for the management of seafood resources in New South Wales (NSW) since 1975. I hold the personal performance level of Principal Research Scientist within the NSW Public Service, Research Scientist Classification and will leave the NSW public service on 2nd August 2012. My submission concentrates upon issues affecting scientific staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Institute (CFRC) relating to the announcement on 8th September 2011 by the NSW Minister for Primary industries to relocate staff from the CFRC. I submit that the NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSWDPI) failed to follow the policy titled 'Agency Change Management Guidelines' of the Departments of the Premier and Cabinet and that the NSW government's actions in relocating scientific staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre is not consistent with its 'NSW 2021 Plan'.

An article in the St George Leader on 26th July 2012 states that 'an earlier release of documents obtained (under freedom of information) by the *Herald* showed this decision was made without a business case, without costings, without a cabinet submission and with little analysis of the likely impact on staff. Further, no reorganisation of staff and functions has been announced to staff. Something that clearly must happen to be consistent with the locations staff are being relocated to. This reorganisation could influence whether staff relocate.

Articles by the St George Leader on 11th September 2011, Fishing World 29th September 2011 and Sydney Morning Herald 25th February 2012 all quote estimates greater than \$ 9 million to complete this relocation. Further the Sydney Morning Herald article on 25th 2012 suggests that bureaucrats had no estimate of the cost of relocating staff from CFRC before the relocation was announced and in fact were examining ways to avoid a business plan and so

prevent the scrutiny of NSW Treasury. Major costs associated with this relocation are (i) a laboratory to be built at the Port Stephens Research Centre (PSRC), (ii) office space to be leased or built at the Sydney Institute of Marine Science (SIMS), and (iii) at least existing buildings to be fitted out to accommodate over 150 positions at the different areas. Then there are the costs of relocating staff members who do move and redundancy pay-outs to those who do not move. This is a waste of taxpayers money considering the facilities and running costs of CFRC.

The work done at the CFRC is extremely specialised requiring methodical, standard practices done on a continuum. Worldwide this essential research is done institutions funded by taxpayers so that long-term databases are maintained in a standard way that allows comparisons to be made across the time series. Scientists with this expertise are therefore only found with the government employer. The CFRC offers great facilities for students and scientists of marine studies. Over the past few years there have been in excess of \$ 1.5 million of public monies spent to refurbish the laboratory and aquarium centre. These are now world-class facilities, offering the opportunity to do experiments with sufficient replication to produce robust answers. This refurbishment included modernising the laboratory for aging fishes.

Closing CFRC is not consistent with the vision of the "NSW 2021" Plan for better service delivery and under Goal 30 of the plan to 'support our Public Service to become a world leader'. Closing the CFRC will reduce service delivery because the New South Government will not be able to meet its legislative reporting obligations about the sustainability of wild-caught seafood resources. Under the Fisheries Management ACT (1994) (FMA), Environmental Planning and Assessment Act (1979) (EPA) and the Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) (EPB&C) the NSW government is required to report periodically on the sustainability of the state's wild caught seafood resources. The capacity to deliver credible reports will be diminished because of a

loss of expertise and because world class facilities are being closed such that scientists will no longer have the infrastructure support to do world class science in the field of population biology as easily. It is estimated that as many as 90% of scientific staff at CFRC will not relocate. This will equate to a loss of much corporate knowledge and expertise in the assessment of wild seafood stocks. In addition, if all vacant positions are not filled once staff leave (this is a likely scenario because the Department needs to reduce their Salaries budgets), then there will not be the work force nor skill base to maintain data bases about the population biology of seafood resources. Under this scenario assessments of stocks will be relying on out of date data which means that less confidence will be placed upon results. There will be no evidence about whether the data used reflects the present situation. If there is less confidence in the assessment then there is a higher risk that seafood stocks are being managed unsustainably. In this circumstance the government is required under national and international agreements to implement precautionary principles which could severely affect the fishing operations of commercial and recreational fishers. In the case of the EPB&C Act commercial fishers may lose their licence to sell seafood overseas.

Service delivery will be affected also because not only will world renowned scientists be leaving the organisation, but those remaining are being scattered to three locations. Good science delivery relies upon interaction between scientists and much of this occurs through face to face discussions with results and ideas on the table. This cannot all be done with modern communications but rather a lot of the efficiency here comes from impromptu discussion. This will be hampered through scientists being located at different locations. Further, having scientific functions spread over three locations means that infrastructure such as laboratories, administration support staff and motor vehicles and vessels must be replicated at each location. This increases operational costs.

Service delivery will be affected also by the reduction in quality of research facilities at the relocation venues. Placing scientists at three locations will mean that either the one fish aging

laboratory at CFRC will need to be replicated at three sites or scientists at the locations without a fish aging facility will be less efficient at their jobs.

The quality of facilities at CFRC is also not equalled at other locations because the Cronulla site offers high quality seawater to the aquaria facilities. Much of the research of fisheries scientists at the CFRC requires maintaining animals in captivity and marine animals are extremely sensitive to the quality of their environment, particularly the seawater. The CFRC is situated at a site which delivers the highest quality seawater. Many experiments at other facilities around Australia have failed because of the poor quality of seawater in which experimental animals were placed. The Port Stephens Research Centre (PSRC) is an example of this. Consequently long running experiments at PSRC run the risk of failing because seawater quality cannot be maintained indefinitely. Under these conditions scientists will not be able to provide the same world class, robust science that they do at the moment.

The CFRC is an important part of Australian history. It should be held in the same reverence as the Elizabeth MacArthur Agricultural Institute, as the starting point for the Agriculture Industry in Australia. Under various names, the now Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre was the site from which fisheries resources of Australia were explored and the fishing industry developed. It was the first fisheries research centre in Australia and probably the southern hemisphere. Its buildings date back to 1902, these being purpose built at the time for fisheries research. Since that time the site has housed fisheries scientists from either NSW or Commonwealth government agencies. It is the site which based the first chief scientist of fisheries in Australia, Harald Dannevig. From this base he surveyed the fish resources of eastern Australia to as far south as Macquarie Island and westwards in to Bass Strait as far as Western Australia. Amongst many gifted fisheries scientists and oceanographers, it has housed the first oceanographic scientists in Australia, the Chair of the International Whaling Commission and scientists who advised that body, who discovered deepwater resources and surveyed the prawn resources of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

As a consequence of its history the site has 3 buildings that are listed under the NSW Heritage Act; namely, (i) the Hatchery which now houses a world-class fisheries laboratory, (ii) the boat shed which is part of an information centre and (iii) a fish pond which together with the adjoining aquaria building offers first class facilities for doing experiments in a marine environment.

In addition, the site has indigenous cultural significance. CFRC is strewn with indigenous middens three of which are recognised under the Heritage Act as being worthy of conservation and protection. As part of the high school education program at the CFRC indigenous leaders take great pride in talking to students about how their people lived on this land and the importance of this land to them.

The fact is that the NSW government is closing a research centre with an international reputation for excellence where scientists from overseas wish to come and work and where scientists from within CFRC are invited to overseas conferences to present plenary lectures and to be members of Steering Committees to oversee the research done by other organisations. The publication records of scientists at the centre and their standing on the Research Scientist Classification salary scale compared to other Departments is testimony to these facts.

The expertise of scientists at the CFRC has been recognised in the NSW Industrial Commission. In 1986 the NSW Department of Agriculture relocated staff of NSW Fisheries from the city to the present site of the CFRC without the offer of any compensation for relocation disturbances. The NSW Public Service Association representing staff of NSW Fisheries took the NSW Department of Agriculture to arbitration. Justice Bower in handing down his decision in 1987 based much of his reasoning around the fact that scientists at NSW Fisheries were a specialist group and that the NSW government was the sole employer of

people with these skills in NSW. To pursue their careers staff had no option but to relocate with their positions or, seek a position with another organisation doing similar research but this would be interstate or overseas. The same circumstance exists today.

Overall NSW DPI has not shown sufficient sensitivity toward staff or their families. In asking scientists at CFRC to relocate, the Department is forcing these people to move there place of residence one way or the other because there is only one employer of fisheries scientists in NSW and that is NSW DPI. This has placed pressure on families and partnerships where each contributes an income to the household. Partners have careers and do not want to leave their jobs and children also have friendships and school associations which need consideration. The NSW DPI offered no solution for assisting in employment opportunities for partners and family members of staff relocating. Remembering that Coffs Harbour and Port Stephens are areas of high unemployment already, the Department is asking staff to move their families to areas where it is likely that there will be a reduction in household income for some time until family members can find suitable employment.

No matter under what banner, the NSW government agency responsible for managing the state's seafood resources (NSW Fisheries) requires high levels of interaction between staff. This is needed to control the fishing of around 1000 commercial and over 1 million recreational fishers on over 103 seafood species. Administration staff confer with scientists about the reported catch of fishers to determine whether a fisher's catch reporting is legitimate and scientists and fisheries officers confer over illegal fishing. It has been my experience that fisheries management works best when there are teams consisting of members from within all branches of NSW Fisheries. This is made far simpler when all staff are centrally located. History has shown that breaking up NSW Fisheries and relocating staff to country areas does not work. This is not the first time that the staff of NSW Fisheries have been decentralised. All staff except fisheries officers and scientists were relocated to Orange in the early 1990s. Within 2 years it was acknowledged that the relocation to Orange had

severely reduced the efficiencies of NSW Fisheries because staff could not interact effectively with each other nor with their stakeholders who were scattered primarily along the coast from Tweed Heads to Eden. Consequently all staff were relocated back to Sydney at a great cost to the tax payer.

I recommend the following solution to the current situation. If opinion is that the NSW Government is not in the business of fisheries research then they should examine the model used in Tasmania where the functions of scientific arm of the fisheries agency works within the infrastructure of the University of Tasmania (please see the websites www.tchange.com.au/opportunities/tafi.html and www.imas.utas.edu.au/about-imas). The current CFRC should become a similar campus of either a single University or group of Universities and still fulfil the population biology functions described above. University and high school students could come to the centre for course work and to do graduate degrees. These would have office space onsite and use of the other research facilities. CFRC scientists would be part of the University(s) and would do the contractual work stipulated by the NSW government . The CFRC already supports many graduate research projects and hosts workshops for school and undergraduate university students.

The NSW Department of Primary Industries has not followed its own policies for reorganising or relocating an agency. There was no consulting with staff before the Minister for Primary Industries announced the relocation, overall staff and their families have not been treated with sensitivity, there was not business plan (including organisational plan) made prior to the announcement and neither cabinet nor government members seem to have been consulted. The relocation of scientific staff at CFRC will:

- be a great financial cost to tax payers,
- result in a loss of expertise as approximately 90% of scientific staff at CFRC are expected to leave rather than relocate,

- result in a reduction in service delivery, and
- reduce the capacity of the Minister for Primary Industries to fulfil the responsibilities detailed in the FMA.

Considering its heritage value and the world-class functions staff there perform, the CFRC should remain as the NSW government's centre from where population biologists provide expert scientific advice about the sustainability of the state's seafood resources.

Dr. S. Montgomery

30th July 2012