

Submission
No 30

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence (Inquiry)

Dear Sir/Madam,

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Upper House inquiry into the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Centre of Excellence.

I have been a fisheries research worker located at Cronulla for over 20 years and I believe I have a good understanding of the role of the Cronulla centre to ensure that fishery resources in NSW are managed in a sustainable way, a primary legislative requirement of the NSW Department of Primary Industries. It is widely recognised that NSW has some of the best managed fisheries within Australia. I believe the closure will result in a serious threat to sustainably managed fisheries in NSW. Reduced capacity, a dysfunctional 'structure' and loss of specialist expertise will result in the government being unable to meet their legislative requirements.

The Department has been unable to clearly articulate the reasons for the closure and perceived benefits that would be a result of relocating services to regional centres.

This lack of a clear rationale has resulted in a shambolic, obscure, unprofessional relocation program that has left staff bewildered, baffled and angry.

It would be impossible to fully explain or query everything in one submission as there are so many interacting elements to this story. My colleagues and other concerned citizens will no doubt provide ample material to cover all aspects of this debacle.

My submission aims to concentrate on some key areas that hopefully the inquiry can provide answers for.

1. What were the circumstances that led to the decision to close Cronulla Fisheries and who or whom was responsible for this decision?
2. Why was it considered necessary to close Cronulla and relocate fishery services?
3. Impacts of the loss of expertise – a case study

1. What were the circumstances that led to the decision to close Cronulla Fisheries and who or whom was responsible for this decision?

The lack of a clear rationale as to why the Cronulla relocation was necessary has resulted in many Cronulla employees speculating who was behind this decision. I hope the Inquiry can determine in some detail how this situation arose.

The Minister has repeatedly stated 'the decision has been made'. But who made that decision? Surely it cannot be the Minister alone who one day over a cup of tea thought it would be a good idea to close down a government department and disrupt the lives of hundreds of people. What advice did the Minister receive re the Cronulla closure and from whom?

The following is the most plausible scenario that explains the closure of Cronulla: Recent management initiatives limited the activities of some north coast commercial fishers. These actions led to a small number of disgruntled operators placing their concerns directly to their local members of parliament via representation from the Professional Fishers Association of NSW. Blame for fishers' restrictions was placed at the feet of managers and researchers based at Cronulla.

The solution to their problems? Once the National Party gained power at the last State election, close down Cronulla, break up the effectiveness of the organisation via a regional 'restructuring' and involve commercial fishers at the centre of management, ignoring other stakeholders. By and large, they have achieved their aim.

Once a course of action was decided, the decision was not put to cabinet for discussion.

If this scenario is indeed found to be the case, this has been done completely outside governmental and fisheries management decision making processes and smacks of 'payback' for fishers' perceived problems. When did a section of government receive a mandate to behave in such a unilateral fashion?

The above scenario requires further investigation to uncover the truth behind the decision to close Cronulla and uncover the people and pathways that led to this decision being implemented.

Until the facts surrounding the reasons for Cronulla to close is determined there is a complete lack of faith amongst staff and other stakeholders in this government's ability to manage the State's fishery resources in a fair and equitable manner.

2. Why was it considered necessary to close Cronulla and relocate fishery services?

The primary reason given by the government to close Cronulla was as part of the NSW National Party policy "A Decade of Decentralisation" (see attachment A).

This 'policy' consists of 8 dot points containing brief statements that aim to improve services to regional communities in NSW.

This is a noble and worthwhile aim but enacting important and far-reaching changes to government services and people's lives based on a flimsy set of 'values' does not appear to be in the interests of good government or the people that this 'policy' will impact.

Could the Inquiry determine if there are further policy details that extend beyond the 8 dot points? For example, is there a cross-departmental committee or planning body that identifies suitable government divisions for decentralisation, to find suitable locations and facilities for relocated services and to assess the cost-benefits of proposed decentralisations? In short, a body to determine the best possible use of taxpayer money to make relocations across all government departments a financial and social success.

Or is this 'policy' merely something to be trotted out on an ad-hoc basis as an excuse to justify job-shedding and cost-cutting?

What are the overarching legislative arrangements that control this decentralisation policy? Are there any guidelines that underpin this policy? There is a distinct lack of clarity surrounding this extremely important piece of government decision making.

Decentralising government departments requires considerable resources and careful planning to ensure successful relocation of services.

There is a wealth of literature relating to the topic of decentralising government from metropolitan to regional centres. I refer the committee to one such recent study which provides a review of the decentralisation of government core services in Australia (see Attachment B). I recommend the Inquiry read this report to understand all of the factors that need to be considered when government services are to be relocated to regional areas.

This report aims to determine the principal influencing factors in the success or failure of decentralisation of services. Its main conclusion is that the potential benefits of relocation can outweigh the risks attached. However.....

"..... the majority of these risks can be mitigated with the employment of a diligent planning approach with a clear business rationale, and a considered, managed and controlled long-term strategy. Decentralisation projects that have a sound business case for relocating, where benefits are sustainable and part of a long-term plan, and where employees are of high priority, minimise the risk of difficulties."(Ward 2007).

In the case of Cronulla *none* of the above key points have been taken into account and doom this relocation to be one with a high risk of failure. There does not appear to be any attempt by this government to take their own policy seriously. The negative impact to government finances, to fishery services, to staff and the management of fishery resources will be profound if this relocation proceeds.

Why was it considered necessary to move ALL the functions out of Cronulla to regional areas? In recognition that some functions were to remain in Sydney, there has been a scramble to find sites in the Sydney Basin to house these Sydney-based staff. Why these staff could not remain at Cronulla as a cost effective option is baffling.

The current situation, almost a *year* after the announcement to relocate Cronulla, is still a state of confusion. Facilities to house relocated staff at other sites are still not finalised, no staff structure reflecting the proposed moves is in place and there has been no attempt to synchronize or understand the IT requirements between disparate locations.

The lack of planning for this relocation is nothing short of appalling with changes in plans from week to week, demoralised staff and still no clear understanding of how this department is to function across several work sites.

3. Impacts of the loss of expertise – case study

The closure will (and has already) lead to an exodus of skilled and talented staff that are unwilling or unable to relocate to a regional location.

I have spent over 20 years involved in recreational fisheries assessments. The Department recognises that NSW has a large recreational fisheries sector and modest commercial and aquaculture sectors in comparison to other States in Australia. There are over 1 million recreational fishers that reside in NSW. The recreational fishing sector has the potential to have greater impacts when measuring harvest quantities of target species, socio-economic impacts, interactions with natural habitats and ecological processes than the commercial or aquaculture sectors.

Estimating the impacts of recreational fishing is a difficult and complex area of research. Recreational fishers are diffuse, diverse, utilise a multitude of fishing methods and habitats and are not required to report their activities to any authority. Monitoring recreational fisheries requires a variety of survey techniques to provide estimates of retained harvest, released catch and fishing effort.

In contrast, commercial fishers are legally required to report their effort and catch to Fisheries NSW and are managed on the basis of the information they provide.

It is essential that Fisheries NSW monitor the impacts of recreational fishing to ensure that fish stocks shared by recreational, commercial and indigenous users are managed on a sustainable basis. Without knowledge of recreational harvests we would be managing stocks blind to the significant consequences of the impact of recreational fishing.

At Cronulla, we have a small research team dedicated to monitoring of recreational fishing and have contributed significantly to the science of estimating recreational fishing impacts. My supervisor has developed a national and international reputation

for advances in this area of research but will be leaving the department as a result of the Cronulla closure. This will seriously degrade our ability to contribute data to ensure sustainable management of fish stocks in NSW, therefore the Department will be unable to meet its legislative responsibilities.

This loss of expertise is widespread across many specialist areas such as fish biology, stock assessment and monitoring, among others. Its not only specialist research expertise that will suffer, sectors of licensing and management are suffering loss of expertise as well.

To date, there has been nothing forthcoming about replacement of specialist staff or what staff structures are to be in place to ensure the department can remain functional, nearly a year since the announcement to close Cronulla.

Summary

The above points are a few issues among many that need to be resolved by the Inquiry. I call upon the Inquiry to recommend reversing the decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Centre of Excellence and retain the unique facilities and expertise resident at the centre before it's too late.

Many thanks for your time,

