

**Submission
No 70**

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF THE CRONULLA FISHERIES RESEARCH CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Organisation: National Parks Association of NSW, Nature Conservation
Council of NSW, Australian Marine Conservation Society,
Humane Society International

Date received: 30/07/2012



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**

The Director
Select Committee on Cronulla Fisheries
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000
Fax: (02) 9230 2981

30 July 2012

Dear Director,

Closure of Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence

Our organisations collectively represent tens of thousands of NSW citizens who are concerned about the ecological sustainability of our fisheries. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. We are very concerned by the NSW Government's decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence (Cronulla FRCE) as fisheries management must be underpinned by strong, ongoing scientific research. The closure of the Cronulla FRCE will have a severe impact on fisheries research in NSW, ultimately threatening the sustainability of fish stocks and the health of the marine environment. We urge the NSW Government to reverse this decision.

We note that the Inquiry has nine terms of reference, however we have limited our comments to the following six terms of reference.

a) The basis for the decision including the documents and other records that were considered by the Minister, including any economic or financial analysis

This decision appears to have been made without a business case or an appropriate evaluation of the expenditure required for implementation. There are very significant costs associated with this relocation, including leasing new offices at both Coffs Harbour and Nowra; moving scientific equipment, libraries and files; building new facilities to accommodate the research needs of the scientists; relocating scientists and their families; and replacing the many staff who are unwilling or unable to move.

Given the extent of research conducted at Cronulla, the current site is highly cost effective. A closure would mean the rejuvenation works that were undertaken at the site over the last few years will be wasted and additional costs at new facilities will be incurred. For example, it has been estimated

that the facility at Port Stephens will need a new research laboratory to replace the one at Cronulla (built at a cost of \$1 million in 2006¹).

b) What consultation was undertaken prior to the decision with stakeholders, including commercial and recreational fishing groups, environmental groups and staff

Our groups are not aware of any consultation undertaken with environmental groups prior to making the decision to close the Cronulla FRCE. This decision appears to have been made hastily, without appropriate community consultation and subsequent public comments by the Minister for Primary Industries have only strengthened the impression that the Government is unwilling to listen to the many concerns of those affected. Indeed, the St George and Sutherland Shire Leader reported on July 15 that Minister Hodgkinson has rejected the recommendation of this Committee to put decentralisation action at Cronulla on hold until this Inquiry is complete.

d) The extent to which the decision satisfies the Minister's responsibilities under the Fisheries Management Act 1994

The first object of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* is to "conserve, develop and share the fishery resources of the State for the benefit of present and future generations". Meeting this object requires a far better understanding of the marine environment and fisheries resources than NSW currently possesses. The Fisheries Management Strategies under which all fisheries in NSW operate include a large number of research projects that must be undertaken to ensure these fisheries operate sustainably, i.e. are appropriately conserved and shared. Much of the necessary research is based out of the Cronulla FRCE. The progress of this research is likely to be, at best, delayed or, more likely, substantially undermined by closing the Cronulla FRCE .

e) Any advice received by the Minister on the ability to replicate the Cronulla facilities at other locations, including potential problems and other implications of the other locations

The Port Stephens research facility has been identified as one of the key relocation sites. However, there are risks associated with the Port Stephens research facility that suggest it is not an appropriate location to relocate a substantial number of additional research staff to. Data from both the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW² and Port Stephens Council³ show that nearly the whole facility is at significant risk from inundation due to climate change induced sea level rise. In June 2012 the facility experienced flooding through the access points, prohibiting easy entry and exit from the facility. This was due to an extreme low pressure system and high tides⁴. It is irresponsible to move additional scientists into a facility classified as 'flood prone' by the Port Stephens council.

¹ Submission from staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence to the Minister for Primary Industries regarding closure of the centre and the relocation of staff, available at <http://www.savecronullafisheries.net/submission-to-minister.html>

² Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW (2009). *NSW Sea Level Rise Policy Statement*. www.environment.nsw.gov.au

³ Port Stephens Council (2009). *Map Port Stephens Local Government Area – Flood Prone Land*. "Flood Prone Land.pdf" available from www.portstephens.nsw.gov.au

⁴ Williams R.J. (2012) *Comments on the likely inundation of the Port Stephens Fisheries Institute by rise in sea level*. Prepared for: Save Cronulla Fisheries <http://www.savecronullafisheries.net/inundationreport.html>

f) The loss of the scientific expertise held by the staff who cannot relocate from Cronulla and the implications for sustainable fisheries management

The Cronulla FRCE is widely recognised as a leading research centre, with particular expertise in population dynamics. The Cronulla FRCE has conducted extensive and continuous research on wild fisheries and fisheries management. This research has generated crucial data about age identification of fish and invertebrates and growth, survival and reproductive biology of commercially and recreationally important species, information which feeds into by-catch mitigation strategies, bag limits for recreational fishing, tag retention and fishing gear. The decision to close the Cronulla FRCE has been criticised by Australian and international marine scientists.

In particular, Cronulla's proximity to the Sydney Fish Markets (where the majority of seafood in the state is sold) has facilitated the regular sampling needed to undertake assessment of NSW fish stocks. Cronulla scientists have indicated the Fisheries Division will be unlikely to be able to produce the bi-annual publication *Status of Fisheries Resources for NSW* without regular access to this resource. This information resource ensures NSW is keeping track with the status reports compiled by other States, the Territory and the Commonwealth, and is vital to ensure the sustainable management of NSW fish stocks.

The most recent *Status of Fisheries Resources in NSW 2008/09* states that:

"The number of species assessed as 'overfished' or 'recruitment overfished' increased from 3 in the last Status Report (2006/07) to 6 in the current report (for 2008/09)"

Four species are subject to specific management initiatives aimed at redressing this situation. With loss of expertise, it is questionable that suitable management strategies can be developed to move these species out of the 'overfished' ranking, and that scientists will have a means of monitoring whether stock status is improving or declining in already vulnerable species. Expertise in fisheries management is vital to ensure the worrying trend of increasing overfishing does not continue in NSW waters.

The Independent Scientific Audit of NSW Marine Parks highlights the need for increased complementary fisheries research, including assessment of the ecological sustainability and management of fisheries, and estimation of recreational fishing catches (Recommendation 4.6)⁵. To close the Cronulla FRCE, which is well placed for research of this sort, is an extremely retrograde step.

The Cronulla FRCE also plays an important role in facilitating research by other institutions and promoting knowledge and appreciation of marine and fisheries science in the wider community. Many other institutions rely on the Cronulla facilities, including 13 Universities around Australia; the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage; the Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry; and approximately 40 more partners. In addition, the Centre receives school visits and houses the biggest fish-specific library in NSW.

⁵ Beeton RJS, Buxton CD, Cutbush GC, Fairweather PG, Johnston EL, Ryan R (2012) *Report of the Independent Scientific Audit of Marine Parks in New South Wales*. Recommendation 4.6, p 24.

A survey of staff at the Cronulla FRCE indicated that up to 96% of staff working at Cronulla will be unable or unwilling to relocate elsewhere in NSW, and will resign rather than accepting a forced relocation⁶. Such an enormous loss of corporate knowledge and expertise is completely unnecessary, and will be a devastating blow to fisheries research and management in NSW. The decision to disperse and relocate nearly 150 staff currently undertaking necessary research at the Cronulla FRCE is being promoted as part of the NSW Government's 'Decade of Decentralisation'. However, only 35% of scientific staff within DPI Fisheries are based at Cronulla, with a majority based outside Sydney⁷. As the majority of staff are already working outside of Sydney, the decision to relocate a coherent research team from a leading marine facility to different regional areas to promote decentralisation is unnecessary.

g) The impacts of the decision on service delivery to stakeholders

The relocation of scientists from Cronulla to regional NSW has been justified as way of increasing access to staff by recreational fishers. However, the specific needs of recreational fishers and other stakeholder groups in regional areas can be addressed by improving consultation processes, rather than by attempting to move staff. Detailed suggestions for the improvement of community consultation on marine issues have been set out in the Report of the Independent Scientific Audit of NSW Marine Parks.

Conclusion

The closure of the Cronulla FRCE is a costly and unnecessary decision. It will have unacceptable negative impacts on the important research being conducted by Cronulla researchers and ultimately on the health of the NSW fish stocks and the marine environment. We strongly urge the NSW Government to reverse its decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence.

⁶ Submission from staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence to the Minister for Primary Industries regarding closure of the centre and the relocation of staff, available at <http://www.savecronullafisheries.net/submission-to-minister.html>

⁷ Submission from staff at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence to the Minister for Primary Industries regarding closure of the centre and the relocation of staff, available at <http://www.savecronullafisheries.net/submission-to-minister.html>

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Evans
CEO
National Parks Association of NSW

Pepe Clarke
CEO
Nature Conservation Council of NSW

Darren Kindleysides
Director
Australian Marine Conservation Society

Michael Kennedy
Director
Humane Society International