

**Submission  
No 25**

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

**Name:** Mr Mark Speakman SC MP

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# Mark Speakman sc MP

Member for Cronulla



25 July 2012

Select Committee on Cronulla Fisheries  
Parliament of NSW  
Macquarie Street  
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear committee members

## **CRONULLA FISHERIES**

I oppose the closure of Cronulla Fisheries.

The reasons for my opposition are summarised in my speech in Parliament on 19 October 2011. I enclose a copy of the Hansard.

Yours sincerely

Mark Speakman



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## Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre

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About this Item

Speakers - [Speakman Mr Mark](#); [Acting-Speaker \(Mr Lee Evans\)](#); [Robertson Mr John](#); [Hodgkinson Ms Katrina](#); [Park Mr Ryan](#); [Parker Mr Jamie](#)  
Business - Petition, PET

### CRONULLA FISHERIES RESEARCH CENTRE

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#### Discussion on Petition Signed by 10,000 or More Persons

**Mr MARK SPEAKMAN** (Cronulla) [6.15 p.m.]: This petition calls for the reversal of the decision of the Minister for Primary Industries to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. The decision contemplates moving research to Taylors Beach at Port Stephens, commercial fisheries management to Coffs Harbour and recreational and indigenous fisheries management to Nowra. Despite meeting the Minister three times and the Premier once to strongly urge the reversal of the decision, I have not succeeded in changing it. But I remain convinced that the decision is the wrong one.

Decentralisation is one way to ease Sydney's housing crisis, and I supported it in my inaugural speech. But I stated two fundamental qualifications: first, that functions can be performed just as effectively; and, second, that there was a benefit, or at least no cost, to the taxpayer. Neither of these fundamental qualifications is fulfilled here. The issues are analysed in detailed staff submissions at [www.savecronullafisheries.net](http://www.savecronullafisheries.net). I wholeheartedly endorse those submissions. My speech with a seven-minute time limit should be read incorporating those submissions by cross-reference. I oppose the closure because of the direct loss of 147 jobs in Cronulla and the multiplier effect this will have on the local economy. I also oppose the closure because from the State's viewpoint it will cost taxpayers dearly and produce inferior outcomes.

The Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre is not like a call centre that may be easily relocated. A detailed qualitative analysis shows that 80 to 95 per cent of staff will not or cannot move. The staff give individual reasons—for example, invalid parents, spouses who earn more or children in their final years of school. The closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre will not result in the relocation of its highly specialised expertise but it will result in the loss of most of that expertise and at a time when that expertise is vital and issues of food security mean we are likely to become increasingly reliant on fragile ocean ecosystems.

It is irrelevant whether Taylors Beach, Port Stephens, is an excellent research facility. The work performed at Taylors Beach is very different from that performed at Cronulla. On-site research at Taylors Beach specialises in aquaculture or fish breeding. In contrast, on-site research at Cronulla specialises in wild fish. Taylors Beach is in a mangrove. The saline water is acceptable for aquaculture. But it is different from ocean water and it is not acceptable, without treatment, for research on wild fish. Members should not just take my word for it; they should read what the experts say. In particular, Dr Jane Williamson, who also is chair of the government Fisheries Scientific Committee, writes that the water quality of Port Stephens is likely to invalidate the results of experiments done on wild-caught animals studied by scientists at Cronulla.

That is the scientific consensus. Even if a scientist with a contrary view exists, why move research to a location where the best-case scenario is that there will at least be a controversy about the validity of the research? To be able to obtain at Taylors Beach anything like the quality of water at Cronulla requires a massively expensive installation of major recirculation and filtration systems, augmented by the trucking in of water. The existing water system at Taylors Beach handles 40,000 litres a day. At Cronulla it is 1.75 million litres a day.

We are told that the facility is moving closer to stakeholders, but the biggest stakeholders are recreational fishers. There are one million recreational fishers but only 1,000 commercial fishers. Sixty per cent of recreational fishers are in the Sydney Basin but only 1 per cent are around Port Stephens and only 1 per cent are around Nowra; and 45 per cent of commercial fishers are here in Sydney and south of Sydney. One might find some commercial fishers in Coffs Harbour pleased by the decision but most are not, and there are three times more commercial fishers in Sydney than around Coffs Harbour.



We are told that Cronulla is old, cramped and inaccessible. That is wrong. It is old in the sense that it is iconic—it has been there for over a century and has a stellar international reputation. But the laboratories are state-of-the-art—upgraded only five years ago. It is not cramped—more staff were moved there only a fortnight before the closure was announced. It is not inaccessible—it is 35 minutes from the central business district and 25 minutes from the airport. Contrast Taylors Beach, which is in marshland at the end of an old road, over a one-lane bridge, and with no public transport.

What will all this cost? If all staff are relocated the cost will be \$9 million, assuming \$60,000 for each employee. If most staff do not relocate the cost will be much higher because of redundancy payments. A new laboratory at Taylors Beach and upgrades to the water system will cost many millions; there will be the cost of building, renting and refurbishing new offices elsewhere; and there will be the cost of moving equipment. If anyone disputes any of these propositions there is a simple answer: The decision must have been made with a detailed business plan with detailed assumptions and costings about precisely what redundancies and what staff locations are expected, what capital expenditure is expected and how the annual operating costs of undertaking the fisheries functions would change. It should be very easy to make that business plan public.

Any argument that costs will be recouped over time because Cronulla costs a certain amount to operate each year goes nowhere unless detailed calculations are released showing how this compares with expected operating costs for regional centres. My sincerity in opposing my own Government can be judged by the detailed and forthright nature of my criticisms, and by my focus on where I potentially could make a difference by arguing and using persuasion with decision-makers. Labor's sincerity will not be demonstrated by stunts such as procedural motions in this House—which are bound to fail, regardless of how I or other local members of Parliament vote—or by attacks on personalities, but by a willingness to pursue the substantive points that I have made in this speech and that the staff have made in their submissions. I commend the petition to the House.

**ACTING-SPEAKER (Mr Lee Evans):** Order! I remind those in the gallery that we are extending them a little bit of latitude in allowing them to wear their T-shirts. I ask them not to interrupt the debate.

**Mr JOHN ROBERTSON** (Blacktown—Leader of the Opposition) [6.22 p.m.]: This petition is straightforward. The Government has made a bad decision, and every one of those 19,000 signatures that were put onto that petition is testament to the fact that it is a bad decision. Taking away these staff will jeopardise the quality of research undertaken at the Cronulla facility. These are trained and experienced staff whose contribution in their fields is second to none. This is a facility with some of the world's leading experts on marine ecosystems who every day conduct vital research for the marine industry in Australia. These are the researchers who saved the oyster industry in the Hawkesbury River and who conduct vital research specific to the waters around Sydney, including important work on bull sharks.

Tagging and tracking sharks, along with long-term research on fish species and their growth and development are all undertaken from the Cronulla facility. The Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre has literally saved lives, it has saved livelihoods and it has been a leader in fisheries research around the globe. But people do not have to take my word for it. This decision has been criticised literally by the whole world. When we raised this issue previously the Government laughed at us. The Minister—who stands in this House like a teapot and treats this matter as if it were a joke—laughed at this. But these are recognised experts around the world.

**Mr Brad Hazzard:** Point of order: This debate is being carried on in a reasonable and professional manner and the Leader of the Opposition knows the rules and standing orders. It does not become him to cast aspersions. I will not ask him to withdraw; rather, to continue the debate and to reflect the concerns of the community.

**Mr JOHN ROBERTSON:** I will give some examples of those who have criticised this decision: United States government fisheries managers, who were laughed at by the Minister; international centres of excellence in Germany, Canada, Brazil and Ireland; the New South Wales Advisory Council on Recreational Fishing; the Lobster Management Advisory Committee; the University of New South Wales; the Australian Marine Science Organisation; Macquarie University; the Chair of the Seventh World Recreational Fishing Conference; and the United Nations. But, most importantly, this decision has been criticised by the member for Miranda, the member for Heathcote, the member for Cronulla and even the Minister for Sport and Recreation. In fact the member for Cronulla even called the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre illogical and "a waste of taxpayer dollars". He freely admitted the true effect of the closure by stating, "You won't have decentralisation, you will have destruction". For a while even members opposite were telling the Minister how bad her decision was.

This is not just about the member for Cronulla making a speech in this place; this is about the member for Cronulla standing up for his community. The member for Cronulla may refer to procedural motions as stunts, but they were opportunities for members not simply to make speeches but to vote with us to overturn this decision. There are 147 workers in Cronulla—that is, 147 families who are all directly affected by this decision. How have those 147 workers been treated? They have not been consulted by the Government—there was no consultation. We know that because the member for Cronulla appeared on the *7.30 Report* and said that he was not consulted, the caucus was not consulted and the Cabinet was not consulted. Those workers were told what was going to happen but they were not consulted by the Government.



The Government's track record on this issue is getting worse. The last time we had a Liberal Government it moved the Department of Agriculture to Orange. It also tried to move Fisheries to Orange, but it suddenly discovered that there was no coastline there and it had to overturn its decision because, funnily enough—most of us have been to Orange and we know this—there is no coastline. This decision is as logical as the last time the Liberals were in government when they sought to relocate the Department of Agriculture. This issue is about standing up for local communities, it is about consultation, it is about where this Government stands when it comes to dealing with workers and it is about how this Government is treating these people from the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre.

It is all well and good to talk about decentralisation as though it were some wonderful idea, but the human cost associated with decentralisation is being completely ignored—ignored in this Chamber, ignored by the Minister for Primary Industries and ignored tonight in the way in which this petition will be dealt with when this debate concludes. The member for Cronulla knows that after he has spoken on this issue—and I do not doubt for one minute that he spoke on it with genuine passion and conviction—we will debate it and when the debate finishes that will be the end of the matter. I can tell the workers from the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre that we will continue to pursue this matter, irrespective of what happens to this petition, because this research facility is worth maintaining.

We will not allow this Government to ridicule the work that those workers do and to mislead the House about the state of the research facility in Cronulla. Those issues have already been highlighted by the member for Cronulla who said that this facility was refurbished only five years ago. But the Minister stood in the House today and said that this facility was outdated and antiquated. She completely misrepresented the true state of operations at the research centre. This is about people and the human cost. The Government will continue to ignore the human cost at its peril. The way these workers are being treated is an absolute disgrace and if the Government were serious it would talk to them about their genuine concerns—about how they have elderly parents they are looking after; how they have kids at school and they are expected to uproot them and take them elsewhere in New South Wales.

The way these workers are being treated is unconscionable and members of the Government should hang their heads in shame. They cannot use the smokescreen of decentralisation to devastate 147 families in this State who do great work, who are loyal to New South Wales, who have done so much for marine ecosystems and the fishing sector and who have done fantastic work to save industries such as the oyster industry. The Government will stand condemned for this.

**Ms KATRINA HODGKINSON** (Burrinjuck—Minister for Primary Industries, and Minister for Small Business) [6.29 p.m.]: I lead for the Government in debate on the petition before the House regarding the Government's decision to relocate the fisheries centre at Cronulla to a number of locations along the New South Wales coastline, including Port Stephens, Coffs Harbour and Nowra. I acknowledge the presence in the Chamber of the members representing those electorates. The petitioners have asked the Government to reverse its decision and to retain all services and staff at the current location in Cronulla. At the outset I acknowledge the member for Cronulla, Mr Mark Speakman—a strong advocate for his local community—who has clearly and forcefully articulated his concerns for his community in relation to this issue. I acknowledge his hard work on this matter.

Change is difficult and I have listened to the concerns raised in relation to the decision to relocate the centre. I can assure everyone that this decision was carefully made. As Minister for Primary Industries, and Minister for Small Business I have to take the entire State into consideration. I have to look continually at the big picture in relation to all the portfolio matters that I represent. Although the Cronulla site is historically important to the local community, it has long been recognised as having some challenges because of its limited access and constrained modernisation and expansion capacity. Conversely, the existing research facility at Port Stephens does not face the same limitations. I have visited those facilities.

I have listened to the concerns that have been raised about the water quality at the Port Stephens location. These concerns are misplaced and misleading. I have investigated this matter and I have spent several hours at the Port Stephens facility. I can assure the House that the water quality at the Port Stephens Fisheries Institute is of a high standard. It has outstanding facilities for water storage and treatment. It has excellent hatcheries and experimental laboratories. It has generated several hundred scientific papers on some of the most sensitive marine species bred, grown and experimented upon using water from Port Stephens.

I have also carefully considered the process of informing those employees working at the centre in Cronulla. I acknowledge their presence in the gallery tonight and I thank them for coming after work to listen to this debate. I also recognise the importance of the work that they perform and I thank them for that work. I wanted to ensure that the process of informing employees was done in a manner that ensured they were fully informed as soon as the decision was made. This was not done through media release and it did not become subject to rumour, which is the appropriate way to do things. Compare that with some of the ways in which—

**Mr Daryl Maguire:** Like the education department in Wagga Wagga.

**Ms KATRINA HODGKINSON:** As the member for Wagga Wagga said, under the former Government people



were informed about some of those relocations through media release. I wanted to ensure that that did not happen under this Government, so those employees were personally informed. This Government will ensure that the relocation of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre is conducted professionally and with due diligence, taking into account the needs of staff and their families. Generous entitlements are available for employees who wish to be part of this project and who wish to continue to deliver valuable services to the New South Wales fishing community. That includes special leave, travelling and accommodation expenses, temporary accommodation and support for relocation, and property transactional costs. In addition, one-off grants of \$7,000 will be payable to individuals or families who relocate from Sydney to regional New South Wales and who meet that criteria.

The decision to relocate the centre demonstrates this Government's commitment to a decade of decentralisation. The New South Wales Liberals and Nationals have a proven track record in decentralisation. As I said in question time today, our landmark vision to relocate the former New South Wales agricultural headquarters to Orange in 1991 has been hailed as an unparalleled success, with increased efficiencies, greater interaction with farmers and a large injection of salaries into the local economy. I cannot express the excitement that is being felt by the regional communities of Port Stephens, Coffs Harbour and Nowra. The members representing those electorates have said to me on a number of occasions that they are happy to have jobs in this field relocated to their regions. I thank all members for their attention.

**Mr RYAN PARK** (Keira) [6.34 p.m.]: A government knows that it is in trouble when its own members start to raise questions about its policy. A government should well and truly know that it is in real trouble when scientific professionals from across the globe write to members whose constituents work in this centre and appeal to them to get this decision reversed. I do not think too many things come before this House that involve international experts who are leaders in their field appealing to members to have a decision reversed. That does not happen every day of the week. But that is what has occurred in electorate offices such as mine whose constituents work in this valuable research centre.

Recently I attended a meeting with members of this workforce who live in the Keira electorate. For about an hour or an hour and a half they provided me with a detailed description of the work that is being done at that centre. I was impressed with the way in which the centre integrates the management and research components of this vital resource to ensure its long-term sustainability. I have lived on the coast all my life. We must ensure that our marine life is protected, enhanced, supported and researched to the nth degree to ensure that our stocks are maintained and resources are managed. That cannot be achieved without locating the best researchers at one centre to ensure the integration of work from a research and a management perspective and to ensure long-term sustainability.

But let me make one thing clear. This is not about decentralisation—an issue about which Opposition members have talked long and hard—but it is a policy that we support. Not one family in the Keira electorate that is employed at the fisheries research centre will move to Port Stephens or Nowra, so this is not decentralisation. This Government is merely ripping the heart out of a community that has already done it tough. In the past few months nearly 800 jobs have been lost in our local community. This selfish and mean-spirited Government decided, with one stroke of the pen, to stack some of The Nationals seats and to look after its mates whilst ripping the heart out of a community that is already doing it extremely tough. I will not allow that to happen and I will not support such action as it is bad for the long-term management of our natural environment and our resources, and it is bad for workers in a community which over the past few months has done it tougher than most communities. I will not support such action.

This is not about jobs because this Government has clearly shown in its first six months that it does not give a damn about workers. This is not about the management of a fishing resource because the changes that this Government made to the marine parks legislation clearly show that it does not give a damn about the environment. This is not about evidence in decision-making, because all the evidence is clear, as the member for Cronulla outlined. This centre is the place in which research and management of stock should take place. This is about getting some dollars into the bottom line. It is about selling off a public asset to try to featherbed some government-held electorates. This is bad policy by a bad government. It is mean policy by a mean government. We on this side will not sit by and allow it to happen.

**Discussion concluded.**

**Mr JAMIE PARKER:** I seek leave—

**Leave not granted.**

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