

**Submission
No 43**

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

Name: Mr Laurie Derwent

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Laurie Derwent

Submission to the
Select Committee on Cronulla Fisheries Closure

Per fax: 92302981

Cronullafisheries@parliament.nsw.gov.au
www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees

I appreciate the opportunity to provide the Select Committee on Cronulla Fisheries Closure with a submission.

By way of background my association with the Cronulla Fisheries Centre and the management of fisheries in NSW includes:

1. Being a member of a family engaged in commercial fishing and oyster farming from 1935 through to about 2000 when the Georges River oyster industry collapsed.
2. Working as an oyster farmer for several years in the 1970s and oyster farming in school holidays for several years before that.
3. Being employed for most of the last 34 years in various positions with NSW Trade and Investment and the previous agencies charged with the administration of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* (the Act) and the *Fisheries and Oyster Farms Act 1935*. This includes:
 - a. About 11 years as a fisheries officer in various parts of the State.
 - b. Several years in commercial fisheries and aquaculture policy roles.
 - c. Nearly 7 years as a practising solicitor for the agency, mainly focussed on prosecution of fisheries offences but also providing legal advice regarding development of legislation, policy, contracts for research etc, and conveyancing.
 - d. 3 years managing the commercial fisheries administration section known as 'Fisheries Business Services' at the Cronulla Fisheries Centre'.
 - e. Over 2 years as a policy advisor for fisheries compliance and based at the Cronulla Fisheries Centre.

The 34 years of my career with fisheries has had me based at the Cronulla Centre for about 7 years and relying on regular information from researchers and others based here for most of the remaining period.

This unique experience has enabled me to provide the people of NSW with some well informed approaches to issues impacting our fisheries and the stakeholders. It has also

enabled me to understand the important role that the Cronulla Fisheries Centre has in achieving the goals of the Act. I understand the benefits of having the Centre operating at Cronulla, the skills of the staff and our relationships with various stakeholders.

My experience includes witnessing the devastation of skills in fisheries administration when in the early 1990s the then government attempted to move 'Fisheries' to Orange. That move was eventually aborted but not before impacting all key stakeholders by the loss of services and skilled staff. This resulted in several years of relative inaction before the level of service could be restored. I recall spending significant amounts of time as a policy officer drafting many 'ministerials' that effectively were apologise for not acting to improve fisheries management.

I fear that a similar situation is being created but can NSW afford the impacts on research and administration of commercial and recreational fisheries?

With regard to the terms of reference of the select committee I would appreciate your consideration of the following

(a). The basis of the decision to close Cronulla Fisheries Centre:

If any analysis of the decision was made prior to the announcement to staff on 8 September 2011 there does not appear to have been any consideration of the experience of the 'move to Orange' I have referred to above. That experience should have provided the Executive with concerns about what factors to consider including the impacts of customers and other stakeholders of the agency and the changes to the experience base of staff.

The Minister has constantly referred to the lack of access and no scope to extend the Cronulla Fisheries Centre. The simple truth is that:

i. Access to the Centre is excellent. This includes:

1. Being close to Sydney Airport so most NSW stakeholders can attend meetings with one day travel only. Otherwise, being within Sydney, the transport hub of NSW Cronulla offers better access than the alternate centres proposed by the Minister.

2. Staff travel against peak hour traffic. Most staff are located in the Sutherland Shire and do not have to travel far.

ii. There has been no proposal to expand the facilities at the Centre but **there certainly is some scope to extend some buildings without impacting the heritage and other values of the site.** This includes scope for building an extra floor on Building 16 (one of the newest buildings on the site). Again there has been no need identified for any expansion.

(b). Consultation: To date the only consultation with staff has been to tell us what is being done and explain our options to relocate or be declared redundant. The consultation has not included any rationalising of the decision with staff who by our professions are required to be rational and not act irresponsibly.

This has adversely impacted many of my colleagues and my concern for them has been expressed in submissions I have made to the Minister, Premier and my local member. My position is being relocated to Ourimbah. My wife and I care for her 86 year old father, her 48 year old invalid sister and we have her mother in a nursing home near our home. Relocation for me is not an option. It has been suggested to me that I may be able to work at Wollstoncraft until my retirement (the earliest date for that that I have considered is mid 2013). Such a move would increase traffic or the burden on our stretched rail services. It would **increase my daily travel time by at least 3 hours.**

Most stakeholders I have discussed the matter with have told me they were not informed of the proposal until it was released in the media. I understand commercial fishers have not been officially warned that the services they are now receiving will be impacted but that is inevitable as almost all the staff involved in a complex licensing system are leaving. Not long before the decision was announced the main form of informing the commercial fishing industry of developments was a quarterly newsletter sponsored by the industry trust account and the department. That was shut down by the department so there is now no regular means of consultation with these stakeholders.

As indicated above I have made various submissions to my local MLA, the Hon. Mark Couré as well as the Minister and Premier. I appreciate that Mr Couré did respond to my submission but have been disappointed that neither the Premier or Minister could see their way clear to do so

(c). **Costs and benefits:** From my experience it seems the only potential 'benefits' of the proposal is to reduce the number of jobs in the agency. This will be offset by the loss of services, an impact that is difficult to cost.

The Minister has constantly said the site will not be sold so there does not appear to be any other economic rationale for the decision.

In terms of the boast of decentralisation, only a limited amount of jobs (less than 100) are moving to regional centres. I understand that each of these (Coffs Harbour, Port Stephens and Nowra) have significant natural growth. Many of the jobs are being relocated to the Sydney Institute of Marine Science (SIMS) at Mosman so those employees will have to travel further and contribute more towards traffic congestion.

The proposed change will create 'silo management' impacts with various sections of the agency being physically separated from each other change. I have raised my concerns about these impacts with Mr Mark Paterson, Director General of NSW Trade and Investment, Dr Richard Sheldrake, Director General of Primary Industries and Geoffrey Allan, Executive Director Fisheries.

Mr Paterson denied any silo impacts would result and Messrs Sheldrake and Allan did not deny the impacts on our stakeholders the closure would have but have chosen to proceed.

(d) Achieving responsibilities under the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* (the Act).

The objects of the Act are expressed in section 3 and the primary objective is:

(1) The objects of this Act are to conserve, develop and share the fishery resources of the State for the benefit of present and future generations.

A number of secondary objects are included and refer to promotion of viable commercial fishing and aquaculture industries, quality recreational fishing opportunities etc.

As indicated above the aborted move of fisheries to Orange led to substantial delays in progress of fisheries management in NSW. The closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Centre is having the same impacts and is significantly reducing the ability to achieve the objects of the Act.

Such problems include:

- i. Delays in processing of transactions for the commercial fishing industry.
- ii. Reducing services for recreational fishing.
- iii. Research projects being interrupted as key staff leave because of the move and new projects are not being initiated.
- iv. Staff have real problems in maintaining productivity, morale and motivation because they are now looking for alternative work

(e) Advice to the Minister on replication of Cronulla facilities:

I understand the Committee will receive submissions from those better able to comment on the unique character of the Cronulla Centre for research.

However, it also has a very important role as a venue for meetings for staff from around the state, between those staff and key stakeholders and for training.

This role is linked with the proximity to transport as well as the professional staff located at Cronulla. The locations where staff are being relocated to do not cater for ease of transport from so many parts of the State.

(f) Loss of scientific expertise and implications for sustainable fisheries management.

I am now observing researchers, managers and administrative officers professional people relinquishing their positions to take alternative employment in Sydney. Two weeks ago I attended a 'send off' lunch for seven officers.

The NSW community cannot expect to have services in research, fisheries policy or administration maintained at reasonable levels whilst such disruption is being experienced and, again, this is what we saw with policy and administrative positions in the early 1990s.

(g) Impacts of the decision on service delivery to stakeholders

Refer to my notes above but in summary:

- i. Extended delays in administrative transactions (share and licence transfers (impacts on conducting commercial fishing and charter fishing businesses) delays in policy development and responses to inquiries about policy.
- ii. Reduced communications in that there are fewer meetings with stakeholders now and soon there will be a much corporate knowledge to be able to effectively communicate.
- iii. The silo management impacts that this decision will have and despite Mr Patterson's denials impacts much of the efficiencies achieved at Cronulla will be lost.

(h) The impacts on staff and their families

My experience of the early 1990s decisions has helped me to identify the stress and frustration that staff are undergoing. The department simply writes this off as dealing with 'grief'. Most of my colleagues at Cronulla and myself have had to deal with grief arising from various situations.

This is different.

The differences are linked to:

- i. Knowing the decision is a bad act of government. By relying on false reasoning the Minister appears to be hiding facts that are very important to understanding why our lives have to be upturned.
- ii. Seeing so many of our colleagues suffering: This is more akin to the experience of a natural disaster than loss of a family member.
- iii. The staff at Cronulla have had such strong commitments to the work, the objects of effective and sustainable fisheries management and commitment to our teammates. Time after time I have benefitted from working with people who put their heart and soul into their work. I've had officers people volunteer to work until 10.00pm in unpaid overtime to complete an important task, staff being disrupted in their work but willing to answer questions (compared with other sections of the department who would simply require a written request and then take months to respond).
- iv. The fact that some couples working at the Cronulla Fisheries Centre stood to have their jobs moved to centres hundreds of kilometres apart.

(i) Impact on the heritage values of the Cronulla Fisheries Centre

This Centre is a living heritage site. This includes the fact that we work amongst and respect Aboriginal historic artefacts and that the site includes over 100 years of research history.

There does not appear to have been any consideration given to the how these values can be preserved if the Centre is closed.

As stated above, my family were engaged in oyster farming in the Georges River for about 100 years. At its height there were 35 people employed full time (and then some) at Neverfail Bay, Oatley. It was a unique farming style operation centred not far from the Sydney CBD and was another living heritage situation. Apart from the lost direct employment and multipliers enjoyed by the community, since the industry closed due to QX disease in oysters, the heritage values have almost been entirely lost. Mangroves are taking over the area where oyster punts used to be moored. The routine movement of oyster punts is a memory. Many of my family simply cannot bring themselves to go the Neverfail Bay any more because it is too stressful.

Something very similar will happen at Cronulla and it appears for all the wrong reasons. The buildings need to be maintained. Weeds need to be controlled. These tasks can be done but the character of the place will be diminished when the valuable work being done is not here any more.

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to bring these matters to the attention of the Committee. It is disappointing that the government has not shown your inquiry the respect it deserves by staying action on the decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries centre until the Committee report can be considered.

I can be contacted on _____ if you require further information.

Yours sincerely

Laurie Derwent.