

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

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**Submission to Upper House Select Committee of Inquiry into the Decision to
Close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence**

By: Dr Kevin Rowling
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I have been employed by NSW Fisheries as a Fisheries Scientist for 36 years. For the last 27 years I have been based at the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. For my entire career I have been involved in studying and documenting the impact of commercial fisheries on the wild fish stocks which occur in the coastal and ocean waters of NSW. The research I have conducted has informed advice provided to the Department and Minister regarding the sustainability of the commercial and recreational fisheries of the state. Results from my research have also been used to assess and manage fisheries under Commonwealth jurisdiction. The conservation of the fisheries resources and the development of viable and sustainable fisheries are core responsibilities of the Department of Primary Industries and the Minister. The wild fish stocks are 'common property' resources, owned by the people of NSW, and fisheries which rely on these resources are managed on the people's behalf by the NSW state Government.

I can say without a doubt that the decision announced on 8th September 2011 to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre and relocate staff and functions to 'regional' areas, is by far the worst decision I have seen taken by a Minister responsible for fisheries in the many years I have been working in the field. Below I give the reasons for this view in regard to the Terms of Reference of the Committee of Inquiry. I would be happy to provide additional details on any of the points discussed if required by the Select Committee.

Kevin Rowling
29th July 2012

Brief Summary of Points Raised in this Submission

1. The basis for the decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre has not been clearly described. (Pages 2 to 4)
2. There was no significant consultation with stakeholder groups, the staff or experts in the fisheries field prior to the decision. (Pages 4 to 5)
3. There has been no consideration of the relative costs and benefits of the proposed closure. (Pages 5 to 6)
4. The closure will undermine the Minister's ability to address her responsibilities under the Fisheries Management Act 1994. (Page 6)
5. It is not clear what advice the Minister received prior to the decision. (Pages 6 to 7)
6. The closure will lead to a critical loss of scientific and managerial expertise within NSW Fisheries. (Pages 7 to 8)
7. The closure will lead to a very significant decline in service delivery by NSW Fisheries, especially for the commercial fisheries sector. (Page 8)
8. The proposed closure has had a huge detrimental impact on staff and their families. (Pages 8 to 9)
9. The proposal to end research at Cronulla is likely to extinguish the Heritage values attached to the site. (Page 9)

Concluding Remarks (Page 10)

Attachment: Letter to Minister for Primary Industries, 26th September 2011 (Page 11)

Detailed Responses to 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.

It is in fact very difficult to determine the real basis behind the decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. When the decision was announced by the Deputy Premier and the Minister, the accompanying press release suggested a number of reasons existed for closure of the iconic research centre. Cronulla was said to be an 'old facility' with 'limited access' and 'constrained modernisation and expansion capacity'. These claims were not supported in any way by the state-of-the-art, recently upgraded laboratory and aquarium facilities on site. It was immediately apparent to staff working at Cronulla that these reasons were spurious, and that there must have been an alternative, more compelling reason behind the decision.

The press release also alluded to the Government's 'Decade of Decentralisation' election policy initiative. While this was just an election platform and not a developed policy, it was invoked as a significant driver behind the decision. On 26th

September 2011 I wrote to the Minister seeking to discuss how we might address the regionalisation outcomes without closing the Cronulla centre (see attachment 1), but my letter received no reply. Following criticism of the decision by national and international fisheries experts, and the presentation to the Parliament of a petition with nearly 20,000 signatures seeking a reversal of the decision, the Minister declared the protests to be 'futile'. Despite later realisations that a number of staff needed to remain in the Sydney region for operational reasons, the Department has refused to consider continuing to locate these staff at the Cronulla facility. Even today, nearly 10 months after the announcement of the closure, suitable accommodation has still not been arranged for the research staff who will continue to be based in Sydney. The Department seems hell-bent on closing the Cronulla centre at any cost - and the excellent research facilities which exist at the site will apparently remain idle, while those staff who remain employed will have to suffer less than adequate facilities at other sites. One might ask why? Are the benefits from decentralisation compelling enough for it to be seen as the sole driver behind the proposed closure?

Although impossible to substantiate, I have no reason to dismiss a suggestion that one reason behind the recommendation to close the Cronulla centre relates to retribution by the DPI Executive for the good working relationship which existed between senior fisheries research staff and Fisheries Minister MacDonald in the previous government. It saddens me to think that such an important recommendation could be made for such a petty reason, but in the absence of evidence of thorough reasoning to support the recommendation to close the Cronulla facility I am not able to dismiss the possibility that this may have been a factor.

Since the decision was announced, it has become quite clear that there was no prior analysis of any business case assessing the likely financial and service delivery impacts of the closure. In the press release accompanying the announcement Minister Hodgkinson stated "*decentralisation can and does work when it is planned and implemented properly*". Had the Department and the Minister's office done any research at all into how to ensure a successful decentralisation they would have found a report published in 2007 by Dr Steven Ward for the Urban Development Research Institute of Australia. This 84 page report, titled "**The Decentralisation of Core Government Services**", studied a large number of relocations of NSW Government

agencies carried out during the previous decade, and identified the factors which needed to be addressed to ensure a successful relocation:

1. Effective planning and project management are vital to a successful relocation.
2. The receiving location must possess sufficient infrastructure.
3. A workforce must be convinced that the move will be beneficial.
4. A good communication strategy is essential.
5. The key employees have to relocate.
6. Incentive-based relocations are more successful.
7. The demographics of the workforce can be instrumental.

Unfortunately, in announcing and undertaking the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre, the Department has ignored these very important factors, and has instead focused on implementing an ideologically driven decision irrespective of the costs and the implications for fisheries research and management in NSW.

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

In a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald in September 2011 Minister Hodgkinson said "*this Government is making decisions based on real consultation and good science*". Documents released under a 'Freedom of Information' request, and reported in the Herald on 28th October 2011, indicated there was no significant consultation with any of the important stakeholder groups prior to the decision to close the Cronulla centre. It appeared that the Department commenced work on the proposal to close the Cronulla centre just **two weeks** prior to the announcement of the decision on the 8th September 2011. The documents released under FOI contain two statements made in emails by DPI Director General Richard Sheldrake which typify the Department's attitude to 'consultation' with stakeholder groups on the Cronulla issue:

1. on 4th September 2011 - "*we also need to get a list of stakeholder names and their mobile phone numbers so someone can ring them on Tuesday pm*"
2. on 6th September 2011, in reply to a query from the Minister's office about the likely view of fishing stakeholders about closure of the Cronulla centre - "*commercial - positive; rec - mixed/negative (because a large no of rec fisherman in the metro area)*".

The Herald article on 28th October 2011 concluded that no analyses had been done which could justify the Minister's claims that decentralisation was the best option and that closure of the Cronulla facility was supported by stakeholder groups.

Importantly, there is no evidence of any prior consultation with experts in the fisheries field, either within or outside of the Department. Expert opinion could have provided clear and accurate forecasts of the likely impacts of this decision on the ability of the Department and Minister to continue to meet their obligations concerning research and management of the state's wild fishery resources. When many fisheries experts in Australia and overseas offered advice and counsel in the weeks after the decision had been announced, their opinions were completely disregarded by the Minister and the Government. The decision had been taken and **would not be changed**, despite the following statements made in the Ministerial press release announcing the closure:

"Importantly, we need to ensure this program is conducted in a planned and strategic manner, and relies on consultation with regional communities and fisheries stakeholders.

We are also determined to retain the valuable expertise and knowledge of the staff so Fisheries NSW continues to provide a valuable service."

In the period since the announcement, there has been no ongoing consultation with regional communities and fisheries stakeholders, or the staff, or other stakeholders, and the Department has simply continued to ignore any sensible criticism, and pushed ahead with implementing this flawed decision.

c) The costs and benefits of the decision to close the Centre and relocate its functions to other locations.

No proper consideration appears to have been given to the relative costs and benefits arising from the decision to close the Cronulla centre. Apart from one verbal admission (at a staff meeting at Cronulla on 12th March 2012) by the Executive Director of Fisheries, Dr Geoff Allan, that the minimum cost, assuming all staff moved to the new locations, would be approximately \$5million, there does not appear to have been any assessment produced of the likely costs of implementing this decision. If, as appears likely, a large proportion of the staff take redundancies, then the cost is likely to far greater. We have been advised that the majority of the cost is to be met from the NSW Fisheries recurrent budget, so the closure of the Cronulla site

will lead to a significant downgrading of the Department's ability to deliver adequate research and fisheries management services well into the future.

The supposed "*significant boost to regional coastal NSW*" has not been quantified in any material way. Because of a total lack of planning and forethought before the decision was announced, there have been significant problems and delays in identifying and securing appropriate accommodation for relocating staff in all of the main regional locations. The current situation could only be described as a debacle, with details regarding office and laboratory accommodation still to be finalised. The actual number of (vacated) positions that will be filled at the new locations is also very uncertain, following the Government's announcement that it intends to delete 10,000 positions in the NSW public service, and the fact that the budget for NSW Fisheries in 2012/13 is likely to be reduced from previous levels.

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

The Fisheries Management Act 1994 has amongst its objectives to "*conserve, develop and share the fishery resources of the State for the benefit of present and future generations*". Section 7C of the Act stipulates how these objectives are to be achieved by the implementation of Fishery Management Strategies, and Section 7E details the content of these strategies, which include generic goals such as:

- *Maintain stocks of primary and key secondary species harvested by the fishery at sustainable levels;*
- *Facilitate effective and efficient compliance, research and management of the fishery.*

There is no doubt that the ability of the Department to meet these Fishery Management Strategy goals will be undermined by the closure of the Cronulla facility, and the resulting loss of research capabilities to monitor the status of wild fish stocks and the fisheries based on them.

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.

On 12th March 2012 at a meeting with staff at Cronulla, Director General of DTIRIS Mark Patterson advised that the Department had provided advice to the Minister for Primary Industries concerning the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre -

however he would not inform the staff of what that recommendation was, nor what it was based on.

It is unclear if the Minister received any specific advice on the Department's ability to replicate the research facilities existing at Cronulla at other locations. Minister Hodgkinson apparently believes this is possible, as in answer to a question in Parliament in October 2011 she said "*All the equipment that is currently being used in Cronulla is easily transportable.*" One assumes she wasn't referring to the 20 m in-ground aquarium pool!?

Irrespective of the Department's ability to replicate the Cronulla facilities, the questions remain: Will sufficient facilities be made available at the regional centres to allow staff to effectively undertake their research duties? And why is it necessary to leave the excellent facilities at Cronulla idle, whilst proposing to duplicate these facilities at the Sydney Institute of Marine Science? This amounts to completely unnecessary duplication of infrastructure, and represents a significant waste of scarce public funds. The only factor driving this wasteful duplication appears to be the decision that the Cronulla facility must be closed at any cost.

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

Probably the biggest 'cost' of the decision to close the Cronulla centre will be the loss of a large proportion of the experienced staff members. This applies not only to the research staff, but also to the senior staff in managerial areas of NSW Fisheries, including the commercial licensing section.

One of the many significant impacts of the loss of scientific expertise will be that the existing stock assessment and monitoring process will be very significantly reduced in effect. There is a real risk that the resource assessment process will be unviable into the future, with little chance of reducing the number of species with 'Unknown/Uncertain' status; also likely will be an **increase** in the number of species in these categories as existing information becomes outdated.

As an example of a particularly ridiculous aspect of the decision, one only has to look at the proposed locations for the three main staff members associated with the Resource Assessment and Monitoring Program. The Resource Assessment System

administrator is supposed to transfer to Coffs Harbour, the senior Fisheries Technician for the program will remain in Sydney, while the Principal Scientist in charge of the program is to be transferred to Port Stephens. There is no logic at all to these proposed transfers, and if implemented they will lead to the demise of a very efficient and productive research program.

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

The quality of service delivered by NSW Fisheries to the various stakeholder groups is not regularly quantified, so it is difficult to accurately assess the full impacts on service delivery of the closure of the Cronulla centre and the loss of a large percentage of the staff. However, there will likely be a *very significant decline* in the service delivery to the commercial fishery sector. Management of commercial fisheries in NSW is often by way of regulation, and the commercial licensing staff at Cronulla play a very significant role in the effective implementation of the complex management arrangements which are common in this area. Closure of the Cronulla centre and retrenchment of staff who are unable to move to another location will lead to a critical loss of experienced staff in the commercial licensing section.

Also of significance to future service delivery for commercial fishers was the appointment of Dr Geoff Allan to the position of Executive Director, NSW Fisheries in February, 2012. Dr Allan is a fisheries scientist with an international reputation in the field of aquaculture nutrition, however he has little experience and expertise in the field of wild fish stock assessment and management. It appears he has been hand picked by the Primary Industries Executive to oversee the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. The very first 'key accountability' in the position description for the Executive Director position was *"Implement reform of the Division's service delivery, in particular through the relocation of staff from the Cronulla site."* The 'reform' of service delivery by NSW Fisheries will likely include the dismantling of the Research Branch, following the closure of the Cronulla facility.

h) The impact on staff and their families of the closure and the relocation.

The way in which this 'relocation' exercise has been conducted has had a huge detrimental impact on staff, especially those who have families to consider. In effect, staff who work at Cronulla and have important family connections to the southern

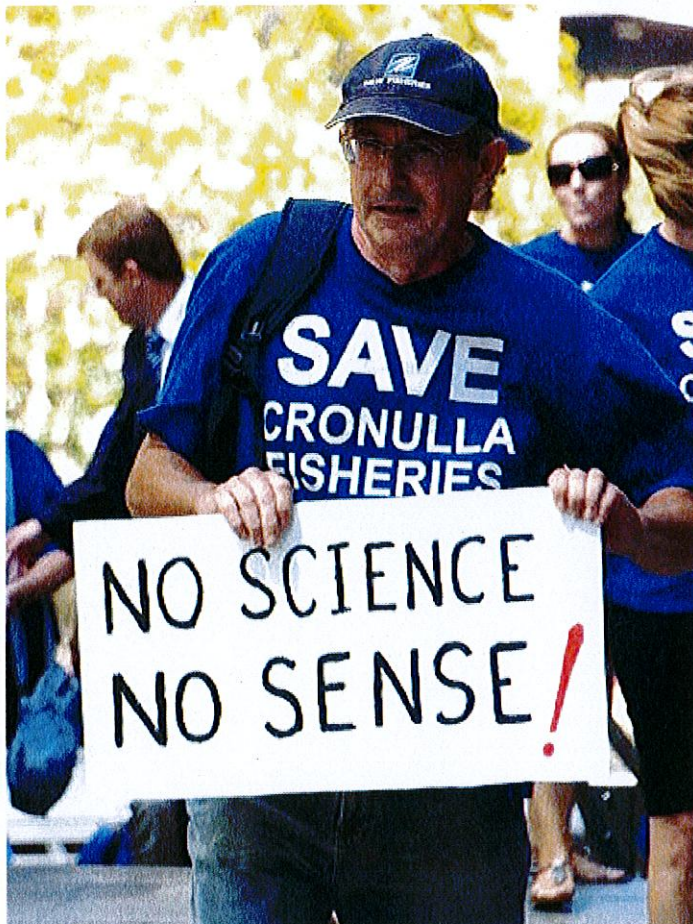
Sydney region are being asked to make a choice between continuing their career at another location by moving their family to a regional area, or keeping their family connections in southern Sydney at the cost of being retrenched by the Department. For staff in a specialised field like fisheries research, who are passionate about their work and proud of its value to the sustainable management of the State's fisheries, this represents a very stressful decision. The fact that there is no good business case to support the decision to close the Cronulla centre, and there has been little real consultation with staff, adds to the frustration of staff who are faced with making this choice. In addition, there is added uncertainty about the future structure of the Research Branch, and a lack of clarity about the responsibilities of individual staff members. The guarantees given by the Minister and Department that they are *"determined to retain the valuable expertise and knowledge of the staff"* and the process *"will be conducted with due and professional regard to the needs of staff"* have certainly been shown to be hollow promises in the 10 months since the announcement was made.

i) The impact on the heritage values of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre.

In deciding to close the Cronulla facility, and in seeking community input about the future use for the site, the Department has paid scant regard to the Heritage values of this iconic site. The first aquatic research station in the southern Hemisphere, the site at Cronulla has been home to Government research agencies for more than 100 years. The entire site is heritage listed due to this history. The proposal to end research at this site will reduce the value of this heritage, and may well extinguish it, depending on the future use decided for the site.

Concluding Remarks

Make no mistake - there was NO science and NO planning behind the decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. If allowed to be implemented this decision will waste many millions of taxpayer's dollars, will decimate the ability of the department to conduct adequate research into the state of the wild fish stocks in NSW, and will result in a critical loss of scientific and managerial expertise from the Fisheries Division of DPI. The decision must be reviewed, with a view to minimising these losses, in the hope that the Department will be able to maintain core research and fisheries management abilities.



Attachment 1. Letter to Minister for Primary Industries, 26th September 2011.

From: [Kevin Rowling](#)

Sent: Monday, September 26, 2011 9:46 AM

To: office@hodgkinson.minister.nsw.gov.au

Cc: office@premier.nsw.gov.au

Subject: Closure of Cronulla Fisheries Centre

Dear Minister Hodgkinson,

I telephoned your office this morning to ask if it was possible to meet with you to discuss the decision to relocate staff from the Cronulla Fisheries Centre to regional areas, and basically close the Centre – and was advised to email my request.

Minister, I have worked in fisheries science and management for 35 years and find it unbelievable that the Government can make such a decision, which appears to simply consider an ideology to decentralise staff to regional areas, irrespective of the implications for the future management of the state's fisheries resources, which task the public of NSW have entrusted to you.

There are numerous cogent and compelling arguments as to why this decision will very significantly reduce the ability of the Department of Primary Industries to provide you with accurate and adequate advice to sustainably manage NSW commercial and recreational fisheries. If enacted as it has been announced, this decision will certainly result in the loss from the Department of the majority of experienced fisheries assessment staff – these staff are absolutely dedicated to their fisheries research work, but the personal and family circumstances of the majority of staff will make it impossible for them to choose to move away from Sydney, and if they are unable to make the move then the Department has indicated they will be retrenched! Additionally, the unnecessary cost of duplicating at another location the 'state of the art' facilities currently existing at Cronulla will be a huge drain on the Department's (reduced) budget. The costs and ongoing consequences of this decision appear to greatly outweigh any potential benefits to the regional areas proposed for the relocation.

Minister, I ask if the Government could please review this decision, in the hope that a sensible and progressive outcome may be achieved – an outcome that will not threaten the future management of the state's fisheries resources. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the matter with you, and would be happy to provide additional detailed information on the likely implications of this decision, and on the existing and potential regional structure of fisheries research and management for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Rowling
Principal Fisheries Scientist,