

**Submission
No 6**

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

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Submission to the LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL of NSW
SELECT COMMITTEE ON CRONULLA FISHERIES CLOSURE

Inquiry into the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence

In this submission I wish to comment on the last four terms of reference of the inquiry, terms f) to i).

In making this submission I am drawing on my extensive experience as a former senior executive in the NSW Public Service with responsibilities for the management of scientific research in the major fields affecting primary industries including agriculture, forestry and fisheries. In addition, in my past capacity as a Member and Chair of the Research Scientists Committee, I have first-hand knowledge of many of the staff employed in fisheries research, and the importance of their work to the State. This Committee provides an independent peer-reviewed assessment of the standing of public service scientists and is a rigorous industrial instrument providing for the promotion and career development of NSW scientific staff.

Comments

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

New South Wales is fortunate in having a body of very well-educated, creative and highly-regarded fisheries scientists based at Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence. A large number of these staff are members of the Research Scientist Classification, attesting to their scientific achievements and standing amongst their peers. Their research covers a wide range of topics relevant to sustainable fisheries management including the evolving fields of scientific management of recreational fisheries; interactions of sharks with humans; the impacts of artificial reefs on fish populations, etc which are of major and increasing importance to the State.

Typically research scientists continue to develop their experience and skills over many years and the leadership and direction that they are then able to provide is of considerable importance to mounting a well-directed and effective research program. Except perhaps at the early stages of a scientist's career, the impact of requiring staff to relocate themselves and their families is devastating, both to their careers and to the research which they conduct. It is not possible to replace skilled and experienced staff quickly if at all.

Previous experience with relocating professional staff in the NSW Public Service has not been successful. For example, after the Head Office of NSW Agriculture was moved to Orange in 1991, less than 20 staff out of the 500-plus originally working in Sydney were employed at Orange after 5 years. Other examples of closing city-based research facilities, e.g. the Biological and Chemical Research Institute at Rydalmere, were similarly unsuccessful, with most staff leaving to take up other careers when relocated to country centres. These politically-motivated decisions do result in a shift of positions to regional locations, but at the expense of the invaluable experience and skills of the bulk of the staff unable or unwilling to move because of the adverse impact on their careers, families and work.

TOR g): the impacts of the decision on service delivery to stakeholders

The effectiveness of service delivery in scientific research is affected by a number of major factors. Certainly one of these is a close proximity to stakeholders and clients; however, this is only one of the important factors. Modern science depends on bringing together a critical mass of well-qualified and creative scientists who can interact with one another regularly, both formally and informally, in order to stimulate the development of imaginative and productive lines of enquiry. In addition, it is necessary to provide well-equipped facilities with access to modern, specialised instruments and laboratories. This is most cost-effectively achieved with a mix of larger central and smaller regional locations such as currently exists.

Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence plays a central and major role in the current delivery of fisheries research. Distributing staff and facilities throughout many small centres presents significant limitations to maintaining an efficient, effective State-wide fisheries research program. The capacity for research staff at Cronulla to interact with the four major Sydney Universities through collaboration and student supervision is also important and will be made greatly more difficult with the proposed relocations.

Without access to the detailed costings for relocation I cannot comment on whether the proposal is financially sound; however, in assessing the benefits and costs it is hard to imagine that the loss of experienced and capable staff has been adequately accounted for, whatever the costs of physically relocating may be.

TOR h): the impact on staff and their families of the closure and the relocation

As noted above, the difficulties faced by staff with established families and work programs in relocating are manifold. In the two-income family of the 21st century, finding jobs for partners and children, especially in regional locations, is usually difficult if not impossible. Depending on the stage in the life of each family, educational issues for children are also important particularly for senior secondary students.

Each family will have specific circumstances, but the impact on the extended family and on the care of aged relatives can be both unsettling and difficult to resolve. The outcome of this is an inevitable decline in the productivity and rate of progress of the scientific work of the affected staff. These factors also play into the assessment of benefits and costs and do not appear to have influenced the planned relocation program.

TOR i): the impact on the heritage values of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre

Cronulla has been an important fisheries research site for over 100 years during which it was operated by CSIRO for some decades. As such it represents an important part of NSW scientific history – it is, in fact the first fisheries institution in the Southern Hemisphere. Australia is still a relatively young country and the continuing maintenance of such well-equipped research laboratories is an important part of our scientific and cultural heritage. If a similar proposal were advanced to relocate, say, the Australian Museum or the NSW Art Gallery, it would meet with strenuous and determined opposition. The abrupt decision to close Cronulla is no different. It

deserves better consideration and careful consultation, which appears to have been ignored altogether. There does not appear to be a credible alternative proposal for the use of the site even if this is legally possible.

Summary

The need for access to the best scientific information to guide sustainable management of fisheries has never been more urgent and hence the decision to close the well-established and highly regarded Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence is both short-sighted and counter-productive. Excellence and experience in scientific research takes significant time to develop and this will be destroyed if the proposed closure and relocation of staff goes ahead. Given most staff are unable to relocate, and the rest will be dispersed to several other centres, re-establishment of the current intellectual and scientific capacity of the staff at Cronulla will take many years.

These factors, together with the significant cultural and heritage values of the site, have not been given any weight in framing the case for the proposed closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence. A comprehensive, independent investigation of the potential impacts of the decision on these aspects should be carried out, which would show that the proposal is unsound policy, costly and likely to set back fisheries research in this State very substantially for many years.

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