

Submission
No 97

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Dear committee,

The following is my submission regarding the ill informed decision by Minister Hodgkinson to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence (CFRCoE).

As an employee of CFRCoE I cannot fathom any logical or financial justification for the closure. It will irreversibly damage one of the country's best fisheries research and management organisations in the country and jeopardise the sustainable management of NSW fish stocks. Since the decision was made last year the government simply hasn't been able to justify it with any logic or reasoning by any means other than the so called 'decade of decentralisation' policy. Whilst I agree with the creation of regional jobs, I think closing this world renowned centre and forcibly transferring staff and their families to so called "regional" centres as in this case is a completely flawed way to do so. It will be a waste of money, cost livelihoods and severely undermine the future management of our precious marine resources.

My arguments follow the terms of reference as specified by the government website:

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

I cannot comment on what information the Minister considered when making her decision. I would attest that it was incorrect judging from her media releases and terrible argument during the parliamentary debate on the issue. The initial reasoning we received from both the Minister's press release and those who came and made the shock announcement to staff; Director General Richard Sheldrake and now Head of Research Geoff Allen was that CFRCoE is 'old' the assertion that it has 'limited access and constrained modernisation and expansion capacity'. This is completely misleading. Unfortunately Minister Hodgkinson and Minister Stoner are yet to visit the site and have apparently been misinformed in reaching this conclusion.

The department has spent over 1.5 million dollars on upgrading the heritage listed laboratory, aquaria and technology of the site over the past decade, in some aspects these now state of the art facilities and technologies are amongst the best in the world for fisheries research. In fact other research facilities such as Universities utilise these facilities regularly, or outsource aspects of their research to the CFRCoE bringing in finance to the department. For example there are currently at least four Phd students utilising the aquaria, laboratory and aging facilities for their projects.

Minister Hodgkinson has also stated that the site has limited capacity for expansion. At the time of the decision there were 150 staff and several staff from Marine Parks had just moved in. There was and is capacity to expand the facility. Surely closing this large research centre that currently holds 150 staff is reducing the overall capacity of the department far more than any future expansion in regional areas will create. I'm very

skeptical that the government has any intention to expand the department in the future, as highlighted by this move which is blatantly a job cut.

The final reasoning, that CFRCoE has limited access, is also untrue. It can be accessed by vehicle and boat, it is close a train line, and to the airport. In fact the location of the site is also highly advantageous as it is central to the states' commercial and recreational fisheries, and being close to a transportation hub enables the department to coordinate internally, with stakeholders and with other National and International bodies. It is very likely that this will still have to occur in Sydney which will be inefficient and costly to taxpayers.

As for the financial advice received by the minister, let us not forget the briefing note that was obtained and published in the Sydney Morning Herald Feb 20, 2012 where "Bureaucrats working on the relocation of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre to Port Stephens pushed to reclassify it from a "major project" to a series of "minor works" to convince Treasury to fund it and avoid having to present a business case." I find this outrageous and corrupt. I think this, as well as all of reasoning and information the minister received should be investigated and those bureaucrats be held accountable if indeed they were falsely or incorrectly advising the minister. I am of the opinion that certain bureaucrats and managers pushed for this closure despite it being a terrible decision for the department to properly function, for its workers and the taxpayers. I would like this investigated by the enquiry and indeed if corruption is uncovered those responsible be held accountable.

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

The staff at Cronulla received no consultation whatsoever, and since it has been apparent that other stakeholders such and commercial and recreation fishing groups were consulted either. This has been evident through the support the 'Save Cronulla Fisheries' campaign has had from groups in both the commercial and recreational fishing sectors. Environmental groups were also not consulted and have since given us their support. In fact since the decision were clearly made with zero consultation to any other than upper management of the department, and its apparent that even then there was not much thought prior. It has been an absolute shambles and terribly distressing as there is simply no certainty for anyone's future due to the complete lack of organization and certainty for the departments future.

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

It first must be highlighted that the department is already decentralized. Even though the entire reason for this closure is apparently for decentralization. There are branches all over the state, including Port Stephens, Nowra, Narrandera, Coffs Harbour, Batemans Bay and Jervis Bay just to name a few. To close the major hub and lose so many staff

will hardly benefit stakeholders, or these regional areas. It will however make it more difficult for the regional centres and most importantly the different components of the department to coordinate. The integration of the various components and expertise (management, research, commercial, recreational, licensing, marine parks etc) is one of the major benefits of the Cronulla Centre, that makes it a model for environmental management on an International scale. Already having a strong regional presence, there is no logic in closing the Cronulla Centre when the majority of stakeholders (including 65% of NSW's recreational fishers, the states largest fish market, the majority of consumers and vendors of seafood) are in the Sydney metropolitan area. The location and quality of the site has also facilitated strong ties with Sydney's major Universities fostering future professionals in the field through joint research projects, internships and the use of CFRCoE's state of the art facilities. As well as this the Cronulla centre runs the majority of its educational programs in the Sydney area, including 200 sustainable fishing workshops to schools. Ridiculously, the government has realized that it needs to retain staff and functions in the Sydney metropolitan area, so know staff have/will be moved to SIMS at Wollstonecraft, Parramatta, Newington and Wollongong. These places will require rent and I believe are still in negotiation. Surely the cost of this alone compared to staying at Cronulla which is an excellent facility and is owned by The Crown rings alarm bells.

As stated earlier, the department has spent over 1.5 million dollars on upgrading the heritage listed laboratory, aquaria and technology of the site over the past decade. As none of this capital infrastructure is available at any of the proposed relocation sites, the capacity of the department to perform research is greatly reduced and a large amount of taxpayer's dollars has been wasted. Currently millions of dollars are invested in projects run by the CFRCoE. Examples include the 4 million dollar new licensing system that will collapse if the staff involved in the projects who are highly specialised are unable to relocate. A \$900 000 artificial reef program is beginning offshore Sydney, millions of dollars have been invested in a recreational fishing survey coordinated in Sydney, millions of dollars have been invested in a shark tagging program in Sydney harbour and the surrounding coast, and as previously mentioned the ongoing monitoring program of the Sydney fish market ensuring the sustainable harvest of fish resources in NSW. These are just a few examples of projects that are in jeopardy due to both the loss of staff and the importance of their location.

The closure will simply face an overall loss in its capacity to perform its functions, due to the massive loss of staff and expertise, as well as the state of the art facilities at Cronulla. It will do so at a huge and unnecessary cost to the taxpayer. It simply doesn't make sense.

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

The closure of CFRCoE will surely jeopardize the department's ability to effectively manage fisheries resources and hence it is irresponsible of the Minister to make this

decision. The impending loss of highly specialised staff and their years of expertise alone will do this. Combined with the difficulty of the department to coordinate through losing its central hub and much of its facilities, I strongly fear for the future of managing fisheries resources.

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,

Again I cannot comment on the advice that the minister received, but I can only assume that it was flawed as its quite apparent that the facilities at Cronulla cannot be replicated elsewhere. The best example is the heritage listed Aquaria facility. It cannot be replicated at Port Stephens as suggested as it is in a brackish mangrove, where as the Cronulla facility is in marine waters and hence suitable to experiments for marine species. To get anywhere near the quality and quantity of sea water currently used at Cronulla would require massive expense and the installation of major recirculation and filtration systems, augmented by trucks delivering water. The current water system at Port Stephens handles 40,000 L/day. At Cronulla this figure is 1.75 million L/day. The Port Stephens location is also a problem for staff as the drinking water is non-potable, it has limited access (a one-way bridge through the marsh) and little capability to expand. It has also been highlighted that the Port Stephens facility is at risk of being inundated in the near future according to Sea Level Rise predictions.

f)

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

As stated, the closure will, and has already begun to cause a loss in hundreds of years of expertise in not only research, but all manner of specialised roles in Fisheries. This will be catastrophic for sustainable fisheries management. In research alone there is over 500 years experience and over 50 degrees. Staff at Cronulla have dedicated their lives to the field as they are passionate intelligent people who believe in the importance of managing marine resources, losing them is a tragedy to both the staff and the state. Already there is insufficient independent data required for many of the fish species the harvested in this state. Losing much of the research capacity alone is a major problem for managing common resources. Combine this with losing managers, people in licensing, the results will be catastrophic. To effectively ensure a sustainable future for our marine resources, the department needs its current capacity and more, not this massive job cut.

g) **the impacts of the decision on service delivery to stakeholders,**

The loss of CFRCoE will severely reduce service delivery to stakeholders. The first obvious reason is, as stated already, due to the massive reduction in the departments capacity to perform its functions due to a loss in staff and expertise.

On top of this, losing the major Sydney hub of the already decentralised department will have countless impact on service delivery to stakeholders. One of the most important to note is the recreational fishing sector, arguably the largest stakeholder group in NSW fisheries. 60 percent of recreational fishers live in the Sydney metropolitan area, however the recreational fishing component of Cronulla is being moved to Nowra, where 1 percent reside. This is an obvious flaw. CFRCoE currently runs educational workshops in schools, safety programs and numerous other programs in the Sydney area promoting sustainable fishing practices, this is clearly important in Sydney where the majority of recreational fishers reside.

Of the commercial fishing catch, 56% comes from areas north of Sydney and 44% comes from Sydney and the South Coast. Most of these fish are sold through the Sydney Fish Market, which provides Cronulla's scientists with the majority of their samples for ageing and stock-assessment work. It was decided that commercial management be moved to Coff Harbour to "move closer to stakeholders" according to the Minister and Richard Sheldrake when he first informed us of the move. There are three times the number of commercial fishers in Sydney compared to Coffs Harbour. Even the far south coast is home to more than twice the number of fishers compared to Coffs Harbour. I am also concerned that the fishers of the South Coast who has already been effected by the Marine Parks will feel further disenfranchised by the perception the North Coast is more important to, or the majority of commercial fishing. It clear that the closure of Cronulla is not to better service stakeholders, as it will do the opposite.

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

As a staff member I have found this ordeal extremely distressing and felt we have been treated terribly and without compassion by the upper management or the minister. We were not consulted at all prior to the decision. I feel that is the minister wished to create jobs in these regional areas, simply offering them to staff and creating opportunities would have been a far more effective and respectful to do so. Forcing staff to move or have them lose their job is completely unfair. A lot of people simply can't move due to family issues, such as not wanting to take their children out of school, or not having a employment opportunities for their spouse. It's been really hard to see the people I work with and care about so distressed.

On top of this, I feel we have been mistreated throughout the closure. Temporary staff have lost the entitlements that were in their award throughout their whole career, which was quietly changed just before the announcement.

Promises of permanency or job swaps as indicated by Richard Sheldrake and Geoff Allen have been made and broken. Their has just been no respect or certainty given to staff in this difficult time.

I find it unacceptable that the Minister hasn't met with staff, and has in fact publicly ridiculed us when we have tried to highlight our concerns through actions and protest.

We have only done so out of desperation, as our concerns have not been dealt with adequately.

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

The Cronulla Centre is the birthplace of fisheries research in Australia and is of great national value. It is the first marine research centre in the Southern Hemisphere. It has long maintained a distinguished International reputation for its contribution to Marine Research and natural resource management. As well as its rich heritage it continues as a leader in cutting edge research and management. It should be celebrated and maintained not closed. There was international outcry when the decision was made. I think for the reason alone we cannot afford to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence, and it is a great shame that the government is trying to do so.

Yours Sincerly,