

**Submission
No 92**

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

Organisation: Coast & Wetlands Society Inc

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The Director
Select Committee on Cronulla Fisheries
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Inquiry into the Closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence.

The Coast and Wetlands Society Incorporated welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre. We recognise that to an extent the inquiry takes place after the horse has bolted, and the decision to close the Research Centre is not, at this stage, reversible. Nevertheless, the Inquiry will fulfill a valuable function if it can shed light on the decision-making process and thus, as a result of any recommendations the Inquiry makes, make it less likely that similar events will occur in the future.

A number of the terms of reference, which refer to advice about documents which may, or may not, have been available to the Minister, can only be answered by the Minister or her staff and Department. These are not matters which can be answered by groups or individuals outside government, notwithstanding that many people may hold suspicions, which have not, to date, been satisfactorily addressed by the Minister, that the decision was made on a predetermined ideological basis without critical analysis of the facts. In particular this comment refers to Terms of Reference a) c), d) and e). In relation to Term of Reference b), regarding consultation with a range of stakeholders, we will be interested in the official response from the Minister and her department, but to the best of our knowledge there was no prior consultation with a broad group of stakeholders. If there was consultation it was highly selective and confidential.

In regard to the other terms of reference we will make some general observations.

The Cronulla Fisheries Centre of Excellence has in various forms been in existence for over a century. It has rightly earned a high reputation for the standard of research conducted over this period. Particularly in recent decades, strong linkages have been made between the Cronulla Institute and tertiary educational institutions in the Sydney region. These include joint grants held by researchers at Cronulla and universities, and provision of opportunities for honours and postgraduate students. It is worth pointing out that while the State government has been responsible for funding many of the staff salaries and the infrastructure, many operational funds and some staff and equipment funding has been won by the Institute from various competitive funding schemes. Whether in its dispersed and depleted state there will be the same success in winning funding remains to be seen, but there must be some doubts

The facilities and equipment available at the Institute are largely modern and in good

condition, some are state-of-the-art. Relocating a research facility is not like moving office. Scientific equipment may be delicate and require re-establishment or recalibrating . Removal is likely to result in disruption to and delays in completing research programs.

One of the justifications advanced by the Minister for the closure and dispersal has been that it will bring the research close to end-users. This argument does not appear to stand up. Fisheries, both administratively and in terms of research facilities, is already one of the most regionalised of government agencies. However, one of the largest stakeholders (both numerically and financially) in Fisheries is made up of recreational anglers, the majority of whom are resident in the Sydney region. Closure of Cronulla will mean that this large group of stakeholders will no longer have research on matters of concern to them conducted from a facility close to their place of activity.

There will need to be continuing research and monitoring in the Sydney region, and to conduct this from facilities outside of Sydney will inevitably add to the logistic costs of research programmes. We understand that, in some recognition of this, at least one group originally scheduled to be relocated from Cronulla will now be based at another facility on Sydney Harbour. Removal outside the Sydney region will disrupt the links with tertiary institutes and other government research institutes whose work is relevant to fisheries (notably the Australian Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens) . Accessibility of library resources, and opportunities for informal contact and attendance at university seminars and conferences will be reduced.

There has undoubtedly been an adverse affect of the decision (both from the decision itself and from the way it was made and announced) on the morale of staff. For a variety of reasons some staff will not be able to readily relocate, and are likely to be lost to the Department. It is easy to destroy research institutions, much harder to rebuild them, and we are concerned that the damage done will not easily be overcome.

The Cronulla Research Centre site includes a number of items of heritage significance and there are substantial constraints on future, alternative, uses. Not only will substantial costs be incurred by the closure, but the possibility of capitalising on the vacant site is negligible, while there will be continuing need for maintenance and security to prevent demolition by neglect . We will be interested in whether or not the government can advise the Inquiry as to its future plans for the site, and demonstrate that it will not incur considerable holding costs.

Yours faithfully

Bill Evans

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