

Submission
No 45

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

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Submission to the Closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence

As a staff member of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence, I would like to submit my objection to the closure of the Centre.

Firstly I would like to state that it has been very disappointing and distressing to be caught up in a process that has been so poorly managed and lacking in any authentic commitment to minimise the impact of the decision to close the Cronulla Centre on the staff. We have had repeated expressions of empathy and concern from the Director, the Minister and the Executive Director with no action to back them up with any meaningful measures to ease the impact of this decision. The distress is amplified due the non-existent business case for the decision and lack of any clear vision or plan for the newly relocated organisation. The publicly disclosed reasons and justification for the decision are clearly wrong making it even more difficult to deal with.

There was no consultation with anyone prior to the decision being made. The first staff knew of the closure was when they were requested to attend an all staff meeting by the Executive Director at 10am on 8 September 2011, this was at the time when the Minister simultaneously announced the closure of the centre to the media. When asked if letters had been sent to all stakeholders, in particular commercial fisherman, the answer given by the Executive Director was something to the effect of "the relevant representatives had been notified" in other words only the representative of the Professional Fishermans Association was notified and it was assumed that he would inform all of the members of the association, keeping in mind that the association does NOT represent all of the commercial fishers in the state. A suggestion was put forward that letters to all commercial fishers should be sent and offers to mail out the relevant letters was made but was declined and the same statement was made that "relevant representatives were notified". This is just ignorant and arrogant in the eyes of the staff members who have to liaise with the commercial fishers on a daily

basis. Many stakeholders are still unaware of the effect this closure will have on the service they will receive, this being lack of experienced staff with the knowledge and experience of their business history. As for informing the recreational sector I believe that the Executive have relied on the Media release to do the job for them or staff to inform the stakeholders when speaking with them during their routine work contact.

The costs for close and relocate the functions to other locations will be exorbitant more than the Minister and Executive realise or care to admit to. Currently the Cronulla site costs little to run. There is no rent and maintenance costs are modest – especially because, in recent years, significant funding has been spent to modernise the site. The government has invested a considerable amount of funding in the site over the past decade, including an upgrade of its Heritage-listed H.C. Dannevig Fisheries Laboratory to state-of-the-art standard at a cost of more than \$1 million (to mark the 100 year anniversary of the site in 2006). This lab is used by staff and university students to investigate the life history characteristics of key recreational and commercial species. These include the ages, rates of growth, mortality, longevity and reproductive dynamics of key species. This information is used to set size and bag limits, advise on other management tools and feeds the resource assessment process.

The facilities at Cronulla are amongst the most modern and effective for fisheries research in Australia. It is an old site (proudly, the original in fact) but certainly not “run-down”. The cost with the loss of staff expertise and knowledge in fisheries management and research is priceless, the whole business/service to the stakeholders will be diminished to the point that in the medium to long term the state’s fisheries will not be managed sustainably and will be on the brink of being overfished and therefore unsustainable.

To have to replicate facilities (which will be impossible for some of the facilities like the aquaria) and pay ongoing rent in the regional areas is just ridiculous. The benefits of the closure – there are none!

I think the Minister has been given very bad advice on the closure and relocation, staff have asked that the correct information be given to the Minister for media and this has not been done, they have even offered to supply her the correct information and this too has been ignored, which is very disappointing to all staff. I am personally disgusted that the Minister and Premier repeatedly state that the decision to move NSW Agriculture from Sydney to Orange back in the late 1990's was very successful and good for the Farmers of NSW. Little is mentioned that the Commercial Fisheries Managers and Aquaculture managers were also moved to Orange; nothing is mentioned in the media about how diabolical the move was for Fisheries staff and stakeholders so much so that the Fisheries staff were bought back to Sydney, at a cost to the tax payers of NSW. Moving the Department as a WHOLE to Orange may have been a good decision for farmers but not Fishers. How can this be compared the regionalisation of Fisheries, where the proposed regionalisation is actually splitting a cohesive group of staff who consult with each other on a daily basis and have managed the State's Fisheries very successfully for the past 25 years from Cronulla. I ask how can that be deemed a good decision. NSW Fisheries is currently one of the most regionalised Departments within NSW DPI or DTIRIS, with 65% of staff currently in regional NSW.

The majority of staff (96%) at Cronulla are unable to move to any of the proposed sites due to family commitments, many have children in vital stages of schooling, others have elderly parents who rely on their support, some have health issues that require visits to specialist who are not accessible in regional areas. Most have partners who have jobs in Sydney who cannot leave and would not be guaranteed a similar job/career in any of the proposed regional sites. The decision is putting a big strain on most staff and is threatening many family relationships, again this is just unacceptable.

Staff were told at the very first meeting on 8 September 2011, that arrangements would be made for all staff to visit the proposed sites in Nowra, Port Stephens and Coffs Harbour, bus trips to be made available for staff and families to visit the region with the view to look at the

new office space and meetings would be set up with local groups, ie schools, councils, estate agents etc to give an overview of the area and facilities available etc to date this has not happened. How can staff make any decision on potentially moving to the proposed new location/s if general support of this kind was never followed through! It seems as if the 'goalposts' are always shifting and whenever you ask for something that was offered or mentioned in the initial announcement, there is never a definitive answer or this is no longer an option.

Staff were told they would be receiving a letter in February 2012 asking to indicate if they would move to the proposed 3 locations, this letter was not received until 24 February and staff had 4 weeks to respond. At the time of receiving the letter no further information was available to staff on the proposed bus trips to look at potential regional opportunities, this number of sites changed from 3 to 13 and the letter was heavily qualified and non binding on the Department, which could be changed at any time. This is not what staff were expecting and how could staff make informed decisions at the time when the Department was so non committal. Office space in Nowra was not found until May 2012 and Coffs Harbour has only recently been confirmed, this is just not good enough when staff have to make a decision in their final letter to move with their current job or leave their current roles. Staff who have received their 'final letter' to transfer their positions to a specified location were shock at the unprofessionalism of the letter, firstly the letter had spelling mistakes throughout, so much for quality control by the Director General or his immediate staff. Secondly, the information contained on the position to be transferred was also incorrect in some cases. When staff have asked for clarification it has either not been received or has taken quite some time to get a response from delegated staff dealing with the closure.

There has been a lack of transparency in the whole process, why when the Minister said there were 3 sites in regional NSW that Cronulla staff could relocate to and there are no negotiations that all of a sudden there are now some 13 sites that staff have had the

opportunity to relocate to, how and why has this happened, when it was supposedly non negotiable.

Staff were told if they could not relocate due to exceptional circumstances all of their cases would be listened to and seriously considered and they may have their positions kept in Sydney. It seems that this has not been the case for some staff who have really exceptional circumstances have not had their case even considered, so much for compassion and a fair and open process. Yet it is known that other staff put up cases that seemed no where as exceptional as those rejected and yet they have had their positions kept in Sydney.

The impact on staff morale and productivity has been severe. The whole process has been unfair and when it comes to looking after the staff during this site closure it seems to have been lacking any compassion or understanding. Long term temporary staff will not get the severance pay they deserve but the Department is towing the Political line that because they are temporary staff they are only entitled to the base payout, this being 16 weeks. Many long term temporary staff have been kept in a temporary position for many years at no fault of their own, many submissions have been put to Directors for approval and the same lame excuses have come back, no guaranteed ongoing funding, how can this be when some staff have had their contracts renewed regularly for 7, 10, 15 some even 20 years, yet they are only entitled to 16 weeks severance and their permanent counterparts are entitled to 40 weeks payout, if they decide not to move to a regional location. Some long term permanent staff who are now on a temporary contract, get to move to new location on their temporary contract with no guarantee that it will be renewed. This is very unsettling and not very secure to up and relocate to a new area for the term of the contract. The option to apply for any expressions of interest that will be offered to Cronulla staff in the hope of being successful and your problem will be solved it's just not an acceptable response to affected staff.

Cronulla Fisheries Centre is the only large Government Department in the Sutherland Shire and biggest employer in Cronulla. Many other big business in the area have closed or are about to close down, examples of these being Players Biscuits, Caltex just announced they are about to close their site, 350 staff will be out of work and it is also well know that Toyota too will be closing it's doors within the next 18 months, leaving even more local residents out of a job. The closure of Cronulla Fisheries will have a big impact on local business as well; we interact with many local businesses from services of cars, trailers and boats, generators for the aquaria. We utilise local trades people for site maintenance, local offsite storage facilities, local catering companies who heavily rely on our business and in general the local shopping centre that staff utilise on a daily basis.

This decision to close the Cronulla Fisheries Centre is wrong; I ask that the committee after reading submissions and getting answers to the Terms of Reference request the Minister to reverse the decision to close the Centre.

Yours sincerely.

Staff Member