

**Submission
No 32**

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

Organisation: Australian Society for Fish Biology

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Submission to the inquiry into the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence

The Australian Society for Fish Biology (ASFB) was founded in 1971 and is a professional, independent, non-profit, and non-aligned organisation. The objectives of the Society are to promote research, education and management of fish and fisheries in Australia and to provide a forum for the exchange of information. ASFB currently has approximately 450 members primarily from Australia and New Zealand.

The ASFB is concerned over the NSW Government's proposal to close the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence. We have already written a letter to the NSW Minister for Primary Industries, the Hon. Katrina Hodgkinson (dated 29 September 2011) highlighting our concerns. Our NSW members have now indicated that the Legislative Council has formed a Select Committee to inquire into the closure of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre of Excellence (hereafter CFRC). Here we reiterate many of our concerns by addressing the specific terms of reference of the inquiry. We also highlight some additional issues that have become apparent with proposed relocations of staff.

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

N/A to our submission

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

The ASFB was formed more than 40 years ago and is a professional, independent, non-profit, and non-aligned organisation whose membership includes many current and former employees from the CFRC. Our Hall of Fame (which recognises those making significant contributions to fish and fisheries research and management) includes Dr Kenneth (Kay) Radway Allen (1911-2008) who was formerly Chief of the Division of Fisheries and Oceanography at CSIRO Fisheries Laboratories in Cronulla. As Australia's leading fish and fisheries society, ASFB has a significant interest in the CFRC, yet the Society was not consulted prior to this significant decision and our general membership only became aware of it via the press release of 8 September 2011. Similarly, there appears to have been a lack of consultation with CFRC staff - many of whom were only informed of the decision immediately prior to the press release.

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

It is our expert opinion that there will be significant immediate and on-going costs to the department, fishery stakeholders, universities and the general public arising from the proposed closure of the CFRC.

While regional centres may benefit from the decision to close the CFRC and relocate its functions to other locations, there are a number of costs and disadvantages associated with the closure. For example, there are many mutual opportunities for professional development and training as well as collaboration between Universities in the broader Sydney region and CFRC. The Cronulla site is situated close to national and international transport hubs, and the staff at CFRC provide economic input to the Sutherland Shire. More detail on these benefits is outlined below.

Many of our student members rely on the state-of-the-art facilities at the CFRC, and require these facilities for the completion of their research degrees. The proximity of CFRC to the Sydney population and key tertiary institutions (Sydney University, University of NSW, Macquarie University, University of Technology - Sydney, University of Wollongong and University of Western Sydney) therefore facilitates education and mentoring of the next generation of natural resource managers, and fisheries scientists. Collaboration with academics and students from these research and teaching institutions is an important benefit of the location of the Cronulla Fisheries Research Centre which will be severely impacted as a

result of the proposed closure. Without this facility prospective students may not choose a career in fisheries. Collaborations with these tertiary institutions also provide a cost effective means (due to co-funding from external sources e.g. Australian Research Council etc) for the NSW Government to conduct and expand vital fisheries research in the State. These unique opportunities, and associated revenue streams, may be lost with the closure of CRFC.

Numerous fisheries staff have also undertaken further education or developed professionally through collaborative opportunities with Universities, while working at CFRC, which has enhanced the capacity of the organisation for delivering high quality science and management. These staff will no longer have the opportunity for regular face-to-face interaction with outstanding University staff in the Sydney region, and may be prevented or dissuaded from completing further postgraduate education. These lost opportunities for career development and training opportunities may impact on DPI's future ability to deliver on core responsibilities (see d).

There are also significant access advantages for the Cronulla location. It is close to national and international transportation hubs that facilitates collaboration beyond the Sydney region. The frequency of flights into and out of Sydney is a significant advantage that has facilitated the Cronulla site hosting many national meetings and workshops on fishery-related issues over many years. It also allows internationally renowned researchers to briefly visit the CFRC whilst en route to other major cities in Australia.

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

The objectives of the Fisheries Management Act are to "conserve, develop and share the fisheries resources of the State for the benefit of present and future generations". Fishery Management Strategies (FMSs) are a means by which these objectives are achieved. The generic goals of these FMSs are to maintain stocks of primary and key secondary species harvested by the fishery at sustainable levels, and to facilitate effective and efficient compliance, research and management of the fishery. The closure of the CFRC and the potential loss of effective and efficient research capabilities to monitor the status of the fish stocks and fisheries are likely to limit the ability of the Minister and the Department to meet these goals. We acknowledge that this point assumes that research capability is lost – at present 18 staff have already left the department and only 7 have moved to regional locations. A similar loss ratio of staff is likely for the remaining CFRC staff suggesting that there may be difficulties with meeting the requirements of the Fisheries Management Act.

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

The CFRC is ideally situated and the capital infrastructure at CFRC includes state of the art purpose built fisheries research laboratories that are not available at any of the proposed relocation sites and would cost millions of dollars to duplicate at another site. During the past 5 years there has also been significant investment in site infrastructure by government and stakeholder groups further enhancing the capabilities at CFRC. Besides significant cost to replicate the Cronulla facilities at other locations, it will also take significant time to build or redevelop facilities which match those that are currently available at the CFRC.

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

Whilst we appreciate the sentiment of decentralisation and efforts to boost regional economies in NSW, the complete closure of the CFRC is likely to have significant and wide-reaching effects for fisheries research and extension in NSW and more broadly within Australia. The ASFB is concerned that the closure will result in a significant loss of research capacity at a national level, and a detachment from the significant fisheries stakeholder base that resides in the Sydney area.

Many of the staff are internationally recognised leaders in fisheries research and management. Those with PhD qualifications have, for example, undertaken education and research training of 7+ years. Many of these well qualified staff have years of experience following their education which in many cases is irreplaceable. We are aware that a number of such staff are not prepared to relocate (decisions often related to their family commitments). Thus, significant scientific expertise and capacity will be lost not only from Cronulla, but also potentially from NSW and Australia, which will have significant implications for sustainable fisheries management.

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

As indicated above, the closure of the CFRC will impact on service delivery especially to the commercial fisheries sector. In addition to the huge loss of research expertise, there will apparently be an almost complete loss of the corporate knowledge of long-term staff in the commercial licensing section, as these staff are choosing not to transfer from Cronulla to Nowra. CFRC staff have built up long-term working relationships with most of the fishers – without these relationships the service delivery to stakeholders will suffer for some time while new relationships are built. As current management and entitlements to fish for commercial

fishers are administered through a complex system of licensing controls, there is every possibility of an almost complete loss of service delivery and stakeholder confidence in this area. In the longer term the loss of research capabilities and experience will become apparent in a few years time when high quality data and research outputs are not available for assessments of fish stock status. There will also be significant short-term costs arising from the lack of service delivery to fishery stakeholders whilst the new facilities are being developed.

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

Many of our NSW members work at CFRC and live in the local area. A number of these researchers have expressed concern that they are unable to relocate to alternative sites. Consequently, NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) will lose significant scientific expertise, which will adversely affect its ability to deliver on key research programs.

We are particularly concerned about the impact that this closure will have on families. Dual-career couples need two positions, and it is especially difficult for established professional couples to find suitable positions with similar remuneration in regional areas. This is often made even more difficult when couples are in different fields (e.g. research and law or accountancy).

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

The CFRC is recognised as the “birthplace of fisheries science in Australia”. It has a long and distinguished history of scientific contribution to Australia and we believe should be regarded and maintained by the NSW government as a “national treasure”. Should the CFRC site be closed, it is not clear what it would be subsequently used for and how the heritage value of the site would be maintained.

As outlined above the closure of the CFRC will have significant consequences for fisheries management, research capacity, staff (and hence experience and intellectual capital) retention, and stakeholder engagement/satisfaction in NSW. It is our opinion that complete closure of the CFRC may not be necessary to achieve the regionalisation policy of the NSW Government. The ASFB recognises that there may be strategic reasons for the relocation of several programs and work units that currently operate at the CFRC; partial regionalisation may be a suitable strategy to ensure the objectives of the NSW Government are achieved without substantial consequences for the NSW taxpayer. This approach will ensure that the significant stakeholder base in Sydney retains access to essential fisheries services, and an important and distinguished institute is not lost at a time when scientifically sound decisions

are essential to ensure food security and sustainable utilisation of natural resources in an uncertain future.

Yours sincerely

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President of the Australian Society for Fish Biology

This submission is authorised by the Executive Council of the Australian Society for Fish Biology.

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