

INQUIRY INTO COMMERCIAL FISHING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Mr Mark Wanless – Partially confidential

Date received: 9 December 2016

Partially
Confidential

SUBMISSION TO THE ENQUIREY INTO COMMERCIAL FISHING IN NSW

Key Issues

- The ability of the DPI to reform and regulate commercial fishing in NSW given their past track record.
- Sustainability of NSW commercial fishing.
- Financial hardship forced on NSW commercial fishers and their families.
- Economic viability of NSW commercial fishing and other flow on businesses, e.g.: co-ops, seafood retailers, transporters, equipment suppliers, etc.
- Affordable, fresh seafood supply to the public.
- Uncertainty of employment for fishers

History

The implementation of share management to the NSW commercial fishing industry in 1994 was forced upon us and extolled as being the best way forward for our industry. We were told by the then director, _____, that the shares issued to us were “a statutory right that could not be taken from us, it is as good as money in the bank, could be used as collateral for loans” and other nonsensical descriptions. These statutory fishing rights were supposed to guarantee our right to fish commercially and to give us confidence in our future within the industry. With every change of government, fisheries ministers and managers we have been given more stringent restrictions and less ability to continue in our chosen occupation.

In my 26 years in the industry I have watched these ever changing policies and restrictions whittle away at the economic viability and sustainability of our industry, seen fisheries collapse, watched many fishermen forced from the industry because of unfounded restrictions and closures.

A case in point is the closure of Lake Macquarie to commercial fishing. In my studies of marine science I prepared a paper on “The Relative Impact of Commercial and Recreational Fishing In Lake Macquarie and Tuggerah Lakes”. During the course of this research using NSW DPI Fisheries own data it was shown that in the 40 years preceding 1997 there has been no statistically significant change in the most sought after recreational and commercial fish stocks in the two estuaries. That didn't stop the department from putting 32 fishermen out of work in Lake Macquarie for the wrong reasons. What was and is significant is the loss of 70% of seagrass beds over that same time period within those estuaries due to nutrification from urbanisation and the coincident runoff. Our managers dropped the ball on that one because it was too politically hot to handle. They knew what problems were befalling Lake Macquarie but the easy option was to close the lake to commercial fishing

and so appease the voters. The recreational fishery in Lake Macquarie, which I have been a part of for 50 years, has not improved since the expulsion of commercial fishers. Infact, arguably, it has gotten worse.

The same thing has happened since many times whereby the fisheries management rules have been changed for the sake of change, too late, or inadequately and not based on sound scientific reason. (Gemfish, Mulloway, Snapper for example. All fisheries in trouble).

Consider recreational use of electric fishing reels which are widespread and must surely affect slow growing deep water fish stocks. The department allows the use of these winches for recreational fishing without any form of monitoring the impact.

What possible confidence could any of us have in this latest so called reform given that the department continues to get it wrong? This BAP will not reform the commercial fishery in NSW, only make life harder for all participants and waste millions of dollars of taxpayer's money.

We have just endured a first round of the 'Preview Share Trading Market'. A closed door scheme devised by the department to feel out the mood of fishers and to get an idea of what it will cost the department to subsidise the 'real' Share Trading Market'.

We, as fishermen, are to be given no indication of what the DPI learned from this!

This total waste of time and money surely shows that they have no idea how the BAP is going to proceed. The entire process so far has been convoluted and mired in secrecy from the people whose lives are being affected. I attended a meeting at parliament house in Sydney recently and watched a burly 40 year old fisherman reduced to tears as he tried to let the members know of the impact this farce is having and will have on his young family. This was moving to everyone present and is indicative of all of the fishing families in NSW suffering the same fate.

Case study

I have been a commercial fisherman in NSW since 1990 when I was told by the fisheries department that I must 'show a substantial financial commitment to the industry' to be eligible for a NSW commercial fishing licence. This I did by buying a fishing business with confidence that as a primary producer I could make my living and support the local economy by supplying fresh seafood to the public. I have been involved in many different fisheries in NSW including hand gathering, fish trap and handline, beach haul, estuary meshing and handlining, purse sein and longline. I have shown my commitment to the industry both financially and physically.

Now I am being told that I have to show more financial commitment by buying my job back, a job that I have given a large part of my life to. Due to financial circumstances beyond my control I am a part time fisherman now. I am not in a position to borrow tens of thousands

of dollars to buy enough shares to continue to do what my statutory fishing rights supposedly guaranteed me when our shares were allocated. I am 57 years old and well past my used by date for career change

I rely heavily on the income that I get from commercial fishing to manage my expenses, mortgages, loan repayments, my children's' education, etc. Because I work at a second job I am not eligible for the rural assistance loan which is available to other fishers to restructure their businesses to accommodate the BAP. This discrimination is a contributing factor to me being forced out of the fishing industry.

This Business Adjustment Program, according to DPI is intended to give fishermen confidence, direction, and the ability to make informed decisions on how to proceed and grow our businesses and to ensure sustainability of NSW commercial fishing. This BAP is doing the exact opposite of these things. Since the first notification from the DPI that 'reform' was coming, myself and almost all fishermen in NSW have been confused and frustrated as to why we must pay to continue to fish. The BAP managers have not given any structured plan or advice to any fisher. To date the structure of the reform has taken so many turns that we don't have any idea where we stand. Nobody, including DPI, knows how it will be implemented, how much it will cost, if enough shares will be available to continue fishing, what, if any benefits it will bring to sustainability of fish stocks.

The DPI wants to eliminate latent fishing licences and those that play a small part in the fishery. It seems contradictory to say that taking out the licences that are having the least impact on the fishery is going to increase fish stocks.

The commercial fishing lifestyle served to give me income and the ability to work doing something that I am passionate about. Commercial fishing is a dangerous and sometimes thankless occupation but most of the people that this BAP will affect would not have it any other way if they had a choice. Since I can remember the NSW and federal governments have said that they encourage small business and the benefits of domestic products and of lower imports. This is obviously just lip service as usual.

Recommendations

The solution is simple. If the DPI want to reduce pressure on fish stocks offer a respectable buyout scheme as has been done in other fisheries, areas, states and countries.