



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

REGULATIONS AND DETERMINATIONS

**Small Pelagic Fishery Total Allowable
Catch (Quota Species) Determination 2012**

Disallowance

SPEECH

Wednesday, 22 August 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 22 August 2012
Page 97
Questioner
Speaker Colbeck, Sen Richard

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Senator COLBECK (Tasmania) (18:37): I have had some quite instructive conversations with Senator Whish-Wilson in respect of this issue. We have sat down on a couple of occasions and had a discussion about it. But I have to say that Senator Siewert's contribution was, quite frankly, reminiscent of some of what her state colleagues have done in whipping up fear and frenzy around this issue and causing a large amount of the concern that exists in my home state of Tasmania and in other places, I might add, with absolutely irresponsible rhetoric around this particular issue. I recognise the concern that exists in my home state of Tasmania and I have had conversations with the recreational fishermen myself. I have sat down with them and we have been through the issues and I think that we understand our issues and I understand their concerns around localised depletions.

As for the paper that came out yesterday, about eight weeks ago when this process started I went to some scientists and said, 'We would like you to publish something. We would like you to put something together that gives some information to the community around this,' because I have to say, the government's approach to this has been dead-set hopeless—absolutely dead-set hopeless. Going and talking to the Prime Minister achieves nothing. This does achieve something, because it provides some information to the community.

I am really disappointed, Senator Siewert, in your misrepresentation of what is said. I have read the report. Senator Whish-Wilson read the same half of the paragraph out that you read and Senator Scullion read the other half of the paragraph, so when you put them together, you get the actual picture. As Senator Scullion said, here we have seven of the most respected marine scientists in small pelagics in the world. Professor Sainsbury has just spent two weeks at the United Nations FAO on small pelagics, lecturing on this—and I will come to that later in my contribution. These people are highly respected, and to misrepresent their writings as you have done is quite disgraceful.

I am going to quote a part of the introduction. It says:

Several groups of scientists worldwide, including from CSIRO and IMAS, have recently examined the effects of fisheries on small pelagic species (also sometimes called forage fish) and how they should be managed

so as to avoid undesirable flow-on effects of these fisheries on the food web and ecosystem.

Very important, because it comes to the issues that Senator Brown talked about. It continues:

There is now clear and widely agreed understanding about how these fisheries should be managed, and this understanding has a strong scientific basis—

That is the introduction to this paper. So suggestions that the science is not known, that there are doubts about the science, is complete rubbish. This is a very well-studied fishery and it is very well studied globally, and there are a number of papers that I will cite as part of the discussion here today that actually talk about it. So the rhetoric that the Greens have been going on with and the misrepresentation particularly by Paul O'Halloran, the member for Braddon in Tasmania, and Mr Kim Booth, the member for Bass in Tasmania, have been quite outrageous. It has whipped people into a frenzy. I have had people in my office who say that they cannot sleep at night because of the concerns that have been raised. They come in and quote the lines that the Greens are running out in Tasmania.

As Senator Brown said, and I agree with her on this point, this motion will not necessarily achieve anything. This is a typical Greens process—delay, delay, add cost, try and make an industry or a business unviable by applying additional cost to the business. They have done it in the forest industry and they do it in a whole range of other industries. They have said they are going to target the mining industry—same toolkit, same process. They demonise the industry, they destroy the reputation of the business, and then they cause delay after delay after delay, which increases costs and therefore makes the project financially unviable. That is their strategy. That is the strategy that is being used here. As Professor Sainsbury says:

The demand that there is scientific knowledge about the detailed local movement dynamics of fish stocks is an example of the approach that we must know everything about everything before we can do anything.

That is the way that the Greens operate—'unless you know everything'. But we know that science continues

to evolve, and we should continue to invest in science so that we get a good outcome, and we must continue to improve our fisheries management. Not only do we say that we are a good fisheries manager, we are globally benchmarked as being a good fisheries manager. According to the fisheries research reports, the 2008 volume, as far as sustainability is concerned, Australia ranks second in the world.

Mr Burke this morning on Radio National made some quite extraordinary statements. He has actually redefined the issue of localised depletion. He is now talking about seals and dolphins and, quite extraordinarily, albatross. I have not seen an albatross 100 metres deep in the water. I have talked to the industry and to the owner of the vessel, who have fished with this method in this fishery previously—so we are not talking about a new process; it has occurred before—using very similar equipment. Mr Burke is now talking about localised depletions in a way that is different from what everybody else who has been talking about it understands.

The paper that was released by those seven scientists yesterday actually deals with the issue of localised depletion. On top of that, the company is offering a move on provision to deal with the concerns of the local fishermen—quite responsibly. They are not necessarily required to do it; the fishery is already spatially managed. You just cannot go to the east coast of Tasmania, for example, and take fish. It already has some spatial management around it, and he is offering more. There is a huge opportunity.

I was really disappointed when I heard that the recreational fishing sector had removed themselves from the discussions last week, as I said to you this morning, Senator Whish-Wilson, because we lost an opportunity to work with the recreational sector, those who are concerned, to do some more science around the issue of how we move around the fishery and how the fish move within the fishery. The offer is on the table. In fact, if you go back to the proposal that SeaFish put over nine months ago to gather new science, that was part of it. If you go back and do that research, that was part of their proposal months ago: to do some more research on the movement of the fish around the fishery so that it was better understood.

There was an opportunity that the recreational fishing guys could have taken to do that. I can understand their lack of confidence in the way the government has managed this—I sincerely can. The government should have said there is a shortage of information or there needs to be a compilation of information. That could have been put on the table. We all know that they were asking for it as part of the talks, but they were told

it was not there. It has come out afterwards because somebody else asked for it.

Senator Ludwig said this morning he now accepts the science. He said on Radio National, in respect of localised depletions: 'I accept the science of that absolutely. The question then becomes whether those volumes, if taken by one vessel using these particular fishing methods, throw up anything that was not contemplated when the science was last done. That is the issue where I think it is quite responsible that questions be checked and checked through very thoroughly, and I am still waiting for some work to come back on that.'

Minister Burke, when he was minister for fisheries between 2007 and 2010, actually presided over the drafting of the small pelagics plan. On the very first page of the small pelagics plan, which was initially put out in 2008 and updated in 2009, it says:

there are considerable economies of scale in the fishery and the most efficient way to fish may include large scale factory freezer vessels.

That is in the Small Pelagic Fishery Management Plan that was issued twice under Minister Burke when he was minister for fisheries. I am not sure what he was doing back then and whether he was moving a motion of no confidence in his role as a fisheries minister when he was there or whether he was just trying to find ways to intercede in this particular issue now, which I have to say I think is the case because, in my view, Minister Burke is completely out of control on a number of issues. But that is his record in this particular matter: he presided over the management plan that suggested a large trawler might be part of the deal back in 2008 and 2009. So for anybody in government to be suggesting that this is a huge surprise is quite outrageous.

I want to go now to the question of global fisheries and how they are managed. I mentioned that Professor Sainsbury was involved in some work in Europe and for the United Nations recently. I go to a piece of science that was issued back in April this year by the Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force. I want to talk about how that works and how our Small Pelagic Fishery Management Plan is established. In the small pelagic fisheries globally, the practice has been to fish down to 20 per cent of the biomass—that is, to take out 80 per cent. That has been the global practice until recently. What this report recommends is that the minimum remaining amount of biomass is doubled to 40 per cent. That is what they observe. The task force also talk about making allowance within that 40 per cent that is to remain for all the other species that forage on the small pelagics—it recognises that they are an important part of the food web.

When we come to the Australian Small Pelagic Fishery Management Plan, where is it set? We say you can take a maximum of 20 per cent. So Lenfest says double it from leaving 20 to leaving 40. We say leave 80, and that is with the most up-to-date science. We then overlay another precaution where we say: as the science decays so does the quota, by 2½ per cent per annum, and when you get to a certain stage you go to a tier-2 level, which has to be below 10 per cent. Where is it set right now? It is set for jack mackerel and blue mackerel at less than 7½ per cent and for redbait at 10 per cent.

So the frenzy that has been whipped up around this, around the science and the level of the quota and the sustainability of the quota, I think is quite outrageous. As Senator Scullion mentioned, there is a small pelagic fishery in South Australian state waters, in a very confined area, that takes 34,000 tonnes per annum. It is well studied. Its impacts are well understood. It does not have impacts on localised depletion and all of the other important marine mammals that are around it because we have a very precautionary approach to the way that we set our quotas and we take into account the importance of these species in the food chain. But nobody has been prepared to say that. Nobody has been prepared to put that important information on the table as part of this debate. All we have had is hysteria and innuendo and claims that will denigrate the name of the business that is operating in this fishery. I think that is an absolute disgrace. We saw that again in the Tasmanian parliament where the press release put out by the Greens does not even reflect the motion that was passed in the house today in Tasmania. Mr Deputy President, I seek leave to continue my remarks.

Leave granted.