

Extract from *Hansard*

Tuesday, 26 May 2009

Budget Estimates Committee - Fisheries

Dr M.D. NAHAN: I refer to page 224 of the *Budget Statements*, volume 1, and to the second bullet point under Significant Issues Impacting the Agency. It has a reference to the impact fishers have on some fish species and the need for better management intervention. The valuable rock lobster industry has received much attention in recent months. Could the minister provide the committee with an update on the activity being undertaken to address the issues in this fishery?

Mr S.J. Smith: At the moment the rock lobster fishery is not travelling too well in terms of projections for three to four years. We are particularly concerned about the collection levels for puerulus, or baby rock lobsters, which predict the catch in three to four years. For the season just gone, the puerulus settlement is close to zero, suggesting a particularly poor catch coming up.

What we have done as an agency this year, or the minister has done, is implement some measures to try to protect the breeding stock for future years, and also to push some of the catch from this year into future years to try to smooth out the trough that we are expecting in three to four years.

Those measures have involved some restrictions on the number of pots that are used and also the number of days on which fishing can take place. There was a reduction down to four days. That has been returned up to five days a week that the fishers are allowed to go out and catch crayfish.

There were also some changes to the gauge sizes to protect the breeding stock, and the introduction of a total allowable catch for each of the three zones of the fishery. Those measures were intended to bring the catch down to under 7 800 tonnes. There were two rounds of measures.

The first round was at the start of the season when the minister announced that the target catch for the season was going to be 7 800 tonnes. The monitoring of the catch suggested that we were on track midseason for a catch in the order of 9 200 tonnes, so the measures were tightened midseason to try to restore the projected catch to 7 800 tonnes.

We believe that that target will be achieved in reducing the catch down to that level or below, which should have the benefit of pushing some of that catch into future years and protecting the breeding stock to make sure that we have a viable and sustainable industry.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Given the sharp drop in the samples, is the department confident that its sampling technique is adequate for that?

Mr S.J. Smith: We are very confident in the model that we have. The model has been in place for nearly 40 years now, and it has proved to be accurate in predicting the catch for three to four years out to within 90 to 95 per cent accuracy. With that extended time series, I think people can be confident that the model is a very effective one. I have to say that with the collection this year being so low, we are really testing the limits of the model, but the model has proved to be very robust in past years, and there is no reason to believe that it will not continue to be robust this year.

We have had some questions about whether we have varied anything; for instance, have the collectors been placed in different locations or have we changed the material that they are produced from and so on? We have not yet come across any question to which there has not been a reasonable explanation for those who make us think that there is any problem with the model. Therefore, we are very confident that the model is proving to be effective, so the measures that we have put in place are necessary to protect the industry.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I will just make some further comments on that. Obviously, this has caused extreme disruption and hardship within the crayfish industry, none more so than in my own electorate. Lots of issues were raised with me about the sampling process. Some people were saying that a new rope was used, and they felt that that was stopping the landing of the puerulus on that rope. However, we arranged to talk to the person who was actually putting out the traps.

As it turned out, he was using some of the new ones and some of the old ones, and he was not catching them on either. There are two options here. One is that something has happened; that there are still heaps of puerulus out there, but for some unknown reason, despite 40 years of experience, suddenly this year they are not landing. Alternatively, there is going to be a significant reduction in the catch.

Obviously, we have to assume the latter. If it turns out to be the former, in the next few years there will be some very happy crayfishermen out there because there will be a lot more crayfish. However, the reality is that the chances are very strong, based on the history, that in four years there will be a significant reduction. Therefore, the minister was really left with no choice but to follow the line that he did. Despite the strong dissatisfaction of some sections of the industry, I think that was the only sensible action that could be taken.

Dr M.D. NAHAN: Why was the catch rate above expectations in the first part of the season? The department forecast about 9 000 tonnes. Is that because more effort was put in?

Mr S.J. Smith: It is possible that some more effort was put in. Certainly, the return per pot was up, as one would expect, with the reduction in pot numbers. However, in actual fact, the environmental conditions were particularly good for an early catch. The season effectively has two parts: the whites and the reds.

The whites are the first part when the crays are moving; they are migrating. The environmental conditions were particularly good for the migration of the whites. The more movement there is, the more often they come across pots and climb in. Therefore, the ability to catch the crayfish was particularly high in the first half of the season. The fact that it was high is a reflection of good environmental conditions for the migration.