

WEST COAST DEMERSAL SCALEFISH RESOURCE

Grievance

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [9.40 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Fisheries. I grieve on behalf of west coast communities that are reliant upon both the commercial and recreational fishing sectors that are providing tourism opportunities and cash income for them. Many communities have already had to adapt to the consequences of climate change and government policy in the rock lobster industry, with a steep decline in the number of boats operating in the fishery from, I believe, a peak that was well in excess of 700 to around 250 today. Many people have left the industry, which is heavily impacting local communities. Recreational fishing provides tourism and hospitality opportunities. In fact, west coast communities have come to depend on the recreational fishing industry.

The minister announced via a media statement on 18 February 2022 that the state had accepted a recommendation by the industry-led Harvest Strategy Reference Group to reduce the total catch for commercial species by 50 per cent. I note the minister's response to a question without notice on Tuesday from Hon Colin de Grussa, the shadow Minister for Fisheries, that there are currently no specific management proposals. The minister also stated that there is no specific mechanism or formal requirement to compensate when addressing the sustainability of fish resources. Minister, the demersal fishery is a key target for recreational fishers. That poses the question: what will be the effect of the catch reduction on west coast communities?

Both the minister and I have received an email from Mr Shane Younger, the proprietor of the Jurien Bay tackle shop. That email references an online petition titled "Don't take our fishing freedom" from a group called the Western Australian Recreational Family Fishing Alliance. The group is calling for the 50 per cent demersal catch reduction to be delayed until there has been further consideration, consultation and research. This change.org petition has around 1 400 signatures thus far. WARFFA claims that the reduced catch limits have the potential to cause irreparable damage to recreational fishing and marine industries, as well as coastal tourism in Western Australia, with significant social and mental health impacts to the people of Western Australia, with over 700 000 anglers in Western Australia.

Mr Younger writes of his deep concerns about the proposed 50 per cent reduction on the demersal fishery. He goes on to say —

Our shop employs 4 people all local, it is open all year apart from Christmas Day.

Jurien Bay like many coastal towns survive on the tourism dollar, many tourists holiday in these regions to participate in fishing for Dhufish etc.

These Recreational Fishermen spend 2.4 billion dollars annually in WA, all shops and services benefit in one way or another.

With over 40 years in the industry I have seen all the measures put in place to help our fishery.

DPIRD have indicated stocks recovering which is good news, so why further reductions?

Was Recfish West approached for advice on this matter?

Was WA Recreational Family Fishing Alliance ... approached?

Sometimes people make the wrong decisions which has happened with our fishery as a member WARFFA we have many ideas to help the situation without reductions.

2.4 billion dollars from recreational fishermen a year is a huge help for the economy.

Approx \$159 million on equipment is spent.

\$389 million on boats.

\$1.8 billion on fishing trips

We have to look at the importance of this fishery economically ...

Further on he says —

Was the social impact ever considered?

Speaking for myself I will have to cut staff and hours.

The economic nature for our town will be significant.

Tourism will be down.

With a downturn of profits local sporting clubs and schools will suffer with sponsorships and donations cut or downgraded.

My GST of course will be down like many other businesses.

Recreational Fishermen also drive Tourism, creating jobs and businesses open.

Many recreational Fishermen will cut costs or do other vacations, probably start flying out of Australia to Bali etc.

...

Further fishing restrictions will cost jobs and livelihoods of many West Aussies.

He also says, in summary, that much is at stake with jobs, the economy and businesses all under threat. He says that it is a big election issue, given one in three voters are recreational fishermen, and that there would be more simple solutions if the powers that be would listen to others.

I call on the minister to consider the impacts on west coast communities. Many of these communities have already had to adapt to the decline in catch limits and in the number of boats in the western rock lobster industry. There is now an apparent need to further restrict demersal species fishing beyond the current limits and seasonal bans. That will have huge consequences for the community and cause economic loss.

Just as the timber and coal industries have been impacted by climate change and subsequent government decisions, so, too, have the fishing communities of the west coast. One example is the 2007 collapse of the puerulus count in the rock lobster fishery and the later introduction of catch quotas, which saw the departure of many boats and crews from the towns. Another example is the 2011 marine heatwave that destroyed thousands of hectares of kelp forest, which is a vital fish habitat. For both the coal and forestry industries, there has been a recognition that changes of policy and government decisions have both consequences for and an economic impact on the communities that rely on those industries. In both the coal and forestry sectors, the government designed a just transition plan, most recently with the \$50 million that has been allocated for the forestry plan. In both these cases, just as for fishing, there is no specific mechanism or formal requirement to compensate—to paraphrase the minister's answer to Hon Colin de Grussa—when addressing the sustainability of these industries. I am seeking for the minister to recognise that the coastal fishing communities of the west coast are similarly impacted by decisions of government.

I believe there are opportunities for investment in the industry and the communities affected. The Nationals WA election commitments included recognition of both the commercial and recreational fishing sectors, with a proposed investment of \$10 million over five years to double the annual amount in the recreational fishing initiatives fund for fish aggregating devices, fishing platforms and artificial reefs. Other proposed investments were \$20 million over five years for regional aquaculture research nodes and \$24 million to fund hatcheries and fish restocking efforts until at least 2030. I note the stalled promise for a \$7 million fish nursery in Geraldton. Perhaps investments such as that could be tasked with helping to replenish some fish stocks. We also proposed other important allocations of money. We also wanted to ensure that fisheries groups would be consulted before, during and after the creation of national parks.

I ask that the minister consider these circumstances, which are real issues for west coast communities, and also consider what solutions could be offered. How will the catch reductions be implemented? The Western Australian recreational fishing community, associated industries and the many coastal communities whose economies depend on tourism need clarity. The economic losses and consequences to these coastal towns must be acknowledged. These communities should not be decimated by decisions of government. I call on the minister to support a just transition plan for the west coast fishing communities and to make the necessary investments in the forthcoming state budget.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Fisheries) [9.48 am]: I thank the member for Moore for his grievance and, of course, without fish, there is no recreational fishing or commercial fishing sector. The profound impact on the state's economy and sustainability is absolutely at the heart of fishing policy and has been for successive governments. The latest scientific stock assessment undertaken by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development has found that the west coast demersal fish resource is not recovering fast enough to safeguard future sustainability, including the sustainability of those communities that might rely on that resource. It was identified back in the 1990s and 2000s that overfishing was occurring. Back then, Hon Jon Ford started the process, which was subsequently taken up by Hon Norman Moore when there was a change in government, to put in place a recovery plan. We are now halfway through that 20-year recovery plan. It was introduced in 2010 and it resulted in recreational and commercial catches for demersal scalefish being reduced by 50 per cent in a bid to get through the recovery process by 2030.

In 2020, halfway through that recovery plan, the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development engaged a reference group to develop the harvest strategy to ensure the continued recovery of the resource. A key cornerstone of the whole policy has been about collaboration and working together to enable the demersal scalefish stock to replenish or we risk the consequence of further depletion. We have found that this highly prized resource has stabilised in numbers, but it is not recovering. The population demographic of the resource shows it is a young

resource. We do not have the older fish that we need for replenishment and over the 10 years, there has been only a couple of good recruitment years that have enhanced population replenishment, and there has been considerable fishing pressure, as members know, on the resource. There is no evidence that anyone has been doing the wrong thing, but we certainly know there has been increased pressure on the resource in total, and that has meant that we do not have the recovery that we were hoping to have by 2020. We are seeing a limit on the increase of older dhufish and pink snapper in the population, and that is a particular concern in resource recovery.

A lot of science has gone into the process so far and, certainly, a lot of engagement with the peak bodies—Recfishwest, the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council and Marine Tourism WA—to arrive at a solution to what is a fundamental problem driven by past fishing practices. We have inherited this issue and collectively we are doing something to make sure fish are there for future generations. We have backed a recommendation from the Harvest Strategy Reference Group, which included Recfishwest, Marine Tourism WA and the WA Fishing Council, the three peak bodies representing the sectors concerned with this issue. We have accepted its recommendation to halve the total catch limit from Kalbarri to Augusta. Consistent with that recommendation and the principles of the harvest strategy, the new total catch limit for demersal species will be 375 tonnes, a reduction from 750 tonnes, with 240 tonnes allocated for the commercial sector and 135 for the recreational and charter sector. As part of that, the government has also accepted other recommendations of the reference group to investigate and prioritise additional measures to support recovery, reduce total fishing mortality—that is a critical issue—and improve management and research of the resource. That includes consideration of measures such as stock enhancement opportunities, targeted protection for spawning activity and recruitment pulses, increasing education about post-release mortality, monitoring and compliance, and further investigation into shark depredation, all of which are critical issues in the total management of the resource.

Beyond that, no further decisions have been made on how that reduced allocation will be managed and that is on the basis that we want feedback. We want innovative ideas from the recreational, commercial and marine tourism sectors about the best way to achieve those reductions. I am very mindful that we want recreational fishers to continue to have a good experience and be able to get out there and use their boat and have an enjoyable day on the water. We also want the commercial fishing sector to be viable and supply fish to the local market and support our broader tourism industry and hospitality sectors. There is some very fine Western Australian seafood in the hospitality sector and we want to continue that. Equally, we want to see a viable marine tourism sector.

These are critical problems, but they depend on those sectors supporting innovation and good ideas and bringing them forward. In considering those ideas, I will be very mindful of the economic and social impact on the community and on fishing communities. I fully understand the integration of the fishing industry with coastal communities as part of their economy, but without sustainability of the fish resource, we will be in a very difficult situation. If we do not act quickly, we are simply putting off a day of reckoning that has to be addressed.

The fundamental principle that we are carrying through was started back in 2010, under the previous government. Based on the work of the previous government, we will be continuing that engagement with the peak bodies and expecting them to consult widely and bring forward those innovative ideas so that we can try to get the best fit in managing sustainability into the future, supporting good-quality social and economic outcomes for families who are dependent on the sector. I thank the member for the grievance.