

ROCK LOBSTER — QUOTA SYSTEM

Statement

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (Agricultural) [5.33 pm]: I make some comments about the new rock lobster quota system that has been enforced this year. I particularly want to air some of the criticisms made by a number of Geraldton fishermen, including Mr Bert Boschetti. I mention him simply because of the apparent refusal of the Minister for Fisheries and/or his staff to engage in some sort of meaningful dialogue in recent times.

Hon Norman Moore: With respect, Hon Matt Benson-Lidholm, that is not true. You wouldn't have the faintest clue what you're talking about.

The PRESIDENT: Order! I just said to the last member who was on his feet that the rules have to be fair here. If one member gets a hearing without interjections, every other member is entitled to that courtesy.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: Before putting forward the areas of concern that this particular gentleman and other industry participants have, I say at the very outset that I genuinely support the notion of a quota system. On purely economic grounds, the simple rules of supply and demand appear to be compelling reasons for the existence of a quota system, particularly if industry intervention and output control is required for the long-term sustainability of the industry. I am confident that most industry participants likewise would agree with that sort of a system. I believe that if the rock lobster season is open between September and August, fishers should be able to structure their take based on a combination of market and environmental conditions. Once the quota is taken, obviously it should be the end of the story. If a crayfisherman takes his or her catch—I do not know whether there are many women in control of boats, but maybe there are—and if the late-season returns are either greater or less, the crayfishermen must live with it. The crayfishermen I have spoken with, including Mr Boschetti, have no problem with such an arrangement. If they can fish when it suits them, financially and personally, they are prepared to live with the sorts of decisions that they make. However, it is the decisions of the minister and his department that preclude the taking of rock lobsters on weekends and the restrictions on fishermen in zone A that are starting to cause fishers to question their involvement in the industry through the modified system. I put it to members that such decisions about the modification of quota systems distort markets to such an extent that effective and viable quota arrangements start to lose their appeal. Overregulation would seem to be the issue. Certainly it sounds contrary to Liberal Party philosophy to have that sort of manipulation of a quota system.

Hon Norman Moore: You have been misled; that is your problem.

Hon MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM: I do not have a lot of time. Maybe I can continue the debate during the next sitting. I will continue and perhaps have a discussion with the Leader of the House afterwards if he thinks that is appropriate. However, I need to continue. It appears that annual quotas could go down that path of an ideal world in which property rights are voluntarily exchanged on the free market at a price agreed to by buyers and sellers. That issue concerns my constituents. Currently, there is a belief that inefficient fishermen are rewarded with quotas that in all probability they will not reach. I have some observations to make about the interim quota system that the fishermen have put to me. In the remaining five minutes I have left, I will begin by placing on record some of their concerns. The first and perhaps most significant concern is that they believe there was inadequate consultation with the industry from the start. They have suggested, and my advice is, that the minister took his advice only from the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, which was directed to consult with industry on two proposals—a full quota management system and an interim quota system. WAFIC was to coordinate seminars to ensure that all fishers had a good understanding of the issues and the implications of any changes and to ascertain the fishers' preferred position. The suggestion is that this did not happen.

I believe that flexibility is central to any quota system. Although obviously imposing a limit is not necessarily flexible, it is the only way to go if the industry is to be sustainable. It was stated that no-one would be disadvantaged by the interim quota. However, the A-zone fishers would be forced to fish, and, because of the limited time available to the A zone, these fishers would seriously risk losing uncaught quota. It was stated, therefore, that the system that has been put in place does not provide flexibility and equity to all rock lobster fishers. According to my informants, it was admitted by the department and other players that the interim quota system that was introduced was not perfect, but basically the problems would be sorted out in time.

The government was advised by the industry that the proposed introductory time frame was unrealistic, and it suggested a 12-month moratorium to enable a thorough development to be put in place for the following year. However, unfortunately, the view of WAFIC was that the interim temporary quota be implemented as a matter of

urgency. I may be wrong, but, from the reading I have done and the meetings I have been to, I think that the quota has been extended for four years in South Australia.

My advice is that the new system that has been put in place did not have the overwhelming support of the industry, as claimed by its proponents. There was a poll of some 61 licensees, and only 302 responses. Of those who responded, half supported a quota, one-third wanted no change, and the remainder were undecided or invalid. Despite the reassurances of people in a position of importance in the department, that is hardly overwhelming and is certainly an issue of some concern.

Another issue is the position and importance of WAFIC. WAFIC is funded by the fishers. The contention is that WAFIC is setting discriminatory rules and guidelines that have divided the fishery, yet it claims to represent the industry. According to my informants, WAFIC has never been involved in setting rules and guidelines for the industry, and nor should it. WAFIC does not represent the rock lobster industry, and nor should it. WAFIC should not be the organisation that advises the minister on all things in relation to the rock lobster industry. It was suggested to me that this would be more appropriately done by the Western Rock Lobster Council or, as was previously the case, the Western Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee.

I have a number of other comments to make, and I will not be able to finish those comments this afternoon. I will, therefore, resume my seat and continue my comments at a later date.

Hon Norman Moore: Mr President, I know this causes a difficulty —

The PRESIDENT: Because a direct issue has been raised, I will give the Minister for Fisheries the call to respond.