

FISHERIES — SOUTH COAST BIOREGION

Grievance

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe) [9.56 am]: Today my grievance is to the Minister for Fisheries. I provided some background information yesterday on the 12-month delay in the implementation of the south coast bioregion management plan in order to complete community consultation, involve small fishing operators in the final stages of consultation and revisit dividing the SCB into two distinct zones. Firstly, I want to acknowledge that this process for the south coast bioregion began in September 2015 under the previous government.

I will go through some of the issues. Throughout the consultation process, small fishing operators located in Albany and Esperance continually raised concerns about the proposed managed access arrangements through the independent access panel and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, and directly with the Minister for Fisheries. Although they have secured access to near-shore netting and squid jigging, the small scale of their operations is such that they need diversity of catch to remain commercially viable. In Esperance, the issues relate more to the failure by the government to recognise that the SCB should not be treated as one single fishery across its approximately 1 500-kilometre span. The effect of this is that the access and management methodology being applied to the west subzone is also being applied to the east subzone, and they are inherently different in terms of biology, geography, economy and the operating circumstances of the fishing operators.

The DPIRD discussion paper states —

The nature of these fisheries does not currently warrant complex or costly management arrangements. As such the Department is proposing to focus on implementing simple, cost effective and efficient management arrangements with the main priority being limiting access.

That tells me that the department does not want to do the work; therefore, the small fishers will have to suffer the consequences. This clearly indicates that the current access and management arrangements are about minimising the administrative burden on the department and simplifying monitoring of catch and environmental impacts. New management arrangements will come into effect on 1 July 2021. However, further community consultation is not expected to commence until the second quarter of 2021, according to the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. Smaller operators have been excluded from the second phase of consultation.

The draft south coast bioregion management plan of February 2020 was not made publicly available online and was distributed only to licensed commercial fishers and those with a vested interest. The impact is that the new management arrangement will come into effect on 1 July 2021, by which time the fishing operators believe there will be little or no chance of having the arrangement reversed and they will be faced with having to close their businesses in either the short or medium term. Small fishing operators in Albany and Esperance strongly believe that their concerns have not been listened to, even to the extent that neither the minister nor the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development has bothered to adequately rebut the issues raised or undertake meaningful engagement to investigate workable solutions.

There is a very real risk that the new arrangements will have a catastrophic effect on small inshore operators in Albany and licence holders in Esperance, with some being forced out of business. South coast commercial fishing operators often hold a number of licences to create a viable year-round fishing operation. Effectively, these operators are being thrown under the bus, simply to make life easier for DPIRD, which will essentially force small operators out of business and make access easier for the big operators. Where does this leave our locally based fishing industries and the local communities?

On behalf of the Esperance fishing operators, I say that part of the problem is the failure by the government to acknowledge that the south coast bioregion should not be treated as one single fishery. DPIRD's scientific analysis recognised that the width of the continental shelf is greater in the eastern subregion of the SCB than in the western subregion, therefore impacting on fishing practices and catch, but no recognition of this has been included in the proposed management arrangements. Most, if not all, eastern subregion operators' line fishing is supplemental to other licensed fishing activities. Because the nature of the fishery in the eastern subzone is fundamentally different from that in the western subzone, it was unfair and inequitable to apply the same minimum catch threshold for entry to the future fishery. In particular, application of the same eligibility criteria to both subregions of the SBC did not reflect the difference in economic impact on the eastern subregion operators.

I ask the minister, on behalf of these small fishing operators, to delay the implementation of the south coast bioregion management plan for 12 months in order to complete that community consultation, and to involve small fishing operators and meet with them in person, obviously in both Esperance and Albany, and to revisit the decision to divide the south coast bioregion into two distinct zones. Thank you.

MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury — Minister for Fisheries) [10.02 am]: I thank the member for Roe for his grievance. I was actually in the member's electorate last week, in Esperance, and subsequently met with quite a group of fishers in Albany, including one, I think, from Esperance. It was a very useful discussion.

Governments, of course, have to make decisions. Those decisions do not always meet the needs of every single person. In making those decisions, we try to find the best balance. In this case, fisheries, there are multiple stakeholders, and there are questions of sustainability. In my short period as Minister for Fisheries, I have the utmost admiration for how the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development goes about managing its response to what are very complex issues that incorporate a number of variables. I know that the staff in that department are keenly aware that their decisions impact on the livelihoods and future operations of commercial fishers, but they have a broad spectrum of responsibilities.

I want to go to the time line of events on this particular issue. This issue has a long history. As the member pointed out, it goes back to the time of the previous government. It is an issue that was identified some time ago. In November 2013, the then Minister for Fisheries approved a review of south coast commercial fish trap, herring G-net and open-access line and net fisheries. On 9 December 2013, the then Department of Fisheries issued an investment warning to all fishing boat licence holders in relation to the fisheries the subject of the review. So the information about this review and the possible consequences of it was clearly out there in 2013, enabling people to start thinking and incorporating that into their business thinking.

In 2015, the management paper was released for public consultation. That provided an overview of the review and future management proposals. In 2016, Fisheries engaged an independent access panel to provide recommendations on access to the fisheries under the review. The panel comprised the chair, Ian Cartwright, and Ian Taylor and Graeme Stewart, who travelled extensively throughout the region to undertake consultation. The panel provided a final report in 2016. Fisheries considered the access report and a range of other information, legislation, precedents, policies and principles relating to access and formed the view that the adoption of the IAP's recommendations would result in an excessive number of vessels gaining access and consequently impact on cost-effective management, viability and a number of other issues.

In January 2017, still under the previous government, the then Minister for Fisheries wrote to the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, the peak body representing commercial fishers, seeking its views on the fisheries' alternative criteria. For a range of reasons, WAFIC did not support the alternative criteria and was of the view that the review should progress in line with the proposed management framework outlined in the independent access panel's recommended access criteria.

In April 2018, DPIRD provided the then minister, who is sitting next to me, with advice on the review and sought his consideration and approval of access criteria for fisheries under the review. The recommendations that came out of Fisheries were reviewed within the framework of WAFIC, which is an industry consultation body, and the then minister acted on that advice. Further advice was obtained from the Southern Seafood Producers WA Association, which represents commercial fishers on the south coast. The advice provided by that body confirmed its support for the IAP recommendations, the immediate implementation of management plans for these fisheries, an independent appeals process, and that developing fisheries should not be limited at this time.

In January 2019, the then Minister for Fisheries finalised the review by approving the access criteria recommended by the independent panel and drafting two new management plans for the south coast line and fish trap managed fishery.

Therefore, the notion that this is somehow being done at the department's convenience is actually incorrect. There has been a long process of engagement and examination of the issue to try to come up with the best balanced decision to meet the needs of the fishery for the long term and the needs of the people who are operating in the fishery.

In December 2020, the then Minister for Fisheries approved new management plans for the south coast line and fish trap managed fishery and the south coast nearshore net managed fishery. Those access arrangements included catch criteria that have been long established for these sorts of issues.

In 2019 and 2020, DPIRD worked closely with two working groups that had formed to assist in the development of the operational arrangements for new fisheries. That included multiple trips to Albany and Esperance to meet with the working groups. DPIRD staff travelled to Albany and Esperance in mid-May and met with over 45 fishing boat licence holders eligible for access to the two new fisheries to brief them on the application process. DPIRD is currently receiving applications and expects to issue 94 licences for the south coast line and fish trap fishery, 55 licences for line fishing, 46 licences for squid fishing and 11 licences for fish traps.

There has been a long process of engagement across three governments. That is a recognition of the complexity of this issue. In my view, the fact that an investment warning was announced clearly signalled to the market that this was underway. The catch criteria came out of the industry. People who may have arrived late in this industry or purchased fishing boat licences without a catch history in that fishery clearly needed to make some

further investigation into the implications of acquiring those licences. The criteria that have been adopted have been well understood within the industry over many years, are legally robust and have been based on extensive consultation. But it means that fishing boat licence holders who do not qualify for access will need to purchase or lease a licence.

That is the sort of churn we see whenever there is a change within the fisheries framework, and the commercial sector has to adjust to that. Ultimately, the commercial sector, along with everybody else, has an interest in sustainable, well-managed fisheries, and that is what this government and the previous Liberal–National government were committed to.

We will continue to follow the advice of industry. The Western Australian Fishing Industry Council has been a key player in this advice, as has the Southern Seafood Producers WA Association. I do not intend to intervene in the zonal issues that the member raised. We have four bioregions stretching over many diverse areas, and they are well established as well. I thank the member for his grievance.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms M.M. Quirk): We turn to committee reports. Member for Willagee, the smell of curry is wafting down to the chair.