

Division 16: Fisheries, \$36 131 000 —

Mr M.W. Sutherland, Chairman.

Dr K.D. Hames, Minister for Health representing the Minister for Fisheries.

Mr S.J. Smith, Chief Executive Officer.

Mr B. Mezzatesta, Director, Corporate Services.

Dr R. Fletcher, Director, Research.

Ms H.G. Brayford, Director, Aquatic Management.

Mr P.J. Bruce, Manager, Infrastructure and Project Management.

Mr I. Wight-Pickin, Chief of Staff, Office of the Deputy Premier.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: Member for Mandurah.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I refer to the recreational fishing special purpose account on page 244. I have a few questions about that. Firstly, can the minister or one of the officers indicate how much was collected through the recreational fishing boat licence fee in 2009–10—so obviously since its inception—and what is projected to be collected in 2010–11?

Dr K.D. HAMES: The chief executive officer will answer that.

Mr S.J. Smith: I am just looking through for the amounts collected to date. I know that after the licence was introduced on 2 March, by 20 May, 56 416 people had been issued with a recreational fishing boat licence. That had generated approximately \$1.46 million in additional revenue, which is being held in the recreational fishing account. Ultimately, we anticipate that the licences will eventually generate about \$1.9 million.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Annually?

Mr S.J. Smith: Annually, yes.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: So in 2010–11, Fisheries would expect \$1.9 million.

Mr S.J. Smith: In 2010–11, yes; not in the current year, though.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Further to that, how is the money accounted for and segregated in consolidated revenue? Is it held in a special trust account, is it?

Mr S.J. Smith: That is right.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: How does the department ensure that it is used only for recreational purposes?

Dr K.D. HAMES: The chief executive officer.

Mr S.J. Smith: That trust fund can be used only for that purpose. It is under a statutory obligation.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Who authorises that?

Mr S.J. Smith: Perhaps Mr Mezzatesta can elaborate on my comments.

Dr K.D. HAMES: Mr Mezzatesta.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I will explain how we arrange to identify that the expenditure relates only to recreational fishing. The department operates a time recording system, and it has structured its accounts so that we actually pick up the beneficiary of any expenditure in purchasing services or labour. That is the way we are able to identify that the activity relates to recreational fishing.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Before any money can be spent from that account, does it have to go back to the minister for authorisation? Is there a process under which the minister signs off on expenditure from that account?

Dr K.D. HAMES: Mr Chair, can I ask for a bit of leeway? When these things are not my personal portfolio responsibility, I have to rely on staff to answer the questions. It seems silly, when we have repeated questions from the same member, that every time I have to say the officer's name. Therefore, until we completely deal with an issue, can that person keep answering, as long as he is able to?

The CHAIRMAN: That is fine.

Dr K.D. HAMES: Mr Mezzatesta can keep answering as the questions come to him.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: The answer is, yes; the minister needs to endorse all expenditure from that trust account.

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Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: On what programs and for what purposes has money from that account been spent so far? Money has been going in there since March, so on what programs or for what specific purposes has the money been spent so far, and what is planned for the spending of that revenue in the future?

Dr K.D. HAMES: Does one of the two officers know the answer to that?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I can continue. The trust account that we are talking about does not hold only the recreational fishing boat licence fees; it also holds the funding that was provided under the pre-existing recreational fishing licence regime, and it also includes the state contribution to recreational fishing. I can actually go through and identify the sorts of things that it is spent on in the aggregate, if that is what the member is looking for.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I suppose what I am concerned about is that people are paying this licence fee of \$30 annually. The original intention, as advertised by government, was that it would go back directly into recreational fishing. Therefore, people would expect that a very transparent process would be available under which they would be able to get answers to these questions: "Where has my money gone this year? Where is my money going to go next year?" We know what fishermen are like. They will be carefully watching the department, along with me, and I am only a shore fisherman. They are the specifics of the question, because Mr Mezzatesta is now telling me that other funds go into that same account, apart from that collected by the fishing fee.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Okay. That is a very good clarification and now enables a much simpler answer.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: It is a super fishing tax, as I call it.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: The recreational fishing from boat licence fee is being used to fund additional research and additional surveys so that we can get a better understanding of the impact of recreational fishing on fish stocks. We have also spent money on expanding our community education program, so we now have a program whereby we are partnering with tackle shops across the state to be a much better communicator of the "Fish for the future" message. We are also looking at spending money on things such as artificial reefs and restocking fish stocks, and we have also had to spend money on getting the new licence regime up and running and the costs associated with that.

[3.50 pm]

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: So will the department be spending money on advertising how the fishing super tax has been spent?

Dr K.D. HAMES: As in a court procedure, are we able to object to the use of the term "super tax"?

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: The minister can object all he likes!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: That is what I call it.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Compared with 40 per cent, this is relatively minor.

The CHAIRMAN: Minister!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Will recreational fishermen be told where this tax will be spent?

Dr K.D. HAMES: The Chairman is —

The CHAIRMAN: Member for Mandurah!

Dr K.D. HAMES: We are not going to answer it because —

The CHAIRMAN: I know that the minister is trying to short-circuit this by saying that members can direct their questions as they come to Mr Mezzatesta or to Mr Smith. However, the rule is that the question should go through the minister; otherwise, there will be an across-chamber discussion, and I do not think that would be healthy. I ask the minister to continue designating who he wants to answer the questions.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I ask the director general to answer that.

The CHAIRMAN: Does the member for Mandurah want to continue?

Dr K.D. HAMES: Has he got a question now?

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes. Will we see advertisements in the newspapers or in other paraphernalia saying to the 56 000 people who have signed up for a licence or who have a licence, "This is how we spent your super tax money last year and this is how we're going to spend it in the forward years"?

Mr S.J. Smith: There were some advertisements put in the newspaper leading up to the introduction of the new recreational fishing from a boat licence. That was to inform the public about the introduction of the licence.

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Subsequent to that, if the need arises, we will place some more advertisements in the newspapers so that people are aware of the requirements. We do not envisage any substantial advertising campaign about the new licence. We have also done a range of things in terms of education. For instance, we have had a lot of the staff down at boat ramps talking to people about the new licence. As recently as last week, I was out on the water with some of our fisheries officers doing some at-sea compliance with fishers, some of whom had their licence. Those who did not have their licence were given a warning and informed that they need to secure one by 1 July. Through this awareness raising, we do not envisage any need for a substantial advertising campaign. The awareness seems to be pretty high and the acceptance also seems to be pretty high, providing fishers are confident that that money is going back into recreational fishing. The feedback we have had to date is that there is considerable support for the resources going back into fishing; and that is what is happening.

I add also something that has not been mentioned. We have employed 13 additional fisheries officers as a result of this licence coming in. That has been very well received.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Any in Peel?

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: No, they have gone to the Kimberley!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Any in Peel?

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: They are all in the Kimberley!

Mr S.J. Smith: There are mobile patrols. I can get Mr Mezzatesta to indicate where those mobile patrols will be located.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: He can wear a badge that says, "Funded by the super fishing tax"! Anyway, I am happy for us to move on.

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: Just send him up to the Kimberley! I will be nice to him!

Dr K.D. HAMES: Mr Mezzatesta will tell us whether there are any in Peel.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Where the distribution of the new officers are —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am just interested in Peel.

Dr K.D. HAMES: So am I.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: The minister and I are very keen to see the Peel figures.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I will start off with Mandurah, which will have two.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Is that additional?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Additional, yes; these are new.

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: He does not deserve it.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Fremantle will have two; there will be an additional one at Hillarys; two in Geraldton; two in Carnarvon and two in Broome.

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: Yes, see! I had a feeling!

Mr M.J. COWPER: There has been some suggestion that there has been some plundering of the crab stocks in the Peel estuary, and there has been some concern also that they are under threat. Does the minister have any scientific evidence that might support what has been alleged?

Dr K.D. HAMES: That is an excellent question.

Mr S.J. Smith: Dr Fletcher is head of our research division.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I will ask Dr Fletcher to answer that.

Dr R. Fletcher: The short answer is that a two-year study has been running funded by the developing better industries fund. In one of those years there was a survey of recreational fishing and another one—actually a biological study—is due to report to me shortly. In fact I saw an email literally before I came here about the "State of the Fisheries Report" for the crab fishery that ended up in my mailbox this afternoon. I have not read it, so I cannot tell members about it today. But certainly the annual "State of the Fisheries Report" will be generated very shortly and a full report on that two-year study will be out by August–September.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Further to that, Mr Chair, we know that the great Peel–Harvey estuary resides within the Murray–Wellington electorate; but also the other great waterway in my electorate is the Leschenault estuary. For some time the crab stocks in that estuary have been fairly poor. I wonder whether the minister has any other information on any causal reasons for the plummeting stocks in the Leschenault estuary.

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Dr K.D. HAMES: I will ask Dr Fletcher to answer that.

Dr R. Fletcher: I am sorry; I actually missed the bit about the other estuary.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It was the Leschenault estuary.

Dr R. Fletcher: The Leschenault estuary as well—no, we have not had any direct surveys in there. I guess one reason we do not have any commercial fishers in there is that we are not getting annual surveys on that coming through from the commercial fishers. One result we hope to get from the boat licence is a boat-based survey of recreational fishing occurring at least on the west coast on an annual basis, so that it will at least cover boat-based fishing for crabs. From what we understand in the Peel–Harvey estuary, about 90 per cent of the recreational catch now is taken by boats. Consequently, we will get a much better understanding on a more regular basis of what is going on by actually having that licence.

Dr K.D. HAMES: If I can add to the scientific data on the study, I can say that I am catching as many crabs in the Peel estuary now as I was five years ago when I became the local member.

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: We have bigger crabs than yours!

Mr M.J. COWPER: Just a further question, Mr Chair. The problem in my entire electorate is that a lot of people from Collie, Brunswick, Harvey and Australind are now going to Harvey for that reason. That is adding additional pressure on Harvey and Peel because of the very poor stocking rates within the Leschenault estuary. Going back a number of years, I can recall that it used to be fantastic crabbing; now it is pretty ordinary. A lot of people are now moving up and fishing out of Peel–Harvey.

Dr K.D. HAMES: What they should do then, instead of changing the catch rates for Peel, is restrict them in Leschenault and leave us alone.

Mr M.J. COWPER: I would be very keen to see what the attendant issues are—whether it is water quality or what it might be that is causing it.

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: I refer to page 236 and the line item on fisheries management under services and key efficiency indicators. Can the minister please provide information on how the department will ensure effective regional consultation with recreational and Indigenous stakeholders now that regional recreational fishing advisory committees have been disbanded?

Dr K.D. HAMES: I will ask the director general to answer that.

Mr S.J. Smith: I thank the member for the question. In the past 18 months we have been introducing a new series of arrangements for consultation with both the recreational and commercial sectors. In relation to the recreational sector, in the past we had regional fisheries advisory committees that were located around the coast and reported directly to the minister. We also had Recfishwest providing another source of input. Under the new arrangements, those regional fisheries advisory committees have been replaced with new arrangements in which Recfishwest takes over responsibility for consultation in the regions. They have been given additional funding for this purpose and they have been working with the former regional fisheries advisory committees to tap into those people who were in that system to provide input. They have been doing regional visits and conducting their board meetings in regional areas as well. The new arrangements, I think, provide a better way forward for input from the recreational fishers not only because we have the people who were formerly involved providing input, but also because it is coming through the recreational peak body. It is a mechanism that is controlled by the recreational fishers, rather than a formal structure set up by the government, which reports directly to the minister and which can conduct some activities in confidence. Under the new arrangements with Recfishwest leading, there is no question about the independence of the new body. I think it will actually be more effective in ensuring that regional people have a voice into government that they can rely on as being truly representative.

[4.00 pm]

[Mrs L.M. Harvey took the chair.]

Mrs C.A. MARTIN: I refer to part of the question about Indigenous stakeholders. How will the minister engage them?

Mr S.J. Smith: It is up to Recfishwest to include that input into the consultation process. At the moment they are sorting out the arrangements for individual regions, but we can certainly raise that issue with them directly by indicating that we would like specific representation from Indigenous people. I would expect they would include that anyway, but we can reinforce the message. In that regard I also say that the department has had very good relationships with Indigenous communities around Western Australia. That has been strengthened in the past year or so with the introduction of a new customary fishing strategy that has now been announced and is in place. It seems to be working well.

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Mr A.P. JACOB: I refer to the third bullet point on page 235 of the *Budget Statements* headed “Significant Issues Impacting the Agency”. This question makes reference to sustainability pressures, particularly in the western rock lobster fishery. Can the minister advise what scientific advice the Department of Fisheries provides on west coast rock lobster managed fishery stocks, and in particular the likely impacts of the proposed management arrangements on this fishery?

Mr S.J. Smith: The western rock lobster fishery has been under pressure due to what appear to be environmental factors. Research into an explanation for that is ongoing. Dr Fletcher can probably elaborate on that if the member would like specific details. The key issue has been the decline in puerulus settlement over the past couple of years—puerulus being the juvenile rock lobsters—which provide an indication of what the catch will be in three to four years’ time. Over the past two years, the settlement of puerulus that we have been recording has dropped substantially—down to the lowest on record. We have been keeping records for over 40 years now. That meant that the catch had to be reduced. The Minister for Fisheries, for last season, reduced the catch to 7 800 tonnes. That is down from the long-term average of 11 000 tonnes. The puerulus settlement, in the season that we are just finishing now, has recorded a significant improvement on the year before, but, to keep it in perspective, that is the second lowest on record. Some substantial impacts on the catch in the next three to four years still need to be managed. The Minister for Fisheries has done that in the current season by reducing the catch to 5 500 tonnes. He indicated that the figure of 5 500 tonnes will be set for the next two seasons as well. He did that at the start of this season to give the industry some certainty about what the catch will be.

As a result of the reduced catch, we have seen some rationalisation in the industry. The number of vessels operating in that fishery has continued to fall from around 600 some years back to around 290 vessels. The minister has managed the fishery through a significant degree of intervention, at the request of the industry. That intervention has seen a reduction in both the number of pots that fishers are allowed to use and the days on which they can fish. As a result, the catchability has been up significantly in the fishery. The reduction in effort that has been permitted over recent years has been partly designed to preserve some of the catch for future seasons. That has also contributed. In fact we have seen the catchability up significantly in the fishery this season, and, with the fewer days in operation, fuel costs and bait costs for the fishery have been down. The profitability for many fishers has gone up significantly even though the catch has fallen.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am conscious of the time. We want to change over to the disability services division. I will make rapid-fire questions that probably only require yes or no answers. I refer to item 2 at page 238 of the *Budget Statements*, the line item “Buildings — Denham Government Office Accommodation” under “Works in Progress”. Are there any plans to close any regional offices in 2010–11?

Mr S.J. Smith: No.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Are there any plans to replace the Carnarvon office; and, if so, when?

Mr S.J. Smith: Replace it, no —

The CHAIRMAN: The member needs to ask the question of the minister.

Mr S.J. Smith: There are no plans to close the office. We have had some discussions about improving the quality of the office.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I refer to the building owned by the fisheries department in Leslie Street, Mandurah, which is the old site. What is the status of that in terms of sale and time line?

Mr S.J. Smith: We had a similar question last year. As I recall there were two areas of interest—one related to the building itself and the other to the jetty and the boat shed. I will cover both of those. We have offered the boat shed and jetty to the City of Mandurah. The Department of Fisheries does not actually have title over that land and those facilities. We have offered it to the City of Mandurah but we have had an approach from one community group. We expect others will be interested in accessing or taking over that facility —

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Does that include the shed staying?

Mr S.J. Smith: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Further questions need to be directed to the minister.

Dr K.D. HAMES: Except I want to answer a little bit about the shed. I was approached by the transportation security administration naval cadets looking for an alternative site to operate from. They suggested that shed. I have written to the minister about it. I understand that is being considered.

Mr S.J. Smith: That is correct; it is being considered. It has also been raised with the City of Mandurah. Ultimately we expect the City of Mandurah to decide which particular community group should have the use of those facilities.

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We have indicated to the government that the department's old office building is surplus to our requirements. I understand the government is looking at whether any other agency has a need for that office. In the event that another agency does not, I expect it will then be put up for sale to the public through some tender process.

Dr K.D. HAMES: Again, I want to add to that answer. That is the standard process, obviously, for all land sales. I put to the former government, through Minister Kucera, that it should look at Water and Rivers Commission land—that was in that industrial area somewhere—to sell it to them to build a new building. They built the new building. Presumably now the process is that that land gets sold and the money goes back to general revenue to compensate for the building of the new building. Of course as part of the public sector requirements it has to be offered to other agencies first. The member knows what sort of condition it is in; I doubt that any other agency would want it.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Has a recent valuation been done on that land?

Mr S.J. Smith: I will ask Mr Bruce to answer that.

Mr P.J. Bruce: We have had a sworn valuation on the property.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Can you tell me what it was?

Mr P.J. Bruce: No.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Not that I am seeking to purchase it myself!

Mr P.J. Bruce: I do not think we are at liberty to divulge that. It is now with Landgate.

Dr K.D. HAMES: I think the way to get an answer is to write to the Minister for Lands and ask him for that figure rather than an officer being in that position.

Mr A. KRSTICEVIC: I make reference to page 239, “Large Vessel Replacement — PV Walcott” under “New Works”. I note the department has \$2 million to commence the construction of a new patrol vessel at a total estimated cost of \$4 million to be funded over the next two financial years. What waters will the vessel patrol and what activities will it undertake when it is commissioned?

[4.10 pm]

Mr S.J. Smith: The \$2 million is the first half of an instalment totalling \$4 million that will provide us with funding to replace PV *Walcott*—a patrol vessel that has operated for the past 15 years or so, primarily in the north of the state, particularly in the Kimberley and in the Pilbara region. We expect that the new vessel that will replace PV *Walcott* will also operate in those waters. It will be primarily engaged in fisheries activities, but we also make it available for other state government initiatives, and sometimes the commonwealth government asks to use it. For instance, it might be used for environmental research in the event of an emergency such as an oil spill—it can be used on those occasions. We have also had our vessels used for purposes such as intercepting asylum seekers and so on. We expect the new vessel will be used for all of those purposes.

The appropriation was recommended.