

SOUTH COAST FISHERY, PILCHARDS

29. Hon MURRAY MONTGOMERY to the Minister for Forestry and Fisheries:

Further to the question yesterday on pilchards -

- (1) Is it true that researchers visited the south coast over the past few days to observe the pilchard population; and, if so, is the minister able to report on their observations?
- (2) What is the time frame for the minister to allow recommencement of the commercial fishery in the Albany zone?

Hon KIM CHANCE replied:

I thank the member for his question.

- (1) Yes, researchers have visited Albany to collect samples of pilchards. I understand that as well as sampling at Albany, similar sampling has taken place at Bremer Bay. My advice is that although some investigations have been undertaken, these do not constitute a full investigation of the status of the biomass stock. The predominant results of those investigations so far, and I have made some inquiries about that today, are that recruits dominated the biomass and few large breeding fish were among the catches. It needs to be emphasised that these are only preliminary findings and cannot at this stage be the basis for making decisions upon future exploitation of the fishery.
- (2) I do not believe that what has been learnt so far indicates with any degree of certainty when commercial fishing may be undertaken in any of zones 1, 2 or 3. On the basis of the limited information currently available, it is considered likely that it may be three years before fishing in zones 1 and 2 can begin again - that is, 2004 - and that is provided there is evidence of very strong recruitment between now and 2002. Similarly, it is likely that fishing in zone 3 may be possible next year. Again this depends on significant recruitment occurring. Currently, very few large breeding fish have been found among the stocks in the zones and any recruitment to the fishery needs to be given time to reach a good breeding size to produce a reasonable level of egg production. Again, on the minimal information that we have available to us, there needs to be a two-year lag between evidence of strong recruitment and the resumption of fishing. Zone 3 has perhaps a more bullish outlook. That is based on the fact that a larger residual biomass remained in zone 3 after the mass mortality in 1998-99. We will have to conduct ongoing biomass estimates to assist in determining the recovery rate. I understand from what Hon Murray Montgomery has told me that the visual evidence indicates very strong rebuilding of the stocks. I am encouraged by that, and I will continue to encourage Fisheries WA to carry out more detailed investigation work. Like the member, I would like to see the earliest possible resumption of commercial fishing in zones 1, 2 and 3. However, like him, I am sure that can be done only on the basis of a consistent and sustainable stock being available before that fishing recommences.