



STATE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL INDUSTRIES COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr CG Whiting MP—Chair
Mr MJ Hart MP
Mr RI Katter MP
Mr JJ McDonald MP
Mr TJ Smith MP

Staff present:

Ms S Galbraith—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE FOOD (LABELLING OF SEAFOOD) AMENDMENT BILL 2021

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 2 MARCH 2022

Karumba

WEDNESDAY, 7 MARCH 2022

The committee met at 10.13 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Food (Labelling of Seafood) Amendment Bill 2021, introduced by the member for Traeger. My name is Chris Whiting. I am the member for Bancroft and chair of the committee. I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me today are committee members Mr Jim McDonald, deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Hart, member for Burleigh; Mr Tom Smith, member for Bundaberg; and Mr Robbie Katter, member for Traeger.

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BOUWENS Mr Jockey, Private capacity

PHILIP, Mr Craig, Manager, Raptis

STAPLEY, Mr Jason, Operations Manager, Wren Fishing

STEVENS, Mr Scott, Private capacity

CHAIR: I welcome witnesses from the fishing sector. We will get your opinion on the seafood labelling bill and at the end we will give you a chance to speak on some other issues that might be on your minds. The inquiry is not into those matters, but we want to give you a chance to be heard on them as well. Jason, could you start by chatting about the impacts and the benefits or disadvantages of the seafood labelling bill.

Mr Stapley: I see advantages. As a commercial fishing operation, we see benefits in the labelling in that you know where it has come from, its origins, whether it is a domestic product or shipped in from overseas, and essentially what the species is as well. It is the best for consumers so that they know exactly what they are purchasing.

CHAIR: I understand, as a supplier, you have to label to your providing—

Mr Stapley: With safe food practices, everything has to be labelled and it has to be traced and trackable. From the boats to the cold stores to the buyers it is traceable so that if there are any issues with the seafood we can trace it and follow it back to identify it.

CHAIR: You identify the country of origin when you supply the product to where you supply it, so you have gathered the information and given it to them?

Mr Stapley: Yes, definitely. There are guidelines in that, too. You have to do temperature recordings—that sort of thing—so it is actually quality control and the reassurance that that product is top shelf and gets to the consumer in the best shape and in the best form. Some of those countries, I do not think, have those rules and regulations which they follow so it comes back to protecting the consumer as well and getting a good quality product.

CHAIR: Can you give us some examples of what happens in producing the fish in other countries that perhaps have a different standard to what we have in Australia?

Mr Stevens: I do not really know. I know that with some of the major aquaculture facilities over in Vietnam or those places, I think the regulations are not as tight on what goes into the water and the fingerlings as well.

CHAIR: Do any of you have any opinions or can see how the labelling of seafood would benefit your operations?

Mr Stevens: Not so much mine. What fish we catch basically we supply to Wrens or whoever else. It comes in as a fresh whole fish, on ice. Basically, once it goes to these guys that is the end of it for me. They deal with temperature checks. We keep all the temperature checks on the boat, make sure they are all cold, but once it goes to the distributors that is the last we see of it. But they can trace it back to us. Yes, it should be labelled but it does not really benefit me in my operation at all, no.

Mr Stapley: Ultimately it may affect the bottom line as well. If it is identified as high-quality seafood from that industry, it comes back to marketing and pricing as well. If you have high-quality product and you do all this effort and all this work, they can be identified and then people can have confidence in that product that they are purchasing. If it is higher quality, the whole supply chain benefits from that. It is not just for the commercial fishermen; it is all the way through that supply chain. If the consumers have good quality product, they might pay an extra hundred bucks for it compared to something that is of lower quality and does not have the assurances associated with it, which they do not realise at this point in time because it is not labelled; it is not identified as to where it is coming from.

CHAIR: Essentially, with better identification the product could achieve a higher price perhaps?

Mr Stapley: Yes.

CHAIR: Craig, from your point of view, what do you see as the potential benefits of the seafood labelling bill?

Mr Philip: I can only speak personally because that is something that our Brisbane office will look after, but I would see it as being more of an Australian product—it comes from Australia, supports Australia and we should buy Australian. If it is from Australia, we should be buying it. That is where I see the benefit of labelling seafood: where it comes from. When I go to the supermarket, I look to buy Australian products.

CHAIR: If you were at a pub or cafe and you saw wild-caught or farmed Australian barramundi on the menu, you would be more likely to buy that?

Mr Philip: No, I would get a steak. I am sick of fish!

Mr Bouwens: I would like to add to this. That bass that is introduced into Australia comes out of the dirtiest water and swamps, and we are supposed to buy it. People are trying to sell it as barra and it is not. These fellas here have already started this wild-caught fish on their market, not for the last two or three days but already for the last three or four years. When you go into the shops and you see farmed barra there and then you see wild-caught barra there, you can tell the difference between the two colours of the fish. Any of the imported fish that is sent in from Indonesia or anywhere else, we should just ban that. It is the same with prawns. Even the farmed prawns get that white spot on them and when they are let go it is hard. This gulf has got pure clean prawns all the time. It is the same as mackerel. There is no ciguatera here for mackerel, but on the east coast you have it. Like I say, I only try to follow what happens with the fishery fellows here, although I am not a fisherman myself. That is all I can say.

Mr McDONALD: To clarify, the introduction of this bill would actually not change your process or be at any additional cost to your process now if it was brought in?

Mr Stapley: Not really, because everything is identified initially and that is a part of Safe Food. To get that stamp of approval and that accreditation annually, it has to be labelled by species. Another thing also with the labelling is, going on from what the gentleman said there, there are different common names that people use. So there is, I suppose, false advertising and riding on the back of other species that have a good reputation. There can be multiple common names for one species. For barramundi, *Lates calcarifer* is the species. If it was identified down to those levels then people know exactly, even though it is confusing. It has a generic common name, which is like an international common name, but in Australia there is a whole handful. That gets rid of all those other incorrect common names and uses the correct common name. Once people learn what each species is then it is easy, it is identifiable and they know it is better than buying from overseas where it is a and regulations in place to have clean water. It is all effluent; it is all dirty water that they are grown in, and the food has hormones and all sorts of things in it.

Mr McDONALD: The seafood markets undertook a survey that said that people would pay up to 30 per cent more for Australian product. How does it make you feel as fishermen if you go to Cairns or another place and you see fish on the market that you know is not what it is represented to be or you know that it is an imported product? How does that make you feel?

Mr Philip: I really think that the government should step in and stop it. They should support Australia. We seem to support everybody else but Australia. We have 14 trawlers tied up on the wharf. We have all these things happening in the world today such as COVID disease. For these guys it is exactly the same: you have COVID, you have the roads closed. Our fuel bill now is going to double, just with fuel, because I hear a rumour it is going to go up to \$2.50 a litre. Each of our boats takes close on 100,000 litres at the start of the season. You start doing the maths when you have 14 of them tied up and there is no relief for us. Then to get to your question, we go to the supermarket and what do we see? Vietnam prawns, sea bass barra from overseas, and our product is put as a second-class product because that is the way the markets sell it.

Mr Stevens: Some suppliers try to push the deepwater stuff before they push the local stuff.

Mr Stapley: Because it is cheaper. They get slightly more money as a business themselves.

Mr Philip: The price of the prawn and the price of the fish is still the same, whether it is Australian catch or Vietnam.

Mr Stapley: It is that margin that they are getting.

Mr Philip: Yes, they are getting that margin on top. They are getting an extra 30 per cent more than buying the cheaper product.

Mr Stapley: Those costings that these businesses take on—Wren Fishing, Raptis, the private guys—you are paying for surveys and so on. Everyone is getting their piece of the pie. You have fuel prices going up. That bottom end that we are selling that product for, a lot of it is going on operational costs straight up and then staff. You need those little boosts because everything goes up except for the dollar value of the fish. This labelling is just one small step that will assist.

Mr Bouwens: These people with their product, for it to go better into Australia to sell it—the government should only import so much from overseas and not as much as they can get, because that is what is happening. Slowly they are pushing these fellas out of business. That is what they want to do, because they want farmed barra, they want farmed prawns, and it is cheaper to buy from overseas than it is for the real good stuff. They have to slow down on importing that stuff in.

Mr KATTER: Part of the intention of the bill is to try to increase awareness and, therefore, increase demand for domestically produced seafood. A question has often been asked that I will put to you all now: what is the capacity of the industry to enhance domestic demand for Aussie produced seafood?

Mr Philip: That would fall back down to the restrictions on the catches—tonnages, quotas.

Mr KATTER: Can you talk to us a bit about that from your observation?

Mr Philip: Fisheries say that you can only catch X amount of fish. You guys set the standards on the amounts that they can catch. If it needs more, obviously the quotas need to increase.

Mr Stapley: The NPF, the Northern Prawn Fishery, is the Commonwealth fishery and we are state fisheries so you have different fisheries in play here. With the state regulated fisheries, with the reform process that is happening in place, they are all going to go to quota. That is how they will put restrictions on what we can actually catch and supply to the domestic market. If that is brought in, then that will be a set tonnage for the different species.

Mr KATTER: Scott, feel free to give your observations of the fisheries here.

Mr Stevens: What they have done on the east coast, like you say, you are going to have X amount of quota. What they have done on the east coast, what they said they were sort of going to get and what they got was slightly different.

Mr Stapley: Yes. They always underrate us. It does not matter how—

Mr Stevens: It can be good for a year but it always goes down.

Mr Stapley: They always go to the conservative side, which in some cases is justifiable, but not in all cases. People say, 'Yeah, we think it is helping,' but they think it is not so it is always going to go the conservative side. That will always reduce that bottom line that you will be able to produce from the fishery, irrespective of whether it is healthy or not. That is an issue too for management.

CHAIR: Before we start talking about the issues of quotas et cetera, we will finalise questions on the seafood labelling bill and then we will go to the other issues.

Mr SMITH: The questions I want to ask you are more about helping me to question the restaurateurs. That is a big one: the people who own the restaurants. Right now, the statistics show about 70 per cent of all seafood consumed in Australia is imported. Can that demand be met if the one for imported fish goes or if the feds came in and said, 'No more imported'? Could the local industry fill that gap?

Mr Stevens: The boys probably know. We are persistent.

Mr Philip: you do not know until you try.

Mr Stapley: I reckon with all these WTOs getting cancelled you are going to have a lot more domestic product.

Mr Stevens: With the wild-caught sector like us, there are X amount of restaurants and they want this much every week. If we have bad weather, we have cyclones, we have seasons. We cannot guarantee that supply 52 weeks of the year, every week, whereas with imported or farmed they can.

Mr SMITH: There is a benefit, if the bill passes and people are choosing their restaurants based on Australian seafood, then that increases the demand and therefore that increases the price you are able to then charge.

Mr Stevens: The cost will go up.

Mr Stapley: It goes back to if the product is wanted then it will go up naturally.

Mr Stevens: And it comes back to quality.

Mr SMITH: Jason, I am aware of a *Townsville Bulletin* story or feature piece on supporting local and so forth. Did it have any impact on Wren after that piece ran in the *Bulley*?

Mr Stapley: I am getting that information now. I was not around for that, but from what Dave was saying the other day, yes, his business boomed essentially. It is like the seafood labelling: it is education. It is education of the Australian consumer on product awareness. For example, not many people know the grey mackerel species. Recreational fishermen is where a lot of the knowledge comes from and then it goes through the community that way. Grey mackerel is a very hard species to catch. You have to be an expert or if you really want to catch grey mackerel you have to be aware of it to actually get it. It is a fair commercial harvest species because of interactions with the recreational guys and so forth. Once the education and that *Bulley* article got out there, it made the public aware that grey mackerel is a good product, it is perfect for fish and chips, similar to Spanish mackerel. They took that on board and people got it. It is education.

CHAIR: That is an example of how a simple thing increased demand; education increased demand.

Mr Stapley: It is just education. It is consumer awareness. If you have that labelling and so forth, you will have that and that will happen with time.

Mr SMITH: Absolutely. It is good to hear that. That is a positive effect from that. The only difference between a 'buy local' campaign and this bill is that this bill will become law and will carry a penalty for those who do not meet it. One of the things we are hearing from restaurants is, 'If we have to rejig menus because supply lines have changed and so forth, there is a cost with that.' However, there will be a penalty imposed upon restaurants that do not comply with the potential act. What do you personally believe is a fair penalty for businesses that do not comply?

Mr Bouwens: That is a hard question. We are not the police.

Mr Stapley: Our penalty is that, if we change the naming, labelling and tracing of our records, we are not accredited for some food. That is a big impact on Wren Fishing and on any local cold stores. They would not be able to do it, so it is a massive penalty if we do not get accredited if we do not follow those guidelines. For a restaurant, it should be just common practice in that business. I do not know what fine you would impose on the business because they—

Mr SMITH: Because this a piece of legislation is based on the law, if the law is broken there needs to be some sort of repercussion for that. That is why I am wondering what is in your minds.

Mr Philip: Maybe like a liquor licence or something like that, they need some formal documentation that they sign and agree upon to say, 'Hey, we will follow the law.'

Mr HART: Jason or Craig, you provide restaurants with information. The intent of this bill is to put an 'I' for imported and 'L' for local or something like that on the menu. Does your invoice provide enough information to the restaurateur to include that on their menu?

Mr Stapley: Yes. We have what is called OMA—outward moving advices—which are part of the Safe Food practices. That is listed by each species and then the weight of the product going out for each outward moving advice. That is sent to the buyer, it is sent to whoever is purchasing the fish, so they know exactly by species and by weight what they are getting.

Mr HART: Just to clarify, do you say 'imported' or 'local'?

Mr Stapley: Yes, Australia caught wild-caught seafood. I have seen some of this labelling in seafood shops, wholesalers. They do that already and it is very effective.

Mr HART: Do you provide any of your product into the Northern Territory?

Mr Stapley: I do not know. That is most probably a question for Tina. I do not think so. I think a lot of it goes to the east coast and then it goes—

Mr HART: I ask that question because they have had their law for a while and I just wondered if you had to change your processes to fit in with it.

Mr Stapley: Safe Food is a national thing; it is Australia wide.

Mr Philip: All of ours go to market in Brisbane and Sydney and then it goes out from there. We just catch it here, process it, box it, send it down and they sort it and put it into packages.

Mr Stapley: Their warehouse would be under the same regulations.

Mr Philip: Yes, it would be under exactly the same.

Mr Stapley: If you export, you have to have AQIS approval which is the next level, which is a lot more intensive.

Mr Philip: Which we do have.

Mr Stapley: And they would have it because they would be exporting.

Mr Philip: All our prawns go in Raptis boxes. If you are in Woolworths or Coles and you walk around and have a look, you will see the Raptis boxed prawns. That comes from the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Mr Stapley: At the domestic level, you need Safe Food accreditation and then for export quality you need AQIS approval, which is very strict and very tedious.

Mr Philip: They come and audit our factory every year here in Karumba and our boats.

Mr Stapley: That is the cost to the cold stores essentially—the facilities that process seafood.

Mr KATTER: I was trying to tease out the last part of that last answer to determine what my question was going to be. You blokes are not so much at the front end of selling fish to the restaurants, which is where the rubber hits the road on this bill. You are at the back end in supply, which I think is pertinent. The real value here is that you can showcase all the stuff that you have to do and the costs that you incur to provide the standards that we should know as a consumer, although probably we do not know and that is the point. As consumers, we do not know how much is loaded on you in terms of cost and restrictions that deny you making more money. All of that is thrown back on you. This bill is about your competitor, which might be Vietnam, sending stuff to a retailer in Townsville or Cairns that is charging pull price as a barramundi when it is a bass that they got for half the price. In my view, they are ripping off the consumer. To me, they are cheating.

Mr Philip: The middle man is earning all the money.

Mr KATTER: Yes. I think you are getting cheated a bit in that process because you have all of these things loaded on you that you potentially are not getting full value out of. That is where we are going with this bill. Do you want to walk us through some of it? Jason, you spoke about the AQIS approvals and accreditations. You have also spoken a little bit about the rising fuel costs. I am giving you a last chance to think through all of the impositions on you that have come up over the years compared to an overseas competitor.

Mr Philip: Where do you start? We have 14 trawlers there. You have AMSA, fire, pest, maintenance, refrigeration. Even your refrigerated gas R438A bill to keep your freezers and that cold—

Mr KATTER: Working conditions for your staff?

Mr Philip: Poor. It has been 40 degrees out there every day for the last two to three weeks. It has been painful.

Mr Stapley: Even the internet service here is pathetic.

Mr Philip: What Telstra? We do not have it some days.

Mr Stapley: The power supply.

Mr Philip: Every time we have a power surge—it flicks in and out—we might have 10 of them a day some days. Our generators come on, they go off, so there is start power, there is wear and tear, stuff blows up. Fridges, freezers, microwaves, computers, computer screens: they just go 'poof!' And that can happen five or six times a day. Lightning hitting the ground next to the line and it just blacks out. Then the road closes.

Mr Stapley: Even just the communication. That is the thing: just to have a network that actually has any sort of speed about it. It is just ridiculous.

Mr Philip: The other big thing, too, is transport and freight costs.

Mr Stapley: Huge.

Mr Philip: Freight is going to go up. I do not see our freight bill, but it would be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, easy.

Mr Stapley: We have a substantial fuel bill with Carpentaria Transport, so gulf freight. That is one major trucking company that we use. Occasionally we use Hawkins as well. That is just what I heard this morning. Going back to AMSA as well, that is the survey of the vessels. Every single vessel is inspected. You have the fires, you have the pests, and you have the surveyor coming in and doing checks as well.

Mr Philip: Training as well for the guys when they go to sea.

Mr Stapley: Yes. Training is another issue. That is work health and safety. That is fire safety. That is all of that as well.

Mr Philip: Flare safety, harnesses, water safety, safety at sea—all that sort of stuff. So each prawn now should be worth like 40 grand each.

Mr Stapley: Then you have VMS as well, equipment that we need by regulation as well so that has to be kept up and working well.

Mr Philip: We are always putting new satellite information on, so receiving other vessels so we can WhatsApp when we have issues on the boats because communication is very poor. We have 14 trawlers and I think they were 70 grand each.

Mr Stapley: They are really expensive. You are calling into Fisheries all the time; you have to call it in, call out and that is regulated.

Mr Stevens: You have to ring in all the time.

CHAIR: Robbie, if you are happy, we will talk about the other issues.

Mr KATTER: Yes.

CHAIR: We have about 10 to 15 minutes. We want to hear from you about the other issues that are on your minds. Scott, we will go to you first.

Mr Stevens: Oh, where do you start? Which issue would you like first?

CHAIR: Remember that this will be on record so maybe there are some things that could be brought to the minister's attention.

Mr HART: Fishery quotas.

Mr Stevens: Fishery quotas? Well, we are in the middle of a reform process now for the gulf. I think they have had two meetings.

CHAIR: This is the mackerel working group that you are talking about?

Mr Stevens: Yes.

CHAIR: You are on that one?

Mr Stevens: No, I applied but they did not accept me.

Mr Stapley: That is the gulf inshore fishery working group, the initial one.

Mr Stevens: The next meeting is next month some time, I presume. I have heard that they will have it here. It is just the reforms they are going through. They have implemented quota on the east coast and they keep saying to us, 'Well, put your ideas on the table and we will look at them.' But basically they are not there. They already have their infrastructure on the east coast for quota. I guarantee it is going to come exactly over here.

CHAIR: Who is not looking at it? The working group or the department of fisheries?

Mr Stevens: Fisheries Queensland. They have already implemented it on the east coast. They already have the infrastructure there. Now they will just bring it straight over here.

Mr SMITH: What ideas are being putting on the table?

Mr Stevens: There have been a few floating around. Units was one idea that they were talking about.

Mr Stapley: Quotas is the main one. There was talk of two for one, but I do not think that will happen. They have not really got to that stage in the meetings yet for people to table other ideas to go away from quotas. It all points to people going to quota.

Mr HART: Getting green zones in?

Mr Stapley: Yes, there are green zones in the gulf.

Mr Stevens: Not that it will affect us in the barra fishery, no, but the prawn fishery—

Mr Stapley: There is talk of potentially putting in new zones up in the Mapoon area and that sort of thing so in environmentally sensitive areas. There is discussion of that, but I do not know how far they are down the track. There are already green zones. It is more so out in the middle, up towards Gravel Island way.

Mr Stevens: There are a few closed areas that we are not allowed to net in. They do not affect us, where they are.

Mr Stapley: There is one here and it goes out for two.

Mr Stevens: Yes, one from the fairway and what happened to the power lines in the river here—it is closed and has been for quite a while. There is one over near Burketown somewhere, but that is way up the top. There is not a lot that affects us.

Mr Stapley: Going back to what Scott was saying, with the reform process what Queensland Fisheries usually does is whatever occurs on the east coast and new rules and regulations that are put in there, it goes statewide. It goes across to the gulf. That is what Scott was getting at. That is why that Spanish mackerel on the east coast and the reform process they are going through now is critical to us. We are trying to get involved in that because we know ultimately this is going to roll over.

Mr Stevens: It will transfer here.

Mr Stapley: So if we do not have our say in the east coast process, we do not get a say.

Mr Stevens: It is a bit like everything, even the AMSA rules, Australian Maritime Safety Authority.

Mr Stapley: Safety at sea: domestic and commercial vessel stuff.

Mr Stevens: When the trout fishermen get lost over there and they have to have tracking on their boats and EPIRBs in all their dories and dinghies, instead of coming to the gulf and saying, 'Well, you guys work in the rivers and creeks so you don't need it,' they just blanket it at whatever fishery there is.

Mr Philip: So you guys all have to have VMS in your tinnies so that is another cost.

Mr Stapley: Every boat has to have VMS.

Mr Philip: You have the mother ship and then you might 10 tinnies and they all have to have VMS. Every VMS would be worth, what, 1,000 bucks? By the time it is fitted, it is 1,000 bucks. You got 10 tinnies out the back, so there is 10 grand.

Mr Stapley: Then there is the equipment in the tinnies and the dinghy and then you have the new AMSA regulations that coming in on these small vessels, under eight metres, and that is what we are discussing now. There are some big issues with that. They are trying to make a national ruling on that as a broad blanket which is shipping legislation on dinghies.

Mr Stevens: We will have that much gear—

Mr Stapley: You can have that much equipment that it can actually be more of a burden or more of a risk for safety than you would under normal operating conditions.

CHAIR: Is that state or federal?

Mr Stapley: Federal. We were just discussing about another body, whether there is an option to have another body regulating that outside of AMSA. That is another agency that is under discussion right now, which will be another piece of the pie.

Mr Philip: So more money.

Mr Stapley: Seafood Industry Australia, I think it is. But yes, that should not happen.

Mr McDONALD: Turning to the issue of quotas, can you tell us what is the system now and what is being proposed?

Mr Stevens: Basically at the moment we are restricted with what nets we can use. On one licence you are allowed six nets: you can either work in the river or you can work the foreshore or you can work the offshore. As it is now, we can catch basically whatever we catch. For 99 per cent of fishermen, whatever they catch, once their freezers are full or their eskies and bins are full, they come home, it is unloaded and they are gone again. If a quota is brought in they will go, 'Okay, you are allowed X amount of barramundi and you are allowed this much king, you are allowed this much bluey'—they will break it into species. But if you have this big barra quota that you are allowed, everything else you catch after your quota is gone is thrown over the side. It is just wasted.

To me, it is a very lazy way of managing a fishery. It is wasteful. Even the recreational sector does not like quotas because they know how much fish gets wasted. If you are sitting on \$100,000 worth of barra quota, you are not going to stop fishing because you might catch a king salmon; you just throw the king salmon away and keep the barra because that is all you are allowed to keep. They will not let you keep the pink salmon or the blue salmon.

Mr Stapley: The current regulations are set by area of operation. The inshore fishery goes out seven miles to the coast and in the estuaries, and the offshore fishery goes out to the OCS or whatever. It is essentially area of operation and gear restrictions and the My Species list. Each fishery has their target species and some by-product species that they are allowed to capture and market. That is how it is regulated now.

What they are proposing is to set limits on those species you are allowed to retain. I think the major target species—they cannot do all species because they need to do stock assessments on everything now—for the inshore it is barra and king salmon that they are looking at. Offshore fishery: Spanish mackerel, grey mackerel. I do not know about sharks; it has always been undefined. It is data limited so they do not have the resources to do it. It comes back to what resources they have to look at all these stock assessments. Then they look at the species, look at their biomasses, where they are at, whether they are sustainable or not or whether they hit the magic 60 per cent or 20 per cent biomass levels and do different triggers. That is the way they are going with the harvest strategy. This is a harvest strategy that is put in place to look at the risk levels of each species. They are at level 2, I think, for all of the risk assessment process. Then that looks at the biology of the animal. Is it a high-risk? If it gets caught a lot, is it characteristic of getting depleted? Some fish are at higher risk and there are some that are at lower risk, so they look at that process as well. Basically the end result that they are looking for is to put a quota on those species.

Essentially, if they are higher risk and you are catching a lot of it, they will reduce that quota down. Traditionally one of the tools they used as well to actually set those quota limits was the history of individual operators. They look at your history and how much you catch historically. With the crab fishery, some people were catching two tonnes, some people were catching 10 tonnes or 12 tonnes—whatever. They tried to allocate that in the fishery, but there are always losers and there are always winners. There is that issue with that process which we will have to do as well.

CHAIR: We have a few minutes left. Do any of you have any questions on any of these core issues?

Mr HART: Is there any shortage of fish out there?

Mr Stevens: I do not think there is. I think the fish stock is quite healthy.

Mr Stapley: King salmon is depleted to a level, but we do not believe it is as low as they say it is. They are saying it is at five per cent biomass, but we do not believe it is at that level, otherwise we would not be catching what we caught last year and this year. It does have very low recruitment when environmental fish conditions are unfavourable—those used to account for some of the lower catches and that sort of thing. But there is also marketing and business decisions where people do not target it or they are not even fishing. When Fisheries look at the catch history, they will think, 'Low catches, low catches—it's bugged'; that sort of thing. But they need to define that a bit better and say, 'Alright, well these guys are expert king salmon fishermen, but they were off because of ill health,' or whatever, and that will impact the knowledge base.

Mr HART: Are you saying the industry is self-regulating itself with regard to fish stocks?

Mr Stapley: More so than ever. The boys here do not want to catch everything because what are they going to do next year or in the years after? They have invested heavily into these businesses.

Mr HART: What about dredging or channel maintenance, and things like that? Are there any issues there?

Mr Stapley: That is within the enclosure here. It is the spawn grounds and that sort of thing. I think a lot of the recreational fishers like fishing there, anyway. I do not know. With the mine here, you might have a bit of fallout and things like that. There may be pollution issues from that association; I do not know. I do not know whether they have looked at sediment or anything like that around the flats. That research would be required to say, 'There is X amount of fallout into the actual ecosystem.'

Mr Stevens: I think the fish stocks are very healthy. Especially over the last few years they have been getting better and better.

Mr Stapley: With the kingies, there has to be a process on that to get back up to a better level. But the other species, no, they are all going great guns.

Mr HART: When you tell the Fisheries that, what is the reaction you get from them?

Mr Stapley: They don't really believe.

Mr Stevens: They don't believe you.

Mr Philip: It is more of a closed door.

Mr Stapley: They will get their scientists to look into it and—

Mr Stevens: We wear the shirt; we know what is going on.

Mr Stapley: And, 'We don't care. This is the best information we have.'

Mr HART: Do any scientists come out and go fishing with them?

Mr Stevens: No.

Mr Stapley: They used to have observers in some of the state fisheries. The observers are more Commonwealth. They are better funded. They have crew based observers as well, which is a different type of scenario. We are looking at that as well now, whether we can get some sort of crew based observer program to validate some of these data gaps and give government reassurance of what we are doing and what we are catching, because that is what they want as well. They want data validation which is a critical part of the process. It comes back to the costs. It comes back to being able to do it. They will be looking at industry to cover those costs as well. Seafood labelling—bring it on. We want more money per kilo so we can actually do these jobs, get it done and keep fishing.

Mr McDONALD: Are the prawn issues the same?

Mr Philip: It is pretty much the same, yeah. You have good seasons, you have bad seasons.

Mr Stevens: We basically rely on the wet season. If we do not get a wet season—

Mr Philip: We are very nervous at the moment if we do not have a wet season. We have 14 trawlers there ready to go and already we are into the season by 28 days, and we are hoping they catch more than one prawn.

Mr KATTER: I have two questions I want to get on the record. As I understand it, there is a desire for the industry to get access to the data. You are providing data on the new fisheries model that is being used and you want to get back some of that data to try to understand the position. That is a strong desire of the industry?

Mr Philip: Correct information is power.

Mr KATTER: And you cannot get access to that?

Mr Stapley: It is the validation of the information in the assessments they are doing. We want to see what information they are utilising. We supply them with a lot. They have catch information. We supply biological samples as well that a lot of people contribute to. If that information goes in, we want to say, 'Can you let us know what information you have used in those models for the decision processes you have gone through?' Then we can have a look at it and validate it. If they leave out certain packets of information that are not utilised in assessments, then we want to know why and what is the justification and if we can actually include that. Maybe there is an explanation: 'This is what happened there' or whatever. It is clarification and transparency.

Mr KATTER: I learnt something just yesterday and it was a real eye-opener for me. As a layperson I always thought you throw nets out and you are going for barra or grey mackerel. You might get 100 species of fish and half of it is thrown away. Yesterday I learnt that actually there is a lot more precision involved. Unless you are going to go broke, you just go—

Mr Stapley: If you are not on the spot, you will not catch fish.

Mr KATTER: You will end up getting mostly just that species and bugger all else; is that right?

Mr Stevens: You target that species. If you want that species, you have enough knowledge to know where to go and get it.

Mr Stapley: It is like the IP of fishermen. It is like intellectual property when you sell a business. It is the knowledge of the environment; it is the knowledge of the species. You can go out, turn a net and get not a skerrick in it. You will have what they call a bubble run; there is not a fish in it. Then you can target kingies, you can target barra. If you want to target Sawfish, you can go out and target Sawfish, because we did it in a research project. You can get different species. If you want to catch shark in dirty water—if you want to catch a whole heap of shit, you can, and increase by-catch levels. Do you think fishermen want to catch a lot of trash, cause extra work, break their backs and end up not making a living?

Mr Stevens: We would rather stay away from them. If we know where it is all is and we stay away from it.

Mr Stapley: There is that perception that, if you put a net in, you will catch everything. It is far from it.

Mr KATTER: I had that perception.

Mr Philip: There is a lot of work behind the scenes

Mr Stevens: It does not happen.

Mr Philip: There is a lot of work behind the scenes to put that one piece of plate barra or the one prawn or the one bug or the one squid on the restaurant table. You are more than welcome at any time to come down and I will give you a tour around Raptis while the boats are there, just to see what is going on. We have about 40 people running around there now, chipping, painting, working, welding.

Mr HART: What is the best time of the year to do that?

Mr Philip: Now.

Mr Stevens: Before they go out.

Mr Philip: Our prawn season: they go to sea on 28 March. They drop down the nets on 1 April. They are back on 1 June. There is an eight-week refit and then they are back 1 August for the tigers. Depending on the season, they come in from 22 to 28 November and they are there until March. We got some in Cairns on Friday. We have 14 trawlers there doing a refit for four months.

CHAIR: Before we wrap up, is there anything on these issues that you want to put on the record?

Mr Stapley: An example of that targeting is that we had some old-school fishermen who exited the fishery a little while ago. They were experts and they are no longer in the fishery. They are no longer there, so you will not have the knowledge of all those experts in the field anymore, and it is happening more and more. A lot of the older guys are leaving the industry. New guys come in and they are not as effective at catching.

CHAIR: We have to retain that knowledge.

Mr McDONALD: So the logbooks of those fishermen are not in the calculations by Fisheries?

Mr Stapley: I think with the king salmon they went back to 1940 or something, but that information—

Mr Stevens: Whether they use them or not, I do not know.

Mr Stapley: Remember how we spoke about that subsistence Spanish mackerel model? One of the representatives from QSI said they had a newspaper article that went back to 1911 or something like that. They used that in the assessment and he was like, 'That's laughable. They used something that is not really credible?' But that is the baseline. That is where it started.

Mr McDONALD: Scotty, you said before that they do not believe your logbooks. Why don't they believe your logbooks?

Mr Stevens: Up until we got VMS they did not, because they could not validate where you were fishing. You had fishermen but the boat never left the backyard and they had all this catch history in their logbooks. Since we got VMS, 'Oh, how come that boat has not moved for three months but he's caught five tonne of fish?' They cancelled that, so to speak. They can validate logbooks now with VMS, but prior to that, basically they just do not believe you. They think we are were criminals.

Mr Philip: I would like to see some sort of compensation for the fishermen. You have heard about some of the costs. Our biggest fear now, from Raptis point of view, is fuel. That is going to be an epic bill. I understand we already get a rebate, but it does not matter if we catch 50 tonnes of prawn a day; the price at the table still dictates it. We can give you as much product as we can and only get 10 bucks a kilo for it, whereas really we need 25 bucks a kilo for it.

CHAIR: Scott, did you want to say anything to finish?

Mr Stevens: No.

CHAIR: Jock, what about you?

Mr Bouwens: In the last 30 years that I have been here with these fellas, fishing mainly, the prices for fish have not really changed that much. They were getting \$10 or \$9 a kilo for barra at first, and king salmon was only \$6. Nowadays, 30 years later, they are only getting about \$18 a kilo for Karumba

king salmon and about \$20 if you have a good buyer for barra. The prices have not fluctuated for these fellas that much, but the fuel price has skyrocketed. With all the new rules for their tinnies, with this and that—they have got more equipment than a person has in a house, just on a boat or on a tinnie.

Mr Stevens: It is getting more and more.

Mr Bouwens: Like Scotty said, most of them fish in rivers, not out at sea.

Mr Stapley: I have just a quick comment on the changes with the quotas. If they push them through, if they come through, then what actually gets put off that boat every single time has to be called in. That is a daily quota allocation that the fishermen have to inform Fisheries of every day, every time a product is moved or anything. That issue here in a remote area could be a big problem.

CHAIR: Got you.

Mr Philip: Then they need a satellite phone, so there is another cost. It is \$2,500-plus for a satellite phone.

Mr Stapley: On the east coast, they are in and out each day from central cities or smaller towns where you have the facilities, you have the set-up and you have everything to do it. Here—well.

Mr McDONALD: Fishing does not work that way, does it? You might not catch anything for three days and then you catch—

Mr Stapley: That is why the gulf has its own system. The east coast is predominantly fresh fish. They all come in on ice.

Mr Philip: As Jason said, there is a major port everywhere. The gulf is a fillet fishery. Some of these barra boats will go out for six to eight weeks. You cannot bring whole fish in. It all has to be processed. It is a totally different fishery and they are going to blanket us with what they already have in place.

CHAIR: That is a good point to make as well. Thank you, gentlemen. That concludes our public hearing. Thank you for participating today. Thank you to our secretariat and Hansard. The transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's web page in due course. We will probably send you guys a copy through the local council so you can see yourselves on the *Hansard* record. I declare the hearing closed. Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 11.04 am.