



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

MONDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2022

Townsville

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The committee met at 10.56 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Food (Labelling of Seafood) Amendment Bill 2021. My name is Chris Whiting. I am the member for Bancroft and the chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather 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 people, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me here today are Mr Jim McDonald, the deputy chair and member for Lockyer; Mr Michael Hart, the member for Burleigh; Mr Tom Smith, the member for Bundaberg; and Mr Robbie Katter, the member for Traeger.

This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only the committee and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. Media may be present and are subject to the committee's media rules and the chair's direction at all times. You may be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. Please turn off your mobile phones or switch them to silent mode. In line with Queensland's COVID-19 requirements, all members and witnesses are required to wear a mask during today's proceedings, but you can remove your mask when speaking.

BADE, Mr Tim, Manager, Spring Creek Barramundi

LOUNDS, Mr Col, Lounds Seafoods, Queensland Seafood Marketers Association

PARTLAND, Mr Mark, Ingham Road Seafood, Queensland Seafood Marketers Association

CHAIR: Welcome. We will ask you to make opening statements and then we will have some questions for you.

Mr Bade: Very briefly, the Australian Barramundi Farmers Association has already put in a submission to this committee that you will discuss, I believe, in Cairns at another meeting. To add to that from a farmer's perspective, in my view it is very important that this bill is amended. When consumers go into a restaurant or a takeaway store, there is no requirement to identify or easily identify the origin of the fish or seafood product they are purchasing. I think that is something that really needs to be addressed.

For me personally, in the barramundi industry a major problem for us is that over 60 per cent of the so-called barramundi consumed in Australia is actually imported Asian sea bass. Basically, the retailers in the food service sector are able to use the Australian Aboriginal name 'barramundi' to potentially, in my mind, deceive consumers into thinking that it is a local Australian product they are purchasing. They are paying the price point that they would for a premium Australian produced or wild-caught fish. In my mind that is not just right. It is really un-Australian, to be quite honest.

We do accept that there is the need or the place for imported products within our seafood markets, but we would like to see people given easy information to be able to make that conscious decision whether they want to support and buy local product or whether they would rather buy an imported product that is generally at a cheaper price point. We definitely do not want to see people, in my mind, ripped off by paying a premium price for something that is very much an inferior product.

Mr Partland: Ingham Road Seafood does about 90 per cent of Australian product. I am very vocal about supporting the local industry, which is under huge threats from government implementing quota and that type of thing. The labelling or identification of seafood in pubs, clubs, restaurants and the like should have been done years ago when it was implemented into our retail sector. This needs to be brought into line with that so that people have a choice and people are aware of what they are buying. The amount of inferior product out there that locals and tourists who come to Queensland buy—and I will use the example of the iconic barramundi—is quite scary.

As a company that delivers to restaurants, clubs and pubs, we probably see firsthand what is going into some of those places. Yes, there is a place for imported product and in the past 10 years imported product has come a long way in the way it is handled. However, it is time that we get together and give the public some perception of what they are buying and the opportunity to have the choice of buying Australian seafood.

Mr Lounds: I have been a commercial fisher since 1980. I have run a retail shop in Townsville since 1986. It is a family business. At the present time I virtually unload all the trawlers in the Port of Townsville and then distribute that up and down the coast. As a retail shop, back in 2018 we had to show country of origin. Back then there was a move afoot to have it at point of plate but that never got any traction. The retail shops were a centre of focus and target so we have had to show where our product comes from.

You must understand that food services out there use a lot of the imported stock. Both boys mentioned barramundi so we will talk about barramundi. At the present time, my wholesale distribution costs for barramundi fillets is \$30 a kilo. I can buy imported fillets for \$14 or \$15 and sell them at \$18 or \$20. There are considerable savings there. An Aussie wild-caught barra fillet—because we have a minimum legal size of 58 centimetres—is 0.8 of a kilo. The imported stuff comes in one step in front of us because theirs is all virtually portion controlled, but it is portioned to the whole fish. They have a whole fish fillet that weighs 200 to 300 grams. You can say you support wild-caught seafood and let the consumers know where the seafood comes from.

Fisheries Queensland has a reform process in place by June 2022 that will decimate the local Queensland seafood supply industry. We believe and the industry believes that the process is flawed in its data and industry is contesting the models Fisheries Queensland is using. That is both in fish species and the models they propose in prawns—all are going to see a massive reduction. We are going to need those bloody imports because the Queensland government is going to decimate our wild-caught catching sector.

CHAIR: I appreciate that. Thank you, Col. Tim, this bill is really important for the barramundi part of the industry and people in your sector have been quite vocal about labelling. What is different about your industry, whether it be farmed or wild-caught, within Queensland? You have said the labelling can be quite deceptive as people say it is barramundi when it is imported from somewhere else and it may well be smaller. Is it because of the potential that you have to grow that industry? It seems to be that your sector is really passionate about this proposal to change it to point of sale for retail.

Mr Bade: Definitely. As Col pointed out in some of his statements, imported barra is a lot cheaper to produce. It is not produced under the same environmental and regulatory standards that we have here in Queensland. It is similar with the wild harvest and the regulations on their fisheries. It is a cheaper product that comes in. It is taking away market share that local product and locally produced product could have. It is impeding the progress of the expansion of our industry within Queensland.

There is a lot of regulation around the industry. Obviously, competing with a product that can be produced for less than half of what we can produce a fish for makes it very hard. But Australians are very passionate when they have information about buying locally produced or caught product. Australians like to support local. It is just the deception that happens in the food service sector by not having that information readily available. I guess there is also a lack of understanding by the Australian public that barramundi is not only an Australian fish; the same species does occur overseas and is farmed overseas.

CHAIR: You talk about the potential for impeding your industry. What is the potential to expand, how would it expand and would it be wild-caught or farmed?

Mr Bade: I feel that it would be farmed, given the regulation on wild-caught. Col and Mark would know more than I do about the regulation on the wild-caught stuff. Farming barramundi in this instance is probably the way forward for the Australian industry in producing more product and meeting that consumer demand. There is a lot of good farming area in Queensland. Obviously there is a lot of regulation with the GBR, which means that the fish we produce are produced to the highest standards of anywhere in the world, in my view. Definitely I think aquaculture is the way forward for the barramundi industry in meeting that demand. I think we are poised to be able to do it given the opportunity and a better piece of the market, so to speak, without inferior and cheaper competition.

CHAIR: You talked about the imported product and that labelling imported product as barramundi is an attempt to deceive customers. Can you expand on that from what you have seen? Townsville

Mr Bade: Say you are an Australian consumer—to give an example—and you go to a restaurant and pay \$45 for a barramundi dish of some sort. You are assuming that that is a locally caught product that is produced to high standards, that it is a premium product, and that is why you are paying a high price point. If you are in the food service sector and you are buying those fillets for \$14 to \$16 to \$18 a kilo instead of \$35 plus, the price point and the margin that the food service sector can make on that is where the deception is. People are paying for a premium product but receiving an inferior product that is produced in overseas countries where, unfortunately, the environmental and sustainability standards are just not what we have here in Australia.

Mr McDONALD: Thanks very much for your really great submission with some great information in it. I am going to ask a couple of questions about a submission from somebody speaking against this bill, because I am confused over how the concerns that they have would actually play out. They say that they are greatly concerned that if the bill is passed it will be at too great a cost in the implementation of the mandatory labelling scheme. From your retailing experience, can you tell us about how much this would cost you?

Mr Partland: For someone delivering the seafood into a restaurant, we say it on our invoices. The product codes are 'Australian' or 'imported' so it is already on the paperwork they get. For the implementation, once it gets to the restaurant a simple 'I' for imported for 'L' for local I think will solve this.

The people who are very successful will market their produce as 'Hervey Bay scallops' or 'Burdekin barramundi'. They want to tell the story about their product. This is all about stopping the businesspeople who buy inferior product and are using it against our local product. It is not going to stop the really good restaurants or the good cafes because they are marketing their product to the highest level. They are telling a story and each Australian product has a story. Be it farmed barra, coral trout, prawns or oysters from Bowen, each has a story. We are only trying to stop the people who do not want to tell the story. I think it would be very easy for us and it is.

Mr McDONALD: So it would be pretty low cost?

Mr Partland: Low cost—very low cost.

Mr McDONALD: In the same submission they say there would be a loss of outlets as they would simply delete seafood from their menus as a consequence of the implementation of this. Could you comment on that?

Mr Partland: I cannot see that happening. Seafood is a reasonable protein source compared to meat, lamb et cetera at the moment. Yes, it is up in price but it is still an affordable protein to be on a menu. I do not think it would come to the point where they would take it off the menu, no.

Mr McDONALD: The other part is the inevitable subsequent uneven enforcement of the implementation of this. Obviously if it is brought in you would love to see everybody doing it. Have you had any experience with the enforcement of the current regime that would be relevant to this when implemented?

Mr Lounds: It is a toothless tiger. We have both discussed this. As retail outlets, we were told five years ago it would be country of origin. We have had one visit in five years, most likely in the first two months. Nobody comes in and checks it. Unfortunately, I thought that is why you had the mayors here, to ask how they are going to implement the checking. They have a health department that goes around to every food establishment. They just say, 'Can I have a look at your menu? Do you have it nominated as imported or not?' It is really simple. I would like to go one step further.

In particular, the three of us have been talking about barramundi. The barramundi with a little 'I' on the end of it? No. Barramundi with 'Imp' and then you can have a footnote down the bottom that says 'Imp is imported'. Restaurants and takeaway shops are not going to go broke. A takeaway shop is still going to charge \$10 or \$12. They will charge \$12 for a piece of barra. Unfortunately, now they are only costing them \$3 so it may cost them \$5, but they are still making 100 per cent.

Mr KATTER: A good question was asked when I was sitting where you are, putting forward the bill to the committee. It was: if this does increase demand for Australian seafood, is there an ability for the industry to supply that increase in uptake?

Mr Lounds: Thirty years ago commercial fishermen in Queensland caught barramundi and the aquaculture industry supplemented it. Now I would say 90 per cent of the barramundi comes from aquaculture and wild-caught complements that. The way the Queensland government, Queensland Fisheries, is going we are going to be producing less and aquaculture will be taking up the slack. It will be Australian barramundi though. They are going to have Australian barramundi fillets that are still 0.8 to a kilo fillets, primo fillets for the customers, but it will be Australian, not imported. That is the differentiation we are trying to make.

Mr KATTER: I know that one of the fishermen in Karumba is getting real good premiums on wild-caught mackerel in Sydney and Melbourne. There is still a market for that. Does it attract premium prices?

Mr Lounds: Different species attract a premium price. Nowadays with the continuity of supply of aquaculture farmed barra it is on a level playing field, one might say, because these guys can drop in half a tonne of barramundi on a Monday, a Wednesday and a Friday to an outlet and they know that it was kicking 24 hours prior to that. How much better can you get? Those of us in the wild-caught sector are at the whim of Mother Nature. It either blows, we have a cyclone or we have floods; hence, the fishing cannot continue but the aquaculture industry can. That is why they have taken over the supply chain. They really have. Thirty years ago I think aquaculture just complemented wild-caught; now it is the other way around. For the niche outlets and in particular places, like Mark and myself that present product to the retail person, they are the ones that we sell our wild-caught barra to, aren't they?

Mr Partland: Yes.

Mr KATTER: The impetus for the bill for us is that we see there are industry pressures in the seafood industry. Can you talk generally about the pressures on the industry at the moment? This is hopefully a bit of a stimulant, perhaps not as much as you need. What sorts of pressures are out there? Can you give the committee an idea of the sorts of pressures on the industry now and why you would need some help like this, if this bill does help a bit, as you say? What are the pressures that you face in the industry that would be a reason you need something like this?

Mr Lounds: Pressures that are facing the industry are Queensland Fisheries, the Queensland government, with their stupid regulations that they are proposing to implement by June 2022. These implementations, industry believes, are totally flawed in the models they have used. In particular, why don't we talk about barramundi. They said all commercial fishers fill out a logbook every day which is submitted to Queensland Fisheries so they know exactly what we catch. They know exactly what we have caught for the last 25 years. Logbooks are not new to us. They give us an allocation: 'Dependent upon on what you caught, we are now going to err on the side of caution and we will give you 70 per cent of what you caught. By the way, we are going to put you in a little area.' I used to have a licence to fish the coast of Queensland on the east coast but, no, 'Now you can only fish'—this is a stupid one—'from Rollingstone to Innisfail/Cairns and Rollingstone to Mackay.' Why Rollingstone? Because I live there? Anyhow. We have quota at a reduction rate. We have a little zone we can stay in. If we did not fish in two zones over a period of time, if things are bad and there is no rain in the Townsville region, which is exactly now, a fisherman cannot move. He starves. That is just one thing. I should not harp, should I?

On the prawn side of it, again Queensland Fisheries said, 'We will put you in zones where you have worked before.' That is not a problem. 'Again, we will err on the side of caution,' and they gave us effort units. That was going to come in place in September or November last year. 'By the way, we believe we are going to have an effort cap, so if there are 100,000 effort units in this area here—we are going to protect the place—there is only going to be 50,000 effort units. So you can all go out and catch prawns for three months and then you can get on the dole.'

Spanish mackerel is another one to have, at point of plate, something for people to know where it comes from. Just like the barramundi, the Spanish comes from overseas as well. In 2005 there was most likely—I do not know the number of fishermen, but say there was 300 and we were issued quota through our logbook data and the quota amount was 650 tonne for the east coast of Queensland. In the last five years we have only caught 350 tonne, but back when it was 650 there was about 300 or 400 fishermen; now there are 50. In Townsville 30 years ago there would have been at least 10 designated Spanish mackerel filleting boats. They caught the fish, they processed it out on the water, they froze it down and they brought frozen blocks of fillets home. Now there is one. He is 74 years old. How much longer do you think he is going to be going for?

There is no reason for young people to get into our industry. Queensland Fisheries are doing a right royal job of screwing over the wild-caught harvesting sector. We are not a wild-caught harvesting sector to go out and rape, pillage and plunder. People want to get their sons involved in this. I have two people down on the wharf now who have gone and bought a boat for their son. Their son worked with dad and he is now a 30-year-old young man. It is about time he did his own thing so dad funds or finances the boat, but he has to pay for it. These guys work their little arses off and then you have got the frigging government coming along and saying, 'Oh, well, there was so much effort unit here, but we think it's too much.' We are sustainable, but Queensland Fisheries and the state government now are hell-bent on screwing over primary industry and right now it is our primary industry; it is everyone else's primary industry—cane farms, whatever.

CHAIR: We appreciate your problem. We may have strayed off seafood labelling there.

Mr Partland: Just on that, I watched a movie a long time ago called *Finding Nemo*. It is probably the only seafood I have ever seen talk. We have an amazing product up here in Queensland, be it farmed, wild or whatever. None of my fish coming into the shop can talk to me. Can we please let them talk on a menu or on a board to say where they are from?

CHAIR: Nice point.

Mr SMITH: I mentioned to the member for Traeger the other week that I think this is very much something that passes the pub test. I was wondering if you can maybe talk a little bit around the consumer desire to have a narrative behind their food. I am from Bundaberg, and the big thing about Bundy is its natural product. The rum tastes a certain way because of the sugarcane and it is in the Bundy soil and so forth. The story behind it is why people want to come up and experience the food that is on offer in Bundaberg. Could you maybe present a bit of a narrative about people who travel from New South Wales and Victoria to Northern Queensland who want that barramundi and are willing to pay that \$45 for a premium product?

Mr Bade: From a farmed point of view, the story is there. That is where we are really putting a lot of our focus as aquaculture producers. It is the story of every farm. It is where those fingerlings come from. They are spawned in hatcheries in local waters using local waters from the GBR and grown in some of the most pristine locations in Queensland. Then it is the story of the lifecycle and how we take that barramundi from a very small fish right the way up to a 3.5- or four-kilo fish when it is destined for market. It is for us the sustainability story and what we do in our farming. It is where our feeds are sourced from and the way they are produced—the way we produce our fish with an emphasis on water quality, particularly my farm. We are a zero-discharge farm, so we do not discharge any water whatsoever into the GBR. That is really part of our story for the consumer. It is the fact that it is local product.

For a Victorian or New South Wales tourist to come up here, realistically they are targeting the wild barramundi. That is why I would come to North Queensland, because I wanted to eat a wild barramundi that came out of the waters of wherever it is in North Queensland. It is the story about that iconic fish. That is why it is so important that they have that choice put in front of them easily, to see this \$40 piece of barramundi. Is it really barramundi? Is it differentiated as Australian or is it imported and somebody has just slapped it on a plate and played on the fact that you think it is going to be Australian barramundi?

Mr SMITH: If we move to the symbols on the menu, I absolutely do not agree that seafood is going to disappear off a menu because of this. I think the member for Lockyer and I probably agree with that. What is the level of flexibility that the industry could be satisfied with? We have had some submissions talk about if the supply of the local product goes off or is bad and they need to do that quick stopgap for a week and bring in some imported product, that they would have to go out and laminate all their menus again or redevelop all their menus, which some businesses take a lot of pride in and obviously put a lot of money into as it is part of the experience. Is there a level of flexibility to say, 'Some fish are imported. Please ask your waiter which ones,' and list them and so forth? How willing is the industry to move around what the actual symbols on a board or on the menu look like?

Mr Bade: In my mind there has to be a symbol there. It has to denote whether it is imported or not. Waitstaff are not trained or paid well enough probably to have a comprehensive understanding of seafood and all the different seafood varieties that may be on a menu so I think it needs to be stipulated there. With regard to barramundi and local supply, with the backing of the aquaculture industry there is always going to be Australian product available for those who wish to source it. Realistically, I feel that menus are probably being changed every three months at a minimum with seasons et cetera, so if there is the thought that maybe it is not going to be a seasonal product or is not going to be available, there is the easy ability to change it. We are talking about a small symbol—an 'I' or an 'Imp' or something like that. If that product was to come off the market and they had to use local, I am sure they could communicate that positively. If it was an imported product and then they started using local, I am sure they could communicate and use that as a positive, but I would not like to see us relying on the waitstaff to communicate that what is being labelled as Australian product is no longer an Australian product.

Mr SMITH: I think one of the other issues that came up was around the marinara complex. If you order prawns, you get prawns. If you order a dozen oysters, you get oysters. The fish would all be labelled. Then with marinara, where some may be a local product and some may be imported, there was a suggestion of putting it as 'mixed product'. So it does not just to have to be marinara 'imported'; it could be 'mixed product'. Is that something the industry would be satisfied with?

Mr Partland: I have dealt with this one. When we did the labelling for our retail shops, you had a guideline you had to go through of what products you put in something like marinara, a crumbed prawn or whatever. You would have to work it out, and it was at least 75 per cent Australian or 90 per cent Australian. That went right down to it. There was an unusual one, and I will use prawns as an example. Sodium metabisulphite is not made in Australia. All of the green prawns that are caught in the ocean are dipped in sodium metabisulphite, so are they Australian or 100 per cent Australian? Probably not, but they let it go that they were 100 per cent Australian. With something like marinara, we use salmon portions, or the fish we use is a bit of flake, or the squid rings might be imported but the prawn meat is local so it gets a percentage of what it is. That is what we had to do in our retail sector.

Mr McDONALD: Just for clarification, do you have to advertise that percentage or do you tick that and then it is Australian-made?

Mr Partland: No, I think it says it is 80 per cent or 90 per cent Australian product.

Mr McDONALD: And then you can call it Australian?

Mr Partland: No. It has, 'This product is 90 per cent Australian' and the rest is imported product.

Mr SMITH: That poses an interesting question.

Mr HART: Who checks that?

Mr Partland: It was interesting, because they went around and we had to change all of the fish names in Australia so all of the names were the same—examples are large mouth nannygai or saddletail. We had to change all of the fish names in Australia to be the same so that if you walked into a shop in Sydney and that fish was there, it was called the same in Queensland, which it was not, and there were a lot of fish that were not. We did all of that and then we implemented this Australian-caught, imported and all of that. No-one has knocked on the door to say, 'Where are you at?' We get a government safe food inspection probably twice a year. That probably should incorporate some of that, but it is just a different sector. To your question, no.

Mr SMITH: The final question is about supply and demand. Is the supply of local product able to meet the demand, especially when we talk about restaurants in Sydney and Melbourne and then exports? Tim, can you talk about how aquaculture is meeting a bit of that demand? I know that Col mentioned that it is probably about 90 per cent now with barramundi. Could you give us a history of the growth of aquaculture and where you think it is leading in terms of filling this gap between supply and demand?

Mr Bade: The aquaculture industry is growing quite rapidly. Several large producers are all in expansion phase at the moment to meet the demand, including us. Some of this is being spurred on by the COVID pandemic and the reduction in the amount of imported and fresh imported seafood that is coming in. Growing rapidly I guess is all I can say for barramundi and aquaculture in general. We are going to be over 10,000 tonnes of local production I think this calendar year, and that is looking to grow exponentially as we move forward. Like I said, I acknowledge that there will be some shortfall in what we can produce domestically for our domestic consumption.

For your higher end food service restaurants et cetera, there is definitely plenty of good product for them to be using. If we are talking about barramundi, the place where I see imported barramundi being useful is where that price point is important. If people still want to eat fish but they cannot afford that premium, that is where that more cheaply produced product can fill that void. Certainly for top quality product, I think aquaculture can meet that demand and we are continuing to grow to meet the Australian consumer.

Mr Partland: Just on that, not every restaurant and every cafe wants to have Australian seafood. Depending on nationality, if you go to a Philippines restaurant you are predominantly going to eat fish and products from over there. If you know that, well and good, and you would expect to have milkfish that is from the Philippines or whatever in their curries. I think it is letting people know what is there.

Mr SMITH: It allows them to access that narrative that they want, doesn't it—to have the experience that they are chasing?

Mr Bade: Or they can make the choice. That is the important thing—the choice. They can say, 'I know that this dish is made with imported prawns but that's fine because I'm at a restaurant where I expected that may happen,' or 'I understand that is what it is and it's reasonably priced for that dish and I'm happy to have that dish.' But if you go and buy an absolute premium top-of-the-line dish, you

deserve that right to be able to say, 'Yes, that was produced here in Australia,' or 'No, I've been duped here and they've put fish that cost half of that in there and they're still taking the money out of my back pocket.'

Mr HART: I will preface what I am going to say by saying that I am onside with this whole concept, but I do have some concerns as to how it is going to be implemented. We took that up with Robbie when he sat over there. Col, what you were saying about the government interfering in the process is what we are basically being asked to do here again in the next step of it. Do any of you gentlemen own a restaurant? You have all indicated no. I understand you are retail. My electorate on the Gold Coast is Burleigh. I have lots of restaurants and only a couple of wild mackerel fishermen, I would say. The concerns that I am getting in feedback from the restaurant industry are (a) they do not know this is coming, if it does come; and (b) they are wondering how they might implement it. How do you provide that information at the moment to the restaurants, or do you provide it to restaurants when they buy fish from you?

Mr Lounds: Just as Mark said earlier, when our invoices go out it says 'local' or it says 'imported'. If I send squid tubes out, it says it is imported; it says 'Imp'. It is there. It is not even coming down hard and fast on them. Every restaurant gets checked by the health department in their region. You just walk in and say, 'Can I have a look at where you indicate whether this is imported or not?' No-one is talking about dropping it on them and they have to do it tomorrow. There is a 12-month or two-year lead-in. There is a time frame to come in, and I think it is nominated at 12 months.

Mr HART: Col, is it a matter of having the indicator on the menu or actually ensuring that is local seafood?

Mr Lounds: By us selling it, we have to nominate it. Even when Bidfood sells you something, it has that it is imported or not. If you get basa fillets from them, it says 'basa imp'—that is all it has—so you know where you are running. A restaurant has to maintain its paperwork, as in its invoices: 'I bought this from Bidfood. I bought this from Ingham Road Seafood. I bought this from PFD.' You have to keep those on hand for if the health inspector comes onsite. You normally only get two inspections and they can lob up any time. It is not an appointment, whereas Safe Food Queensland is an appointment where they ring up and say, 'In two weeks time we're in Townsville. We're doing 10 shops. Be prepared.'

Mr HART: What happens if a restaurant or retailer can buy local seafood today but they cannot buy it tomorrow but they still want to sell it? Do they climb up and change the sign?

Mr Lounds: First, we would come back and just run it on barramundi. For everything else, the unfortunate thing is that it is most likely going to be imported for a lot of things. We have an abundant supply of local Queensland prawns and we have an abundant supply of Queensland barramundi but we do not have an abundant supply of Queensland coral trout and we do not have an abundant supply of red throat emperor. It is a seasonal thing. The unfortunate thing is, especially with the coral trout, that the fishermen have this mentality—so we have been our own worst enemies—that so much of it comes in live and it is exported.

As someone said, two years ago at the start of COVID China stopped taking in live coral trout and there was a backlash of anything Chinese. In particular, in my shop I had natural squid rings but they were a product of China. It was clearly marked 'product of China'. I had two people on the one day say, 'I'm not going to buy that,' so then I had to find and source an Australian squid ring that was diced and sliced so now I get that out of Victoria and I sell that. There was a backlash in the retail sector. The restaurants and takeaways will get kudos for promoting Australian, but people will walk away and not go there if they are selling imported.

Mr Partland: I think the onus has to go back to some of those places. As a body, we can give all the information we like of where it is from—be it imported, local or whatever. We have to show where it is from. We can show where it is from. They need to step up and say, 'Yes, it's imported,' or 'Yes, it's local.' Like I said before, the places that want to succeed and then do succeed already do it.

Mr HART: That was my next question. A lot of places do that. With Coffin Bay oysters, for instance, you see those on menus all over the place. Why is it, then, that we do not see restaurants saying that it is Asian bass that they are selling on their menu? Is it because they do not want to put it on their menu?

Mr Partland: They probably do not want to put it out there that it is on their menu.

Mr HART: Now we are going to force them to put that out there. If this bill passes, there may be some consequences—and, again, I am just being a devil's advocate here. I do not disagree with

what you are saying. I just see there may be some real pushback from the industry when it does find out this could happen, and the practicality of actually doing it could be a major issue.

Mr Lounds: We as a retail sector had to do it, so what the bloody hell is wrong with them doing it?

Mr HART: Yes, but—

Mr Lounds: If we want to sell stuff, we have to specify where it all comes from.

Mr Partland: And proud of it.

Mr HART: Don't get me wrong, Col. I am with you, but you are doing something where you have a truckload of it or a bucket load of it, whereas the restaurant is doing something on a plate. It could be a bigger problem for the restaurant industry—

Mr Lounds: But if they only put it on their menu. Let us get realistic here. Who is really going to see the 'I' or the 'Imp' behind the barramundi? The odd person will. What they are going to see is a print-up with a beautiful big highlighted 'barramundi in orange glazed sauce'. It will say 'Imp', but we are asking them to do that just to be accountable. It is the same way as you present anything. Who is that on my name plate? First, you see my name and you don't really see the rest of the shit. It is the same thing with them. You are going to highlight 'barramundi in orange glazed sauce' in big print with a little 'Imp', but we will have taken the first step forward.

Mr HART: I agree, and I will be the devil's advocate again. For the restaurant that makes a seafood basket, who is going to decide that they have reached their 75 per cent and they are not 74 per cent of prawns, oysters?

Mr Partland: It can be 40 per cent. It can be 30 per cent Australian. It depends how much you put in there. That is a sliding scale.

Mr HART: Are we just overcomplicating things at the end of the day? That is what worries me. When you tend to overcomplicate things, nothing happens.

Mr Partland: It is no different in wine. When they sell wine they say it is from Marlborough or from the Coonawarra. It might be from Wynns, but they do not know Wynns. They say, 'I'll buy that wine; it's from the Coonawarra. I'll buy that sav blanc; I know New Zealand is good—the Marlborough.' The name on it is irrelevant.

Mr HART: It is good when you have a good name—Coffin Bay oysters or Marlborough wine—but if you have a bad name, you can see that people do not—

Mr McDONALD: Like Asian?

Mr HART: No, I wasn't going to say that! A lot of restaurants will not want to do that. Have you taken this up with your end users to see how they feel about this? What has the feedback been?

Mr Partland: A restaurateur will sit down with me or Col. If he is going to put something on his menu, he will say, 'What's the availability like?' I will say, 'Listen, it is no use putting Coffin Bay oysters on in December because they are going to spawn. There are not going to be any.' With barra I will say, 'If you want fresh barra when barra season is closed, we will have to go to a farm product.' I use their product. It is a great product. I tell my customers: 'I can do this all year around.' If you will inform the restaurants, they will ring and ask what is available. 'If it goes pear-shaped in scallops, we can go to an imported one, to a Tassie Roe On or whatever.' If you have options, they will make the decision: 'Okay, I don't want to change my menu weekly.' Now with most of the menus you can just click and it is just on a screen. It is not as bad as doing it on a menu in a whole big cover.

Mr Bade: I do not think we are asking anyone to change the names. I am not asking anybody to label it as 'Asian seabass' on their menu. They are still getting away with using 'barramundi', which they probably should not, but all we are asking is to stipulate: 'Yes, we are calling it barramundi, because that is what the fish species is called here in Australia, but it is imported barramundi.' People can still make the decision and say, 'I think barramundi is a good fish but I know this one is imported. Am I going to pay top dollar on the menu for it or am I happy to eat it but at a reduced price because I know it is an imported product?' It gives people the option to make a choice.

Mr SMITH: One issue the member for Burleigh might be touching on is: if this bill becomes law and somebody does not stipulate on their menu, there is going to be a penalty. The first penalty is about \$137 and if there is a second infringement the penalty is \$689—whether that is in general, where they have not said it for one particular fish, or whether it is on each species that is not accurately

recorded. In your mind, what is a suitable, commonsense penalty that the industry would propose upon a restaurant that deliberately did not put the symbols on their menus or keep up to date with the symbols on their menus?

Mr Partland: That is a very good question. We are still in COVID, where we are supposed to wear masks. It is very hard to police something like that with fines for businesspeople. I think it would be a time thing. I do not think it needs to be a monetary thing to start with. I do not think it needs to be a major cost or a major fine to them. It could be a bit of media about 'Joe Bloggs' restaurant'. Once the media gets hold of something, that some place is selling something, it is a pretty big penalty.

Mr SMITH: Unfortunately, as you have probably noticed, the state government cannot control the media! I understand what you are saying.

Mr Partland: There is a pretty big penalty just in the local area without it being financial. Word gets around pretty quick.

Mr SMITH: I guess that is the hard thing for us as legislators and for you: what is the right balance? We do not want to go around fining and crippling businesses but we also do not want them to say, 'Well, the fine's not worth that much so I will run the gauntlet' and play the system a little bit. Col or Tim, do you have any further comments?

Mr Bade: I would love to think that everyone is honest and does the right thing, but we all know that is not how it works. We would not have jails and we would not have criminals if that were the case. I think you will find that 95 per cent of businesses will adopt it and will do the right thing or will at least be trying to do the right thing. They might make a mistake. They might forget: 'Oops, these scallops have changed season. Now we are on the imported product,' and it takes a month until they change their menu. That is going to happen, but at the moment there is nothing to stop that happening every day of the week. They are not breaking any law currently. They are not doing anything wrong.

I think it is about having something there that at least gets people thinking about doing it. The good operators will do it. They will like to see more dishes on their menu than not have 'Australian product' next to it, especially if that is what they are going for in their marketing ploy. If they are trying to market that they use local produce, they will want to have no 'I's against their product where they can. I think the majority will adopt it and take it on.

Mr HART: That just triggered something in my mind. That is a very good answer. What if instead of or supplementary to this we actually had one indicator on the menu that said, 'I declare that everything is locally imported,' or 'I am a restaurant that tells you this stuff and other people do not have to do that.' Would that help? Do you know what I mean?

Mr Partland: Yes, something like 'my menu supports local industry'?

Mr HART: I am just thinking if the menu had something like the 'Australia' mark that said 'We support Australian'. So, 'We have identified on our menu "imported" and "not imported" but then some other restaurants chose not to do that at all.' I personally would go to a restaurant that told me that, because I would like to pick it. I may not go to another restaurant that does not tell me that.

Mr McDONALD: Like country of origin compliant?

Mr Bade: You have hit the nail right on the head. It is about information. You have been given the information that the restaurant you have chosen to go to supports local produce. It is the same as labelling on the menu. It is the information.

Mr HART: Is that an idea we perhaps should be thinking about?

Mr Bade: It is the information. We cannot miss that. It is giving people the choice and the information that they can then make the decision: 'I am happy with imported,' or 'I'd rather not eat that tonight because I want Australian product when I eat XYZ seafood.'

Mr Partland: On a sit-down restaurant menu, there would not be too many other things on the menu—beef, chicken or whatever—that are imported. Really, the only things on there are going to be the seafood component of that menu.

Mr McDONALD: Tim, I am just picking up the submission from the Australian Barramundi Farmers Association. The point is made that 50 per cent of people do not realise that that is not Australian barramundi in the marketplace, so the idea of a voluntary scheme is not working. What are your thoughts?

Mr Bade: Definitely not. It is because barramundi is such an Australian name. Everybody just assumes—well, 50 per cent or more of the public—when they hear the name 'barramundi' that that is an Australian product. They know that it lives in the wild throughout all of Northern Australia. It is

an iconic fish; it is an iconic sportfish. People already have this preconceived notion in their mind that when they hear 'barramundi' it is Australian; it has come out of Australian waters. It is slightly different than some of the other seafood species in that the name in itself is so iconic. A scallop is a scallop. They occur naturally off the coast of Queensland and in many other parts of Australia as well as overseas, but with scallop people do not naturally just say, 'Right, that is Australian' straight off the bat. Barramundi is a bit of a hard one, but definitely a lot of people do not have any clue that the bulk of what is so-called barramundi in restaurants is actually not Australian product.

Mr McDONALD: Do you guys market into the Northern Territory, where this scheme is in place?

Mr Bade: We do not market in the Northern Territory, no.

Mr Lounds: It comes the other way.

Mr McDONALD: Tim, you mentioned the capacity for Queensland to have more aquaculture or barramundi and areas for such farming. Could you expand on that to give us some sense of the scope for expansion?

Mr Bade: The scope is massive. We are ever improving the way that we grow barramundi. Our productivity and the growth rates that we can achieve are always improving. Geographically there are a lot of great areas within Queensland. Regulation obviously is a hurdle. The GBR makes it a lot harder in Queensland than it is in other states to farm barramundi or any fish, prawns et cetera. There is a massive amount of expansion potential there. We have seen it in the prawn industry for aquaculture. We have some massive farms that have just come into Queensland. We have three major producers here in Queensland that are all in expansion phase, including ourselves. It is about having the market there. We cannot grow the industry if the market is not there. Otherwise, we just do everybody out of a dollar. Everybody goes broke because we have all this product and there is not enough market there to sustain what we are producing.

Mr KATTER: You really just answered my question. I asked earlier about supply. My understanding is that we were a net exporter of seafood but now we are a net importer of seafood. The question was asked, 'Can we handle any more supply?' I would have thought there would be a lot of capacity to expand aquaculture in the future.

Mr Bade: There definitely is, but it is about that competition from a cheaper product that has been incorrectly labelled as barramundi. We cannot in Australia produce barramundi for anywhere near what it can be produced for overseas. If you took away all of our environmental regulations, if we did not have to pay people a reasonable wage for a reasonable day's work et cetera, then definitely we could grow it tomorrow. It is about having that differentiation. While food service can still get away with bringing in imported product and labelling it barramundi—not giving the consumer that information—it is hard for us to command the price that we need to to make expansion viable and profitable for the people who put the money into these farms, because it costs a lot of money to run a barra farm. They are a live product: it is 365 days a year, 24 hours a day to keep them alive.

Mr KATTER: In terms of the risks with imported seafood, what is some of the industry talk? What are some bad stories from overseas? What is the risk?

Mr Bade: The big ones are rampant use of antimicrobials, antibiotics, as a treatment—basically, a constant treatment rather than a disease treatment. That is not practised in Australian aquaculture. Fish have to be completely antimicrobial free for any point of sale. Disease is a big risk to our Australian industry. With fresh product coming in, especially when it still has the head on and still has viscera—gut and gills—that is a major biosecurity risk. There has been work done by the Australian Barramundi Farmers Association that has identified that biosecurity measures at a federal level are not adequate in keeping out foreign disease, as we know. That is a real risk. We saw it with the white spot in the prawns. It is only a matter of time, if we keep bringing in fresh product without some more regulation, that this will impose an issue on our Australian industry and could cripple the industry for us.

Mr HART: Is mercury still a big problem?

Mr Bade: Mercury has never been an issue in barra, to my knowledge. Barramundi are not a bioaccumulator, even in the wild environment. They are not a fish that is around for years and years or even one that eats heaps of small fish over their life span and then accumulates mercury. There is definitely nothing in the industry. It is a myth around barramundi. We hear it as an association body quite frequently. It becomes another one of those grabs by the health influencers et cetera that say, 'Fish is bad. Mercury, mercury.' The retailers would know more than I do, but the large pelagic fish can have issues with it—shark and things like that. To my knowledge there is no issue whatsoever with mercury in barra.

Mr SMITH: This is probably just for soundness of mind. Would it be fair to say that this bill is really about protecting that premium catch? We have spoken a lot about barramundi and Spanish mackerel. Is it about making sure those iconic fish or brands, if you like, are protected in terms of their premium cost, whereas no-one is worrying about imported bream or anything like that? Is it fair to say that this is about protecting that premium catch that is that \$45 bit of food on the plate?

Mr Lounds: That is one thing—you are right—but it is giving people the option. It is letting the person know. In our retail shops Mark and I have to let the people know. All we are asking for is that someone else selling food has to do the same thing. As Robbie said just then, when you invoice a product to a restaurant, it is marked 'imported'. If something goes out and it is imported, it is specified. If I buy it from Bidfood or PFD, it is specified. That part of the chain is already accounted for; it is just the next part. At point of plate we want the punter to know what is on his plate. When it is covered with his sauce and everything else, what is he eating? Is he eating Australian or is he eating something from an overseas country? We are not even asking to tell them which country it is coming from—imported, a blanket.

Mr Partland: I think we assume that it is towards the premium. I think it is across the board. In relation to the squid tubes, if they are imported they should say imported. If the prawns are imported, they should say imported. No, it is definitely not just the coral trout, the barra et cetera; there is a lot more to it. It needs to be the whole lot.

Mr Bade: It is across the board. It is just giving people that choice. I think the retail guys here would tell you that people are still buying retail products out of their shops. They make that conscious decision, whether it is a price point or that is the product they want and if it is not available locally they still buy it. They have made that conscious decision, 'X is imported, but I am still happy to take that home because I want to eat that tonight.' They have made the decision and no-one has tried to fool them. They have consciously made that decision.

Mr Partland: Do not get me wrong: some of the imported products are really good. The scallops from Japan are really good—they are like our scallops—but we let them know they are imported. We do not even tell them that they are from Japan. They are really good.

CHAIR: There being no further questions, I thank you. We have no questions on notice. Thank you very much for coming and speaking with us today. We appreciate the time you have taken out from your businesses to do this. As I have said, face-to-face chats are very highly valued by members of parliament. Thank you once again. I declare this session closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.04 pm.