




Speech By
Christopher Whiting

MEMBER FOR BANCROFT

Record of Proceedings, 28 November 2023

**FISHERIES LEGISLATION (SPANISH MACKEREL AND BAR ROCKCOD)
AMENDMENT DECLARATION**

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

 **Mr WHITING** (Bancroft—ALP) (5.44 pm): Before I make my contribution on this disallowance motion I want to congratulate the Brisbane Blaze women's and men's sides who both won the JDH Hockey One League over the weekend. All of Queensland should be proud of their performances. Once again, we have an Olympic sport where the centre of gravity has shifted to Queensland.

Ms Boyd interjected.

Mr WHITING: I am available. At the outset, I say that we will be opposing this motion of disallowance. It is a matter on which the State Development and Regional Industries Committee has spent quite a lot of time and consideration. I believe we have been briefed three times on this matter and we have done two reports on the subordinate legislation regarding Spanish mackerel, including report No. 50. What I have learnt from this body of work by the committee is that science says we should be taking action to protect this fishery. Let's look at the steps demonstrating how we have followed the science on this matter.

The first step was the 2021 assessment of the Spanish mackerel stock and this assessment found the biomass to be between 14 and 27 per cent of unfished levels and most probably about 17 per cent. A biomass of less than 20 per cent is the national trigger to take action to rebuild stocks to a sustainable level. This stock assessment recommended a biological catch of zero tonnes or a full closure of this fishery.

Following this assessment, the next step in following the science was an independent review of the assessment by Dr Neil Klaer, a former CSIRO fisheries scientist prior to any decisions being taken. It was agreed that the data was used appropriately in the 2021 assessment and the assessment model itself was suitable. The reviewer questioned the model setting for the ability for Spanish mackerel as a species to bounce back from fishing pressures. Dr Klaer was unable to support model predictions and future harvest recommendations until this certainty was resolved. In a nutshell, the review points to more work needing to be done.

The reaction of the minister and the department to this assessment and the review was measured and careful. He did all the right things. The minister requested a balanced approach and did not recommend a closure of the fisheries. On 14 September 2022 the following management arrangements were announced to rebuild the Spanish mackerel fishery: two northern seasonal closures of three weeks in October and November each year to protect those sporting aggregations and two southern seasonal closures of three weeks in February and March each year to protect those migrating aggregations; reducing the recreational possession limit from three to one fish per person; a boat limit of two fish per boat carrying two or more recreational fishers; and reducing the total allowable commercial catch from 578 tonnes to 165 tonnes. As we have already heard, they usually catch about 270 tonnes a year. What we have seen is a balanced reaction, but it shows we are listening carefully to the science.

The next step in how we followed the science is a review of that 2021 assessment by the seafood industry itself. In June 2023 the Queensland Seafood Industry Association published an industry funded review of the stock assessment by Dr Simon Hoyle and Mr Alistair Dunn. These stock assessments are highly complex. They involved inherent uncertainties. Different stock assessment scientists will favour different approaches in accounting for such uncertainties. The department has examined this industry funded review.

The steps swing back to the government following the next steps in that. This information from the industry as well as the original 2021 stock assessment, Dr Klaer's review and the departmental response were presented to a body called the independent Sustainable Fisheries Expert Panel. This independent panel commented that while Dr Klaer's findings were justified, the department's response was defensible.

Given this, the independent panel considered that the most responsible way forward is to accept the stock assessment as the most credible scenario and make management decisions accordingly. Let me repeat that: the independent panel considered that the most responsible way forward is to accept the stock assessment as the most credible scenario and make those decisions accordingly. The east coast Spanish mackerel harvest strategy identifies that the next full stock assessment will be undertaken in 2026-27, but the government and the department will bring forward the next stock assessment to early 2025 and by then the Spanish mackerel fishery will have benefited from those five seasonal closures which will aid in rebuilding the stock.

The future steps in following the science show that the government will keep taking careful and considered actions. This next full stock assessment in 2025 will be able to incorporate interim outputs from a new important study—the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, FRDC, research project which is currently underway. This is a four-year project with a total cost of more than \$1 million focusing on four key areas of research for east coast Spanish mackerel. I want to talk about one part of that research—that is, investigate a cutting-edge genetic technique called close-kin mark-recapture, or CKMR, to obtain a fishery independent estimate of population abundance. That technique estimates the absolute abundance of a population based on the number of parent offspring pairs or half-sibling pairs found in those sample individuals. This technique has been used successfully for several species, including southern bluefin tuna and school shark, and is being led in conjunction with the CSIRO.

Once again members can see another step with a careful and considered approach by this government and this minister. That is the careful process of following the science and it is clear to me that there has been thorough consultation on this matter. There is no way to get around that. The committee noted in a report that in 2022 public consultation took place in two stages. The first round sought to determine stakeholder preferences on possible management measures to rebuild the stock back to a sustainable biomass level. Port visits with dedicated commercial Spanish mackerel fishers were held in Cairns, Townsville and Mooloolaba. The second round of consultation sought to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to have their say on rebuilding options and a draft harvest strategy which was developed using feedback from the first round of consultation. This year's parliamentary estimates also covered Spanish mackerel, as did the 2022 estimates process. Again, this House and its members have had a lot of opportunity to examine this matter and to have their say on this matter.

In conclusion, to put it simply, there is a fisheries stock that through a stock assessment process is estimated to be below the 20 per cent target. The government takes action but not until after a diligent review and public consultation and engagement. A decision is reached that allows the fisheries to remain open while allowing the stock to build. I thoroughly believe that this is an example of good policy processes in action with enough evidence to show that the government has enough facts to justify its decisions. With regard to this disallowance motion and after all of the information that has been presented to date and the raft of documents that are publicly available on this matter, I have no hesitation in opposing this motion. While I have been talking I have heard the interjections from down the back. I say to those members that you cannot use politics to resolve a scientific problem. When science presents you uncomfortable facts, you cannot wipe them away with a political bludgeon. I say this to the member for Traeger: it is not ideology or appeasements that drive this process; it is science and it is a concern for the sustainability of these fisheries into the future for not only this generation but the countless generations that are to come after us. I need to point out what happened to the cod fisheries off Newfoundland to show what happens when we get it wrong. As I said, I have no hesitation in opposing this motion.