

**MARINE PRODUCE AUSTRALIA — SALTWATER BARRAMUNDI AQUACULTURE BUSINESS**

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**HON KEN BASTON (Mining and Pastoral)** [5.16 pm]: I rise this evening to talk about Marine Produce Australia, an aquaculture business in the Kimberley that I visited recently. For some six years now it has been producing the iconic saltwater barramundi. The producer is based at Cone Bay in the Buccaneer Archipelago in the Kimberley region, which is some 100 kilometres north of Derby as the crow flies. It is one of the largest barramundi farms in the market and it is very well known for its quality, its reliability and the size of its fish. The investment to date is some \$40 million, and of course, it plans to produce a steady two million kilograms a year of fish and fillets by 2013, building up to a further five million kilograms a year. This operation has gone from its first harvest in 2006 of 1 700 kilograms of mixed-size barramundi to 440 000 kilograms of whole fish and fillets in June 2009. The 2010 harvest outlook is in the order of 620 tonnes, and it is hoping it will rise to some 1 800 tonnes by 2012.

Cone Bay barramundi was recently granted recognition under the sustainable Australian seafood assessment criteria and the Australian Conservation Foundation's healthy oceans program. I believe it is the first aquaculture farm in Australia to achieve that. That is a very meritorious award for any business to achieve, and I congratulate Marine Produce Australia on that.

I was fortunate to visit the operation a couple of weeks ago when it was harvesting. The operation is located on a small island in Cone Bay. It is totally isolated. There is no road to it. The only way to get there is by boat or seaplane, because the little island is not big enough to have an airstrip. Although it is quite isolated, one could say it is an idyllic position, which it certainly seemed to be in the short time I was there. I thought it was absolutely beautiful. However, its isolation causes problems in the sense that everything has to come in by ship, and, of course, all the staff have to go out by boat or be flown out. Using a float plane is a fairly expensive business.

This Marine Produce operation is always looking at new technology in developing its infrastructure and product, so much so that it has been developing special nets. There are a lot of predators in the waters such as crocodiles; birds, from the top of the water; and other fish that will eat the barramundi when they are fairly small. The very small fish are eaten very quickly if they swim through the cage. The cages are eight metres deep and made out of a brass structure, which will last a little longer than others. These cages can hold up to 30 000 fish, which weigh three kilograms each. While the fish are still small, the cages can hold up to 200 000 fish. The program requires constant drafting; in other words, when the fish go into the tanks as fingerlings, they must be consistently drafted. The fish are pumped through with fish graders and drafted by size; otherwise they will eat each other. It is not uncommon to see little fish swimming around with other fish in their mouths. If it were my business, I would be very worried about that, but I was reassured that that is a normal part of aquaculture. But that drafting process must be done consistently to ensure the fish are protected and kept in with fish of the same size. The fingerlings are supplied by the Challenger Institute of Technology in Fremantle. Marine Produce Australia is also looking at possibly replicating that Cone Bay operation in Broome in the future.

The fish are like some other fish in that when they weigh six to seven kilograms, they change sex from a male to a female. The fish that were being harvested the other day all weighed probably four to six kilograms, but an occasional fish around the 14 kilogram mark was turned back and sent to Challenger TAFE for breeding purposes.

Another issue Marine Produce faces in Cone Bay is the fact that its lease is for only a year. As anyone in business knows, if we are investing some \$40 million, the lease needs to have a longer tenure than that. From discussions I have had with the Minister for Fisheries, legislation will be introduced further down the track that will deal with that. It is very important that Marine Produce's tenure be extended.

I have to say that, after sampling the produce for lunch, which was cooked in breadcrumbs and baked in the oven in a very similar way to the way my mother used to cook it, the product was superb. I notice other members shaking their heads. They obviously thought I should have suggested the meal might need to be accompanied by a good chardonnay! But it could not because it was a work situation. The potential of this product for the domestic market is huge. I strongly believe that, as more pressure is placed on our wild stock, aquaculture is the way to go in the future. My vision is for a branding of "Cone Bay Barramundi", and even for establishing Cone Bay barramundi fish and chip shops, which will guarantee the quality of the product.

I commend the management of Marine Produce Australia for its operation and vision for the future. I will follow the growth of this operation. I believe that Marine Produce Australia Ltd of Cone Bay is an excellent example of any future aquaculture operation for not only the rest of Western Australia but also Australia as a whole.