

Division 57: Fisheries, \$50 949 000 —

Mr P. Abetz, Chairman.

Mr J.M. Francis, Minister for Fisheries.

Mr B. Mezzatesta, Acting Director General.

Mr D.J. Foster, Deputy Director General.

Mr P. Robinson, Chief Financial Officer.

Mr K. Van Dongen, Executive Director, Corporate Services.

Dr B. Wise, Supervising Scientist.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIRMAN: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. It is the intention of the Chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. It will greatly assist Hansard if members can give these details in preface to their question.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee rather than ask that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by Friday, 3 June 2016. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice with the Clerk's office.

The member for Bassendean.

[11.20 am]

Mr D.J. KELLY: I refer to fisheries management outlined on page 626 of the *Budget Statements*. Firstly, I refer the minister to the proposal to trial the reintroduction of fish traps along the coast off Carnarvon earlier this year. Firstly, in the minister's view, was it wise for the Department of Fisheries to endorse the trial prior to it going out for public comment? Secondly, where is the working party that was subsequently set up to deal with this issue up to and what is the time frame for making some decision?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will ask the acting director general, Mr Mezzatesta, to comment on that.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: With respect to the first question, I do not know that the department necessarily endorsed the proposal. As I understand it, the proposal came to us from the commercial sector. It is our responsibility, upon receiving those sorts of requests from industry, to then go out and consult, so I think that is the process we are in. Rather than endorsing it, we just put that position out for the public consultation process. In terms of the second part of the question, I think Mr Foster is better placed to advise on where that process is at.

Mr D.J. Foster: As members would be aware, the department appointed an independent mediator to work with both the recreational and commercial sectors on this issue and to develop with them a harvest strategy. That work is ongoing. The group has already met. We anticipate an outcome around September this year.

Mr D.J. KELLY: The proposal that went out for public comment clearly had in it a statement that the fisheries department supported the trial. One of the most controversial aspects is that the proposal was put out for public comment with the clear statement that it was supported by Fisheries. Is the department not aware of that?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will ask Mr Mezzatesta to comment on that.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Certainly, there may have been a comment in the paper that went out for consultation that we were supportive of a trial, because it would have been interesting to see what happened in the trial process, but I do not think that would equate to us necessarily endorsing the proposal.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Can the minister give a guarantee that the use of fish traps will not be endorsed if the government is re-elected in March 2017?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I cannot give that guarantee, because it is an independent assessment process. To be frank, I have seen two sides of the argument. I am not sure whether Dr Wise wants to talk about this, but one of the arguments I have heard from the commercial sector is that the use of fish traps would mean that there is less waste from the catch. There is a finite number of fish, and obviously there would be less waste because sharks would not be eating half fish and those kinds of things, and that would mean that, if there is an exact amount that

commercial fishers can catch, the net result would be that more fish would be left for the recreational sector. I do not know that it is a black-and-white issue, but, at the end of the day, it is an independent assessment process, so I cannot give the member that guarantee.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I refer to the shark mitigation line item in the table of spending changes on page 623. Can the minister give details of all the shark mitigation projects or measures that the government currently funds or plans to fund between now and the forward estimates, including the nature of the project, its budget, its time frame and who will deliver the project or measure?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: If I had my answers to possible parliamentary questions from last week, I would have been able to provide that information for the member on the spot, but I do not have that folder with me.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am happy for the minister to provide that by supplementary information.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will ask the acting director general to elaborate, but we can get supplementary information.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Firstly, I will make a statement that not all shark hazard funding is necessarily run through our department; it is split between the Department of Fisheries and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, so I will provide commentary only on what is in the Department of Fisheries' budget. We now have funding in our budget to deliver around three key projects as part of the shark hazard mitigation program. The first is the maintenance of the SharkSmart website and all the communication tools that sit around the provision of information to the public. We will continue to use Surf Life Saving Western Australia to tweet both sightings and detections and we will continue to put that information on the SharkSmart website. We will continue to work with agencies such as Surf Life Saving and local governments to make sure that appropriate signage is put up when a shark has been detected or sighted in an area.

The second key area, or project, if you want to put it that way, that we will be delivering on is the maintenance of the shark monitoring network. We will maintain the 25 satellite receivers that are in place mainly in the metropolitan area but also in some key areas in the south west. We will also continue to undertake opportunistic tagging around the state as part of the shark monitoring receiver network. We will also have some funding to operationalise any response in the event that there is another incident involving a user of the water. They are our three key areas.

[11.30 am]

Mr D.J. KELLY: The budget speech states that there is \$4.9 million, I think, in total for shark mitigation. How much of that is in the Fisheries budget and how much of it is in Premier and Cabinet's budget?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Fisheries has two components—capital and recurrent. There is \$495 000 capital funding for the coming financial year and then \$75 000 capital each year thereafter. That is to look after the network array. We have just over \$1 million per annum in the next four years to run the three projects I outlined earlier.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: On top of that, there are also obviously the shark barriers.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Is that out of the Fisheries budget or out of Premier and Cabinet?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: That is out of Premier and Cabinet.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Just for clarity, on those three areas—I suppose responding to shark incidents is the fourth—does the department have any contracts with external providers for that? The minister spoke about Surf Life Saving, but does the department have any contracts with those people or does it just liaise with them?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: We do not have any contracts with Surf Life Saving; it is very much a partnership arrangement in that scenario. The only contracts we would have in the shark hazard space would be around the satellite contract for the receivers to tweet the data. All other work is done by Department of Fisheries officers.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Could the minister provide me, by way of supplementary information, with the details of any contracts with external providers?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: With anything to do with shark mitigation?

Mr D.J. KELLY: Yes, that is right.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I suspect it just comes down to the data through the Marsat network or Iridium or something like that for the satellite service. However, I agree to provide by way of supplementary information to the member for Bassendean any details about external contracts the Department of Fisheries may have in the area of shark mitigation.

[*Supplementary Information No A11.*]

Mr D.J. KELLY: Any current contracts or contracts that are planned across the forward estimates? The minister mentioned the shark monitoring network. How much is budgeted to monitor that network across the forward

estimates? Can the minister give a guarantee that all receivers in that network will be operational across the four years?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: As part of the allocations in this budget, there is an upgrade of the receivers. Someone here will know more about it than I, but obviously it will detect only a tagged shark that has a unique transmission. My understanding is that it has about a 500-metre range to a receiver, give or take a little. A new generation of receivers transmit in real time through the satellite network and then obviously connect back to the end user through the webpage or Twitter feed or whatever it might be. My understanding is that those receivers are being upgraded to the new generation receivers. Can I give a guarantee that one of them will not fail? No; one of them might fail but we are investing in the latest generation transceivers.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Some of the receivers transmit in real time and some of them just collect the data. I think there are 25 real-time receivers; am I right?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Correct; I think that is right

Mr D.J. KELLY: Tell me if I am wrong. Will the department be increasing the number of real-time receivers or is it just upgrading them to a higher level?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: My understanding is that they will be upgraded to deal with technology—to a higher level and to be more robust and all of the things that go with it.

Mr D.J. KELLY: There will still be only 25 real-time transmitters.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Correct.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I refer again to the spending changes on page 623 and shark hazard mitigation and I note additional spending on shark enclosures. Can the minister give some advice as to how the existing enclosures in, I think, Albany, Dunsborough, Busselton and Coogee fared during the storm over the weekend?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I saw a media report that showed that one of them had broken or had to be repaired. I am not sure which one it is and I am not sure whether anyone else here has information on that. They are the property of the local councils. I cannot say; I know what I saw in the media.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I think all of those enclosures, except for the one at Coogee, were partly funded by the state government. I thought the minister would have been monitoring their progress. Is the government not aware of how they fared during that major storm over the weekend?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: As has been mentioned, they belong to the Department of the Premier and Cabinet for the funding allocation for part of the investment on them. I have not had any reports back to me as yet—it was only 48 hours ago—as to the state of those particular shark enclosures. I did see the end of a report on a TV network that one of them had suffered some damage, but I am not sure which one; it was the end of the transmission. I will find out for the member for Bassendean and get some information. I am sure someone will let me know today anyway, regardless of estimates.

Mr D.J. KELLY: By way of supplementary information, is the minister willing to provide us with that information? The Minister for Emergency Services is looking a bit baffled as to why I would ask this question. Given the amount of public money that has gone into these enclosures, I would have thought that the storm on the weekend was a pretty good test as to how they would fare. Is the minister prepared to give us by way of supplementary information a report on how they have fared?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: It is not really the Department of Fisheries' responsibility, but I will get someone to bring the member for Bassendean up to speed today on it. I cannot really do that as supplementary information because it is not the department's contribution, but I will find out for him and get back to him.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Is it difficult having the issue of shark mitigation split between the fisheries department, which I assume has a high level of skill on these issues, and the Department of the Premier and Cabinet? I constantly have this trouble when there are two departments trying to deal with what is supposedly an important issue. I ask a question and I get bounced from one department to the other.

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will endeavour to get the member information by the end of today, even though it may not be the responsibility of the Department of Fisheries. I will find out for him.

Mr D.J. KELLY: When was the last time the Minister for Emergency Services met with the Premier to discuss shark mitigation?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I meet with the Premier all the time and discuss all kinds of things, member for Bassendean.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Has the minister met with the Premier to discuss shark mitigation to make sure we are all singing from the same song sheet?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I meet with the Premier all the time and we discuss all kinds of things, member for Bassendean.

Mr D.J. KELLY: So the minister has met with the Premier and discussed shark mitigation?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I meet with him all the time and we discuss all kinds of things.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Can I assume from that that the minister has not met with the Premier and they have not discussed this issue?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Yes, we have discussed—I am not sure what line item or page the member for Bassendean is on.

Mr C.D. HATTON: I refer to page 623, “Spending Changes”, to do with aquaculture development zones. A lot of community and industry that I talk to are very interested in the aquaculture development zones that the government is setting aside. Can the minister expand on what the government’s intentions are in this area?

[11.40 am]

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I thank the member for his question. When it comes to creating jobs and diversifying the economy, there is obviously a lot of potential within Fisheries to contribute to the state’s economy. As I said last Thursday afternoon in this place, the natural catch has its limitations. It has to be managed on a scientific evidence-based quota so that the amount of fish product in the ocean is taken in a sustainable manner. On top of that, there is an increasing demand for seafood. Especially in some Asian countries, there is an increasing demand for Western Australian seafood, which is a high quality sustainably caught product. The price is also going up. The opportunity to further increase the amount of produce can only come from aquaculture. The government has invested \$1.3 million into establishing investment-ready aquaculture zones to support the large-scale development of aquaculture industries in coastal waters off Western Australia, potentially including the south coast. It has been introduced in a phased schedule. I think it is a very exciting part of what we are doing. It is something that I would like to see more of but certainly it is an area that the state has a massive opportunity to grasp.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I refer to the asset investment program on page 628 of the *Budget Statements*. Can the minister tell us how much has been spent on the Fish Eye information technology system, how many fisheries are now using the system; when will all fisheries be using the system; and does the government think that Fish Eye has achieved what it was designed to do?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will ask the acting director general, Mr Mezzatesta, to elaborate on that. My understanding is that at the moment the take-up has been a little slow amongst commercial fishermen. The feedback that I have is that those who have used it have found that it simplifies their compliance cost.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I think the question initially related to cost. People refer to Fish Eye as a system. I do not think we should refer to it as a system. It is a collection of systems that manage fishery licensing and entitlement. People imagine that this is a thing that we plug into our computer network and it works. It has a number of components. The licensing component of Fish Eye has been in place for three years now. We have transferred the western rock lobster fishery —

Ms M.M. QUIRK: I am having a bit of trouble hearing the acting director general. Could I ask that he speak up?

The CHAIRMAN: The end of the microphones does not pick up the sound; it is the bar at the front. If it is positioned vertically, it picks up the sound better.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: Is that better?

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Marginally.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: I will try to speak a bit louder. The total cost of the development of Fish Eye was \$11.4 million. That included a number of elements. One is the licensing part of our management of licensing and entitlements. That system has been in place since 2013. Within that system we have west coast rock lobster, the largest fishery in WA both in dollar terms and also in numbers. All commercial fishing licences have been run out of that system since 2013. Anyone who engages in commercial fishing, whether they are a licence holder or working as crew on a boat, needs to have a commercial fishing licence. The abalone managed fishery comes within that licensing component.

The other aspect of Fish Eye relates to managing catch or effort information. Within that we have the west coast rock lobster fishery, which is currently able to use that catch-and-effort reporting tool. As the minister mentioned earlier, the take-up has not been as high as we would like. It is running at about 20 per cent of returns from fishers that are currently coming in electronically.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Is that for the rock lobster fishery?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: That is correct. In terms of fisher returns, the rock lobster fishery generates around 30 000 returns a year. The fact that we have 20 per cent coming in is an improvement but nowhere near where we would like to be. There are lots of reasons why we think people are not taking it up but one of the fundamentals in my view is that it is not mandatory. Fishers can continue to use the old methodology. They can make three phone calls and fill in a logbook telling us what they have caught on a daily basis and mail that in. We are currently working on the catch-and-effort reporting for the marine aquarium fishery, which has some of the more complicated reporting requirements of any fishery in WA. It will go live in terms of catch and effort by midyear and then we will be following with the balance of the fisheries. We hope to have all fisheries in place both in terms of licensing and catch and effort by the middle of next year.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Just on that issue, my understanding was that the commercial fishers would meet half the cost. Is the government in a position to recoup at least half of that \$11.4 million from commercial fishers or will the government be left short?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: The government went into a co-funding arrangement with industry. In terms of fisher contributions, the western rock lobster fishery has now made its share of three annual contributions to the development of Fish Eye. I expect that as other fisheries come in and receive the benefits of that delivery, they will also contribute their share. The western rock lobster fishery would be paying approximately \$400 000 out of a total industry contribution of about \$540 000. That fishery is in and it is making its contribution. I think the government will recover the industry component.

Mr D.J. KELLY: By when?

Mr B. Mezzatesta: If we assume that all fisheries are in by June next year, those fisheries that have transitioned in that period will then start paying the following year. The agreement was that they would pay back over 10 years.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I refer to the significant issues impacting the agency on page 624 of the *Budget Statements*. The fourth dot point refers to environmental fluctuations and major climatic events being a significant issue. How many staff and how much in dollar terms are dedicated in the department to studying the impact of climate change on WA fisheries?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will have to refer the question to the acting director general. During the 2010–11 summer, one of the first significant marine heatwaves that we are aware of hit Western Australia. Over the following two summers there were above-average water temperatures. We know that that has had an impact on particular fisheries down the Western Australian coast. As to the level of resources within the department to study these things, I will have to refer that to the acting director general.

Mr B. Mezzatesta: The question related to what dedicated resources we have to look into climate change. The department does not have dedicated resources that look into the issue of climate change. There are up to 100 individuals in our research division. As part of their normal role, they are always looking at the impact of all sorts of external factors on fish stocks and where the stocks are travelling.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Over the last 12 months, how much of that group's resource has been put into studying the impacts of climate change? Has it done any studies?

[11.50 am]

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: As the acting director general outlined, it is effectively a key part of the scientific research in the department. I will ask Dr Brent Wise, the supervising scientist, to go through some of the research they have done.

Dr B. Wise: For example, one of the species that was affected during the heatwave was scallops in Denham Sound. Limited fishing on scallops in Denham Sound has resumed for the first time since the heatwave. Research on that has demonstrated that that species is fully recovered, so fishing resumed normally for the first time in 2015. For the scallop fishery in northern Shark Bay in 2016, although that stock has been monitored and is showing signs of recovery, it is still in the recovery phase. Scallop fishing in the Abrolhos Islands has been monitored and remains closed since the heatwave. Capture of tiger prawns in the Exmouth Gulf has increased over the last few years, which the department has been monitoring, and that fishery is now considered fully recovered. There are a number of other examples if the member would like me to go through them.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Thanks for that advice. All those projects are work that has been done after the event. On an ongoing basis, what resources is the department putting into studying the impact or potential impact of climate change? Given it is a significant issue, even though the words "climate change" have not been used —

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I am happy to use the words "climate change".

Mr D.J. KELLY: I am glad the minister is; not everyone in his government thinks it is real. What resources is the government allocating to monitoring the ongoing impact of climate change on fisheries?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will undertake to provide the member for Bassendean, by way of supplementary information, more detail on what resources the Department of Fisheries allocates for assessing the impact of climate change on Western Australian fisheries.

[*Supplementary Information No A12.*]

Mr D.J. KELLY: There have been recent reports about coral bleaching at various reefs off the coast of Western Australia. What work is the department doing on that issue or would another department be dealing with that issue?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: It is my understanding that the Department of Parks and Wildlife is looking at that, rather than Fisheries, because, obviously, it is an environmental issue.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Whether reefs live or die actually does have an impact; even I understand those impacts.

Ms M.M. QUIRK: Is that not where fish live?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Fish live in my fish tank too, member for Girrawheen.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Is that not an issue that the department is following? Does the department leave that to the Department of Parks and Wildlife?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I think there is a watching brief on it, but certainly individual responsibility belongs to the Department of Parks and Wildlife.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I refer to the first dot point on page 624 and the implementation of the Aquatic Resources Management Bill 2015. How many fisheries does the government plan to transition into the new regime in each financial year from 2016–17 into all the forward estimates?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: Assuming that the legislation is passed this year—hopefully it will be because we all support it—the implementation, or the transition, is being managed by Mr Foster. I will ask him to elaborate on the plan as it is at the moment.

Mr D.J. Foster: There are in excess of 40 fisheries in the state. At this stage there is no shortlist of which ones will be transitioning and when, so all fisheries will transition under the new arrangements once they have been implemented. We do not yet have a set gazettal date because, as the member knows, this bill has not passed through Parliament. It is certainly unlikely to occur before 1 January 2018. From that point, we will start transitioning fisheries on a progressive basis under the new management regime.

Mr D.J. KELLY: Are any additional resources allocated to the department across the forward estimates to assist in that transition process?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: The advice I have is that because it is a gradual transition and the department is not doing them all in one big hit, it does not require any additional resources. It is within the current capability.

Mr D.J. KELLY: I assume that pearling will come under the new legislation. Can I assume that that will be a priority fishery, or not?

Mr J.M. FRANCIS: I will ask Mr Foster to provide further information on which ones they are looking at.

Mr D.J. Foster: As I mentioned earlier, the department has an implementation team. We are working through all the requirements of the new legislation. Of course, we are uncertain about its final shape, and because the bill has not yet passed through Parliament, there is no fixed implementation date. We are working with all industry groups to try to manage the transition program as smoothly as possible. There is no fixed view on which fishery will come first. We will do that within the current capability of the aquatic management team in my division. That is the normal business we engage in with individual fisheries—working with interest groups to try to manage the settings for each fishery. As we go into the new legislative environment, we will continue those discussions.

The appropriation was recommended.

[12 noon]