HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

THURSDAY 20TH SEPTEMBER 2012

FISHING SUPER TRAWLER

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (11:50): I wish to speak to this motion regarding the FV *Margiris* or the *Abel Tasman*, as it has been rebadged. This vessel has been rebadged in commonwealth waters as the FV *Abel Tasman* and is operated by Seafish Tasmania, a joint venture between Seafish Tasmania and Seafish Tasmania Pelagic, and is committed to long-term sustainable fishing in Australian waters. One point has remained constant throughout the super trawler debate: the *Abel Tasman* would only fish in commonwealth waters, those waters being outside the three-mile state limits, thus making it a commonwealth issue and not a state issue and, to spell that out, not a South Australian Labor government issue.

The operator of the FV *Abel Tasman* has met every requirement, abided by existing rules and complied with regulations. As one political commentator states, 'Its only crime was to run into a government in a tight political spot that is looking to attract votes on the back of a populist environmental campaign.' This can be said of the federal and current South Australian Labor governments. The knee-jerk reaction by the federal government has put Australia's reputation as a stable investment country at risk, adding to a growing list of decisions that have penalised investors. As another commentator reports:

Investors already spooked by abrupt decisions and reversals on mining taxes, the carbon tax and live cattle exports now have one more reason to worry about sovereign risk—governments changing the rules after the money has been committed.

The reaction by the federal government has also drawn a lot of criticism, sighting the influence of the Greens.

The Liberal opposition acknowledges and supports sustainable fisheries management and sustainable fisheries practices, and in particular the South Australian commercial and recreational fishing industries. We recognise that the development of the fishing industry in South Australia and a commercial fishery needs to be based on a sound marine science platform. As a result of the federal government's inconsistent approach to policy we have seen 50 employees lose their jobs at Seafish Tasmania, and lose a considerable amount of money as a result of the introduction of the two-year ban on fishing while science is explored. Seafish Tasmania confirmed that it will be looking at compensation, which is expected to be in the tens of millions of dollars.

The state Labor government is happy to use science as an excuse where it sees fit, not having done so when implementing its marine parks policy and also in the debate on the River Murray. The federal Labor government has overreacted and backflipped on policy. The Liberal opposition believes the federal Labor government has not shown respect to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority and the CSIRO.

Some facts about the Small Pelagic Fishery: the *Abel Tasman* is targeting small pelagic fish—redbait, jack mackerel and blue mackerel—and has an 18,000-tonne quota already, which has been transferred from other vessels. No boat size limits apply in the Small Pelagic Fishery or in any fishery managed solely by the commonwealth. The Small Pelagic Fishery is managed by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority under a statutory management plan. The total allowable catch for each species and each zone of a fishery is set annually by AFMA in accordance with the Small Pelagic Fishery harvest strategy, a strategy that was signed off on by the Hon. Tony Burke when minister for agriculture, food and fisheries in 2008 and revised in 2009.

The harvest strategy policy was developed as a direct response to a ministerial direction calling for AFMA to take a science-based approach to setting total allowable catches and effort in commonwealth fisheries. The harvest strategy is based on sound science and recognises the ecologically importance of the species and is precautionary. The harvest strategy requires that research is undertaken into the stock biomass, a fishery-independent stock assessment technique known as the daily egg production method. The objective of the Small Pelagic Fishery harvest strategy was:

The sustainable and profitable utilisation of the small pelagic fishery in perpetuity through the implementation of a harvest strategy that maintains key commercial stocks at ecologically sustainable levels and, within this context, maximises the net economic returns to the Australian community.

The SPF harvest strategy is similar to approaches successfully applied in other large fisheries for small pelagic species, for example, the South Australian sardine fishery, and has been developed to account for key fishery-specific attributes, such as:

recent catches are limited by economic constraints and are considered by the SPF Resource Assessment Group to be below the maximum sustainable level and there is potential for sustainable expansion of the fishery;

SPF species are an important food source for many threatened, endangered and protected species and other species and it is therefore important that the SPF harvest strategy takes into account the ecosystem role of these species; and

small pelagic species are caught in high volumes and have low unit value. Additionally, there are high capital costs associated with the large-scale catching units and specific processing infrastructure required. As a result, fishing operators need to have a heightened efficiency.

But, most importantly, as a result of aiming to achieve this objective, minister Burke signed off on a point that welcomes mid-water trawlers such as the *Abel Tasman* to fish commonwealth waters for small pelagic fish. I quote from the AFMA guidelines: 'There are considerable economies of scale in the fishery and the most efficient way to fish may include large scale factory freezer vessels.'

Commonwealth and South Australian fisheries policy has been well-managed with quotas in place to address overfishing in each fishery. However, quotas have been continually cut by state and commonwealth governments, making commercial fishing in certain fisheries unviable. To make it viable to fish, many quotas have been consolidated into one licence and, as long as the rules do not allow overfishing in any one area, this is seen as a sensible approach to fishing. In the same way that other industries increase size to cut costs and maximise efficiency, so is it sensible that the fishing industry is headed that way.

It is argued it should be encouraged that these quotas be filled with the least amount of cost in order to free up resources for other uses. The proposed operations of the *Abel Tasman* have met all requirements of Australian fisheries policy and the federal environmental protection laws. A strict quota has been set for the Small Pelagic Fishery and the fisheries management arrangements for the fishery have been strategically assessed by the federal environment department on several occasions, most recently in 2012. Quotas are in place in order to manage fisheries and to avoid undesirable flow-on effects of those fisheries on the food web and ecosystem.

Seafish Tasmania has had ranging quotas from 15,000 tonne to 26,000 tonne over the past 12 years, with 18,000 tonne considerably conservative in the scheme of things. The quota assigned to Seafish Tasmania was based on science performed by SARDI—our own scientists—and the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies at the University of Tasmania and reviewed by the CSIRO.

The result was a joint report by several marine scientists confirming that the Small Pelagic Fishery is sustainable and that the quotas set are conservative. There is a strong scientific basis and understanding of what is required of fishery management to protect the food web and broader ecosystem, and dependent fish, bird and marine mammal populations in particular, when conducting a fishery that targets the forage fish in that ecosystem. These requirements include that management be more conservative where there is a more scientific uncertainty about the forage fish or the food web. The harvest strategy for SPF was borrowed heavily from experience gained in the South Australian sardine industry.

Localised depletion is where fishing reduces the abundance of fish in a local area and for a period of time. Several scientists, including representatives from SARDI, CSIRO and the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania, give confidence that food web impacts of the SPF on predators and the SPF species themselves, including through localised depletion, are unlikely.

Under the well-managed guidance of AFMA and PIRSA—and I say PIRSA, not DEWNR—fishing gear is regulated heavily to reduce bycatch and this is no different for the *Abel Tasman*. AFMA has committed to 100 per cent observer coverage to monitor bycatch and other aspects of fishery operations for the factory trawler.

There has been extensive research and sampling conducted on mid-water trawlers such as the *Abel Tasman* by the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies of the University of Tasmania researchers and AFMA observers, with many reports finding that mid-water trawl operations had minimal levels of catch of non-target species.

Stringent bycatch conditions have also been set under the well-managed guidance of AFMA. Fishing gear is regulated heavily to reduce bycatch. AFMA must be informed of all catch landed and verifies this information. If operators are found to have caught more than their quota, strict penalties apply. Small Pelagic Fishery operators must hold quota to cover bycatch of species that are subject to quota management in other commonwealth fisheries.

We do, however, recognise the concern outlined by industries such as the South Australian Sardine Industry Association that there can often be, and I quote from Paul Watson, the executive officer of South Australian sardines, 'a capacity for mistaken identity of species.' Mid-water trawl operations in the Small Pelagic Fishery include ongoing and effective observer coverage to monitor such interactions with seals and dolphins along with strategies that reduce capture and mortality rates.

Voluntary avoidance measures are in effect. The measures are simple: move-on rules that stop fishing and move the vessel to a different location if dolphins are sighted. In addition, SPF vessels are required to use a seal-exclusion device. Voluntary ongoing measures and monitoring assesses excluder devices and manages the ongoing risk of marine mammal interaction and capture. The Australian Fisheries Management Authority also has a dedicated team of enforcement officers and a range of enforcement powers. I note that the federal government has set this ship on its way. We do not oppose the motion.