

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

QUESTION TIME: TUESDAY 27TH OCTOBER 2015

FUR SEALS

The Hon. T.J. STEPHENS (14:51): I seek leave to make a brief explanation before asking the Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation questions about the protection of the Coorong from New Zealand fur seals.

Leave granted.

The Hon. T.J. STEPHENS: The very excellent member for Hammond has brought to my attention that the overpopulation of New Zealand fur seals is beginning to affect the protected area and unique biodiversity of the Coorong. With reports of local bird populations, some which are protected by international bilateral agreements such as JAMBA and CAMBA, being devastated by the presence of the seals, not to mention the destruction of the wetlands protected under the Ramsar agreement, my questions are:

- 1.Does the minister accept that the government's protection of the New Zealand fur seal by the National Parks and Wildlife Act conflicts with the commonwealth's JAMBA, CAMBA and Ramsar agreements?
- 2.Does the government's protection of the New Zealand fur seal under the act prevent the minister from taking action on this issue which is concerning the community?
- 3.What will the minister do to ensure the Coorong and its unique ecosystem remain protected?

The Hon. I.K. HUNTER (Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation, Minister for Water and the River Murray, Minister for Climate Change) (14:52): I thank the Hon. Mr Stephens for his most important questions. The government, of course, is taking very seriously the concerns expressed by the local communities, including fishing organisations and traditional owners, about the impacts of long-nosed fur seals in the Coorong and Lower Lakes area. We obviously have listened to these groups and we are taking action to ensure that any impacts from seal interactions are kept to a minimum.

While the state government understands the concerns expressed by some local Coorong and Lower Lakes communities, we certainly do not support a cull of long-nosed fur seals, and the reason for that is pretty plain: it is based on science and evidence. We know from the best available science, we know from available evidence, that culling would be ineffective. Culled seals would simply be replaced by new seals and the culling would fail to address the impacts being felt by commercial fishers. It would also create welfare and safety issues for seals and for fishers.

Other population management options such as relocation and sterilisation have been proven to be costly and ineffective in other parts of Australia, and we can use the experience of seal interactions and government interventions in

Tasmania as a starting point which show the failure of these management options.

The South Australian government has taken a number of steps to help fishers and local communities mitigate the impacts felt by the presence of long-nosed fur seals. Some of the steps the government has recently taken to help the fishing community include the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources and Department of Primary Industries and Regions SA working closely with the Southern Fishermen's Association on a plan to mitigate interruptions felt by the fishing industry from seal interactions.

This includes the state government investment of \$100,000 into research into fishing gear, methods and deterrent devices. I understand that the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, which is co-funded by the commonwealth and industry, has contributed more money to this project; and now approximately \$260,000 of funding has been secured to investigate alternative fishing gear and practices and to trial deterrent seal devices.

In addition, on 12 September 2015, the government announced that it would waive the 2015-16 licence fees and other charges to provide operators with additional flexibility. These changes include increasing the season length in which hauling nets may be used in Area 1 of the fishery by 106 days, permitting drum nets to be used by all Lakes and Coorong fishery licence holders, and increasing the number of relief days per licence holder from 28 to 90 days.

I am told that the seal deterrents will be trialled in November of this year. Once all the legal obligations and approvals for their use have been met, Rural Business Support, which incorporates Rural Financial Counselling Service SA, has offered to assist fishers with free, independent and confidential financial information and business support. They are also able to refer fishers to other professional service providers, such as personal and social counsellors.

As well as these steps, the government has established a high-level working group to address the issues that have arisen from seal interactions. This working group is made up of representatives from relevant government agencies, local councils, natural resources management boards, environmental NGOs, research institutions and industry groups. The Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority has also been invited to attend this high-level working group.

Alongside these processes, DEWNR continues to work with the Ngarrindjeri community to find appropriate solutions for problems created by seals impacting aspects of the Ngarrindjeri culture. This working group had its second meeting on Thursday 24 September 2015 and progressed the issues surrounding long-nosed fur seals in the Coorong and Lower Lakes area to identify and implement appropriate short and long-term actions.

After the first meeting of the working group, and as a result of the government's efforts to address issues arising from seal interactions, the Mayor of the Coorong council has been reported as saying in the media that he is optimistic that some of these issues will soon be resolved. He is further quoted as saying that the issue is not a 'them and us' scenario: it is an issue that requires all parties coming to the table to work together to put forward and implement workable

solutions, and I am pleased to say that it is happening through the working group right now.

DEWNR continues to monitor the situation and has undertaken a series of seal counts in the Coorong. I am told that DEWNR's most recent count found 22 seals and that this count included the areas in and around Mundoo, Goolwa Barrage, the Murray Mouth and Tauwitchere Barrage. I also understand that the local communities carried out a seal count and that the count showed 45 seals. This count was carried out in the same area as well as on the ocean side of the Coorong and a small part of Lake Alexandrina.

Historically, seals have been hunted in our country to the point of extermination, and the population was more than decimated by the beginning of the 19th century. Since hunting has ceased, the number of long-nosed fur seals in South Australian waters has recovered over the last 100 years or so to an estimated number now of around 100,000 animals spread across the state. This recovery of a state and nationally protected species has brought economic benefits to South Australia through wildlife tourism on Kangaroo Island and the West Coast region. It has also the potential to impact some fish farms and wild catch fisheries, including the Coorong and Lower Lakes commercial fishery, which developed during a period when seal numbers were obviously lower.

This impact is best dealt with by industry and the government working together to identify solutions and through industry investing in new techniques, equipment and changing practices, not by killing seals, which, from interstate and overseas evidence, has been shown not to work. When developing policy responses to wildlife issues, the South Australian government draws from a wide range of sources. These include current laws and existing policies, published text, journal articles, literature from government and industry groups and input from the community.

The increase in the long-nosed fur seal population in the Coorong and the Lower Lakes is documented by Goldsworthy, Shaughnessy and Mackay in their report, 'The long-nosed fur seal in South Australia in 2013/14: Abundance, status and trends (2015)' As part of the Science for Decision Makers series, the Australian government report, 'Managing interactions between humans and seals: A national seal strategy to minimise adverse interactions between humans and seals in the fisheries, aquaculture and tourism sectors 2008' by Stewardson, Bensley and Tilzey sets out background information on seal interactions in Australia.

Experience from Australia and overseas has shown that site-specific, lethal options for fur seal control are ineffective and that non-lethal options available to manage fur seal populations are often limited to alternative fishing practices or improved fish farm design. For example, research published in 1993 by Pemberton and Shaughnessy, titled 'Interaction between seals and marine fish-farms in Tasmania and management of the problem' demonstrates that shooting individual seals is ineffective in managing negative interactions with fishing activities.

I am advised that recent experience in Tasmania highlights the difficulties in attempting to sterilise seals, including technical complications, expense and

welfare implications. Translocation has also had little success in minimising conflict between seals and fishers, and the Tasmanian Marine and Marine Industries Council has recently recommended that translocation programs be phased out due to their inefficiency.

A technical meeting, I am advised, was held in June of 2015 to further investigate the options available, such as the use of 'bangers' (seal scarers), to deter seals from nets. 'Bangers' are not lethal to fur seals. They emit a sound wave that is uncomfortable to them, I am advised. I am also advised that 'bangers' are currently used by fish farm licence holders in Tasmania as part of an integrated approach to keep seals from entering farm nets.

We need to also consider the complex marine systems and interactions based on the science we have before us and the lessons from other jurisdictions. The government is very well aware of the complexity of the issue and is working with stakeholders to arrive at a long-term and sustainable solution. DEWNR is also currently working to develop a statewide policy to guide the management of interactions between long-nosed fur seals and other pinnipeds and aquaculture and the Lower Lakes and Coorong fishery, together with PIRSA, industry bodies and other stakeholders.

This policy encourages a 'living with wildlife' approach through using different fishing practices and/or fishing gear. I am advised the policy will give industry clear guidance on any appropriate and legal means they may have to reduce the impact of seal and sea lion species on aquaculture and fishing operations. I am advised that consultation on this draft policy closed at the end of June 2015 and comments are now being collated and analysed before the policy is to be updated.

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The Hon. T.A. FRANKS (15:00): Supplementary: noting that the minister observed that there has been both licensing relaxation in terms of fees and also other supports offered to those facing increased risk in their occupation and the flow-on effect of this on their industry—for example, their mental health—can the minister provide us with some information, or take it on notice, about what documentation is being undertaken on the occupational health and safety for those now in this region where seals have increasingly jumped onto boats and workers are at risk of physical harm? Also, what additional supports have been made for either employment transition or mental health supports for people in this region?

The Hon. I.K. HUNTER (Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation, Minister for Water and the River Murray, Minister for Climate Change) (15:01): I thank the honourable member for her most important and sensible question, unlike the previous one. I will undertake to seek a response on her behalf and bring it back.