

SOUTHERN ZONE ROCK LOBSTER FISHERY – 14 Sept 2010

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:35): My question is to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries.

Mrs Redmond: The world's greatest agriculture minister!

Mr PEDERICK: That's the one. Before he made his decision to close the month of October to southern zone lobster fishers, was the minister aware of studies by the University of Tasmania that indicate no apparent harm to spawning female lobsters when caught and returned immediately to the sea?

Information published in 2009 by the University of Tasmania's Aquatic and Fisheries Institute indicates strongly that there is little egg loss from handling spawning females. Indications from specific trials currently underway by the same university are that eggs are very robust and handling loss is trivial.

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN (Napier—Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, Minister for Forests, Minister for Regional Development, Minister for the Northern Suburbs) (15:36): This is quite a serious issue and I have just had a discussion with the member for Mount Gambier in some detail. If I could just commence with a brief examination of the state of the Western Australian fishery. Over the past three years, boat numbers in Western Australia have declined by about 40 per cent from 491 to 300. That is nearly 200 boats that have been taken out of a fleet of around 500—a dramatic drop in the productivity of the Western Australian lobster fishery. Just recently, within the month, the Western Australian government has further reduced the catch by 50 per cent.

So, we have a fishery under significant stress and in crisis and, according to ABC News, the Western Australian fisheries minister (Hon. Norman Moore) said he regretted the social and economic impact of the measures imposed this year but he had no other choice. Minister Moore said he was very much aware that, when you go below a certain threshold, the fishery does not recover.

Moving to South Australia, I believe that we are in a better position than Western Australia but we are heading down that particular road to a position where we may not be able to reverse the decline in the fishery. In making that decision to close off October, I was guided by the fundamental principle in the Fisheries Act which is the precautionary principle.

This is a United Nations auspice principle that has to be incorporated in all South Australian legislation relating to fisheries. It flows out of the United Nations Rio Declaration of 1992. It compels me as the fisheries minister, when a fishery is in decline and even though the scientific evidence is not substantial, to act on the principle of precaution. Now, I have done that.

Ms Chapman interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: No; in the absence of scientific data, I am compelled by the Fisheries Act and, in making that decision, I look to every other state in Australia. I look to Victoria, I look to Tasmania and I also look to Western Australia. They close off their fishery in October.

An honourable member interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: I will come to that. October is a month in which lobsters carry eggs. Last season, 87 per cent of females brought to the surface were carrying eggs. Common sense would indicate that in a fishery in significant decline you do not interfere with spawning females.

I have looked at some research. I am not sure if it is the scientific research that the member for Hammond refers to, but I have looked at Tasmanian research where they are trying to develop an aquaculture industry. The research I have found tends to indicate that there is around a 10 per cent to 15 per cent loss of fertility when tampering with—

Mr Williams interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: No. The Tasmanian and Western Australian material that I have indicates that it is not a smart thing to do.

Mr Williams: Why won't you release it?

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: I will release it. I will table it when I have access to all the scientific information. I have acted in accordance with the Fisheries Act and the precautionary principle. We have a fishery in decline. Is the opposition suggesting that we ought to go in boots and all and not take—

Mr Williams interjecting:

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: Do you want us to find ourselves in the situation in two years' time that Western Australia is in at this very point in time where it is highly likely that that fishery will never recover?

What I have done is intervene to halt a downward spiral. There is an influx of young lobsters—a recruitment pulse—coming into that fishery. It is an ideal opportunity to rebuild the fishery rather than plunder it. I stand by the decision, and I believe that industry in the South-East is now coming round to the view that for short—

Mr Pederick: I don't think so.

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: Yes, that for short—

Members interjecting:

The SPEAKER: Order! You can have a discussion afterwards.

The Hon. M.F. O'BRIEN: I think I have pretty well canvassed all of the issues.