

Lobster Industry Working Group Meeting – 7 April 2011

Chairman's Report

GENERAL

Interestingly, at least from a Chairman's perspective, the period leading up to this meeting was somewhat unlike any that have occurred previously in my almost four years as Chairman. While there are always matters that require discussion in forums such as this working group, this time there appeared to be none that was overly contentious or which would strain relationships between the Department and the wider industry. I consider that this situation affirms the considerable progress that has been made by the Department and the industry in recent years inasmuch as each has worked, and continues to work, to ensure an economically viable and environmentally sustainable industry. This is a notable achievement and I am hopeful that this will continue well into the future.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Discussions throughout the meeting tended to reinforce my perception that the Department and the industry are very much focused on what will benefit the wider industry and the broader good in the longer term. While undoubtedly some decisions will potentially disadvantage some lobster fishers (arguably only temporarily in most cases), the overall tenor of the meeting embraced that 'wider industry' focus. This approach was adopted irrespective of whether the matter related to what might need to be done to address something potentially putting the industry in a bad light or to something that would improve the industry overall, notwithstanding the possible impacts on a small number of fishers. It was apparent that these affected fishers might just have to reconsider their position in the industry if they are unable to adjust to what is being proposed for the betterment of the industry as a whole.

Of the matters discussed, the following were noteworthy:

TACC Presentation: The information that the Department proposed to present to the TACC meeting was well received by industry, particularly the apparently solid rebuilding of lobster stocks since Departmental management, scientific research programs and compliance and enforcement efforts were all considerably strengthened in the past ten to fifteen years. Industry readily acknowledged the importance that each of these initiatives has played in putting the industry where it is now and setting it up for the future. As in previous years though, while industry again expressed its satisfaction with the Department's overall compliance and enforcement activities, it sought further information on the offences detected and more importantly the number of offenders involved. The industry is consistently acknowledged as being 'highly compliant' due to the compliance efforts of the Department, the consolidation of the industry, and the high degree of industry self-regulation. Nevertheless, its current reported compliance rate of 86% is below that of recreational fishers at 92%, figures that the industry believes does not present an accurate assessment to the Department, the industry or the wider community. I would encourage the Department to routinely report the type of offences being detected and the number of individual offenders involved in order to give a more accurate assessment of the scale of non-compliance amongst commercial fishers.

Management Charges: The reduction in the management charge for the current year was acknowledged and appreciated by industry members, particularly the efforts of the Department in this matter following the previous LIWG meeting. The final EIS payment by industry is also to be made in this current year. This combined reduction in charges for 2010-11 (and its flow-on to future years) has been welcomed by industry. Nevertheless, industry reaffirmed its view that it will accommodate increased management charges for targeted compliance efforts and necessary research programs etc provided that these are advised to them beforehand and the basis for the charges, as well as the related management and administration charges, are fully transparent.

Considering the significant issue this has been to industry members in recent years, I would suggest that the Department, when setting management charges for future years, continues to be open and transparent when providing the industry with budget estimates for lobster related activities. I consider that the level of understanding between the Department and the industry that has been hard-won in recent years must not be jeopardised by any unexplained increases in the annual management charges.

Season Quota Dates: At the last working group meeting the Department advanced proposals to change the date of the quota year due principally to the adverse weather and strong currents encountered by a number of industry members at the close of the 2009-10 season. The great majority of submissions received by the Department, together with feedback to LIWG members, showed substantial support for the change. However, some in-shore North Coast fishers remain unsupportive and have voiced concerns regarding the impacts of this change on their businesses and livelihoods. However LIWG industry members have reaffirmed their commitment to the change, notwithstanding some opposition to it, as being in the best interests of the industry for the future.

Unfortunately, the processes to implement this change have been delayed with the election of a new government and the appointment of a new Minister. I would suggest that it is imperative for the Department to maintain its efforts to have this change implemented as soon as practicable. This will ensure that the standing of LIWG members remains high within the industry and confirms the Department's role as an effective manager of the resource for the future, both economically and environmentally.

Catch Returns: Some discussion occurred regarding the difficulties sometimes faced by individual fishers in providing accurate and timely information to the Department. Again, while industry members understood that situations such as these arise occasionally, they were firm in their view that for the overall management of the industry and the sustainability of the resource, all fishers without exception must provide this information. Similarly, this information must be up-to-date if quota transfer arrangements are to function effectively and efficiently, even more so when the FishOnline facility is fully implemented later in the year. I would encourage the Department to ensure that these reporting requirements are met, and sanctions imposed where appropriate for failure to do so, notwithstanding the difficulties that some individuals might experience in doing so.

Marine Parks: This matter generally continues to present concerns to the lobster industry, and particularly at this time for the Solitary Islands Marine Park. It is not helped by the continued reluctance of the NSW Marine Parks Authority to comprehensively discuss the establishment of Marine Parks with the industry at LIWG meetings, or by the alleged deception that has occurred in the public consultation processes so far

undertaken to establish the Solitary Islands Marine Park. Industry has asked the Department to provide the LIWG with advice regarding various provisions of the Marine Parks Regulation and to forward a letter to MPA regarding the industry's continued concerns. I would suggest that the letter also should repeat the long-standing invitation for the Marine Parks Authority to attend any LIWG meeting.

SUMMARY

This was again an informative and productive meeting. I consider that it again highlighted the substantial progress that has been made by the Department with the industry in recent years and the highly cooperative approaches that now exist generally. The ongoing emphasis on the holistic management of the industry is now becoming well established and is to be commended. Such approaches can only assure the continued improvement in the viability and sustainability of the industry into the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A. A. Dodds". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'D'.

A A Dodds
Chairman, LIWG
April, 2011.