



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Tasmanian Scallop Fishery

SPEECH

Monday, 1 June 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 1 June 2009 Page 155 Questioner Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (9.18 pm)—I represent regional Australia and I have a very good story about regional Australia to talk about, without exaggeration or hyperbole. Seafood lovers around the House will be rejoicing in the news that the iconic Bass Strait scallop fishery has been reopened. While this is a great moment for those who enjoy the gastronomic delights of the scallop, it is also wonderful news for the seafood industry in Tasmania and particularly for my own region. Like so much primary product from the seas and the soil of Tassie, the Tasmanian scallop is renowned from one end of the country to the other for its quality. In fact, over time a number of less than scrupulous operators have made the most of its reputation by passing off other product as Tasmanian scallops. But it is hard to match the Bass Strait scallop with its rich flavour, creamy flesh and orange roe.

The return of the fishery is the result of some detailed work from within the industry and from the federal Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. The fishery itself, exploited since early in the 20th century, has had a chequered history, having been overfished for some time and closed down in 1987. The fishery began in the Derwent River estuary, not too far from where I began my days in Tasmania's south. When the quality of the Bass Strait scallops was recognised, they became a very sought after commodity. But, as has happened with other such delicacies, they were overfished. For eight years, the fishery remained closed to allow stocks to recover, and there has been only limited harvesting since 1998. In 2005, the fishery was again closed by the then Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, Senator Ian MacDonald, to allow it to recover after it was again coming under threat.

Over the past 12 months, the industry has been working closely with the department, conducting three research surveys to look at the availability, quality and quantity of scallops. This has revealed three areas of scallops in Bass Strait which are in good condition and one that is ideal for harvest. This information has been referred to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Mr Tony Burke, who has granted permission for limited fishing from today, 1 June. This is a good news story and a positive outcome from what has been a rather tortured journey from plenty to scarcity to replenishment to responsible management and sustainable harvesting.

However, to preserve the industry into the future this approval only covers a single area of Bass Strait. The area itself covers 75 square nautical miles, about 30 nautical miles to the north-east of Flinders Island. Still, the industry has welcomed the opportunity to return to the waters. Mr Bob Lister, Executive Officer of the Tasmanian Scallop Fishermen's Association, tells me this is welcome news indeed. It will be a definite boost for the industry, expected to bring in about \$5 million worth of scallops with a maximum catch of 2,500 tonnes. This will see fishing boats operating out of the ports of Devonport, Ulverstone, Currie, Grassy and Stanley in my electorate, along with other Tasmanian ports such as Bridport and St Helens.

The scallop fishery is a significant industry at its height, employing not just fishermen but people in transport, processing and retail. We will see a hive of activity in places like Stanley, where Stanley Fish will process many of the scallops caught in Bass Strait. This will be replicated in other places such as Georgetown Seafoods, St Helens and the famous Mure's in Hobart. This will mean valuable casual work for people who will split scallops—a very skilled task and something that can be a very good earner for those who have the knack.

From this week we can expect to see Bass Strait scallops being sold in fish markets along the eastern states, including Sydney, Melbourne and across Tasmania—and they will make their way into the electorate of Hume at some stage. While the industry says it is difficult to put a firm figure on the employment generated, it is estimated that across the board it will support about 100 fishermen and another 200 in seasonal jobs in the processing factories. This is another important boost for regional employment, and the hope is that with careful management it can be sustained well into the future.

These benefits do not come easily. The scallop fishery is one that comes with an element of risk. The fishers will spend up to 14 hours travelling into the middle of Bass Strait. Here they will battle the infamous Roaring 40s to harvest the scallops from the ocean floor. The trips are regularly interrupted when the weather becomes too

treacherous and the boats are forced back to port until the weather improves. One only needs to remember the graphic pictures of Bass Strait at her fiercest during the 1998 Sydney to Hobart race to appreciate the vagaries and challenges of this stretch of water. The scallop fishers are a happy bunch, and take it in their stride as part of the industry that many love.

It is also an industry that they hope to see sustained well into the future. Mr Lister tells me that after the three years of closure, the scallop fishers are determined to look to a sustainable future. They want to see a regular commercial scallop fishery. He says rebuilding the fishery has been difficult for many fishermen, but they will be reaping the rewards again from today. Fishermen realise it will not be smooth sailing—excuse the pun—because of the conditions they must battle in what is recognised as one of the most difficult stretches of water in the world. They are also working to address other challenges, such as quality and quantity, and marketing of the scallop. But the opening today is good news and they are looking forward with a positive attitude. This is backed by a very careful approach, detailed in the Code of Practice for the Tasmanian Commercial Scallop Fishery, which says that the industry ‘endeavours to harvest scallop stocks in a responsible, sustainable and profitable manner’. It goes on:

While providing the community with highest quality scallops, employment and investment opportunities, the industry seeks to minimise the impact of fishing activities on the environment through the adoption of best fishing practices and coordination and cooperation of fishing effort.

Scallop fishing is traditionally a secondary fishery for rock lobster fishermen during the winter months when rock lobster are either scarce or the fishery is closed. These fishermen have invested heavily in the industry, with boats from 15 to 24 metres in length and harvesting equipment designed to sensitively bring the scallops up from the sea floor. Some have gone to the extent of installing sophisticated washing, sorting and conveying systems to minimise labour, ensure undersize scallops are returned to the water quickly and minimise the time between the catching and the chilling of the product.

Scientific evidence suggests that targeted scallop fishing yields low levels of by-catch and, further, that no by-catch species are threatened by this particular fishing method, which is good for everyone and everything involved. Using sophisticated satellite equipment, fishermen are able to precisely position their vessels and harvesting equipment on scallop beds where there are few other organisms. The advances in technology will also allow a satellite-based vessel monitoring system to provide real-time information to authorities on vessel position. This ensures compliance with fishery rules and regulations and prevents access to areas closed to fishing.

The return of sustainable numbers in the scallop fishery will hopefully lead to a long-term future for fishers. As I mentioned, after a tortuous history from plenty to scarcity to renewal now, that is a good story indeed. This will allow the fishers to continue to invest in the industry—and certitude of resource is an important criterion for investing in the industry—to provide much-needed jobs and lead to a more sustainable income.

I would note that despite the erratic nature over the years, an export market still exists for scallops both in France and South-East Asia. With some certainty into the future, let us hope that can grow and that the domestic market will also strengthen and make the most of what is another of the wonderful examples of the clean and green industries that we have in this country, particularly in my home state of Tasmania and more specifically in my region of north-west Tasmania, including King Island.

In conclusion, although it is a grievance debate, I am pleased to bring a positive story for regional Tasmania. I would like to congratulate the industry itself. I would certainly like to congratulate the department and the minister, both past and present, for investing in a proper management plan for this important industry and bringing it to fruition. Today, 1 June, is a red letter day for the Tasmanian scallop. I look forward to eating many more. The price is, of course, like gold. Without the knowledge of my wife and by blackmailing those in my local shop, I imbibe in the scallop every now and again when I drive past my local store. *(Time expired)*

The DEPUTY SPEAKER—Order! The time for the grievance debate has expired. The debate is interrupted in accordance with standing order 192B. The debate is adjourned, and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.