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FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TOLD "MANDATING COUNTRY OF ORIGIN LABELLING FOR ALL COOKED SEAFOOD IS "A MATTER OF URGENCY."

NSW NATIONALS SENATOR, JOHN WILLIAMS SAID " IT IS A SIMPLE FIX SUPPORTED BY THE MAJORITY."

APFA APPLAUDS THE GROWING SUPPORT FOR EXTENDING CoOL TO ALL COOKED SEAFOOD NATIONWIDE - AFTER A SENATE INQUIRY REPORT RECOMMENDED THE EXTENSION FOLLOWING A PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO THIS VITAL INDUSTRY ISSUE LAST YEAR.

Senator John Williams speech to the Senate.



Extract from Hansard February 12, 2015 - below:

Senator WILLIAMS (New South Wales) (18:37): I rise to speak on the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee report, *Current requirements for labelling of seafood and seafood products*, which is a very interesting report with, I think, a great recommendation. From the outset it became evident that there was a hole in the system that needed to be fixed and virtually every witness who appeared before the committee believed there will be great benefits when Australians know that what they are eating is Australian seafood. There has been no requirement on those in the food service sector such as restaurants, fish and chip shops, or pubs and clubs, to identify the a seafood's origins outside the Northern Territory. The committee actually went to Darwin and had a good, close look at the industry there.

The Master Fish Merchants Association of Australia told the committee at our Sydney hearing that imported seafood accounted for in excess of 70 per cent of the seafood we eat, and to have a proper country-of-origin labelling system in place would make it a level playing field. Amazingly, there is a company called Australis Barramundi. You would think that that would be nice Australian

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barramundi. No, it is farmed barramundi from Vietnam. I think the ACCC are very aware of this situation, but people are confused. The association also said that the Australian fisheries industry is managed properly and is sustainable. It pointed out that fisheries are highly regulated and that stocks are actually increasing. I hope the Greens take note of that.

Helen Jenkins from the Australian Prawn Farmers Association said that a practical solution to give Australian consumers more clarity and confidence in making their choice is to write 'Australian' or 'imported' on menus or blackboards. Go to a fish and chip shop and today's special would be identified as Australian or imported. There is not too much cost in that. She suggested that a proper, universal labelling system could see huge investment in farmed prawns, and even predicted that it would increase 17-fold and that job numbers could climb from the current 300 to 5,000. One concerning point raised by the prawn farmers was that there is cheating going on when some overseas seafood is being substituted for the more expensive Australian product. The fines are minimal. One fine was just \$6,000, which they said is a slap on the wrist, so perhaps these fines should be higher.

The Australian Barramundi Farmers Association told us that 90 per cent of people preferred Australian fish. Of the 20,000 tonnes of whole barramundi consumed annually, 40 per cent is Australian produce. When mandatory labelling was introduced in the Northern Territory there was an increase in seafood consumption, and the barramundi industry all but guaranteed that, if the labelling were introduced nationally, barramundi production would increase, and that means more jobs.

Matthew Evans gave some interesting evidence in a private capacity. He talked about the difference in environmental standards between our seafood industry and those overseas. He mentioned he had been on a fish farm in China where he saw cigarette butts, an oil slick and polystyrene floating through the farms and dog droppings in the water next to the farm. He said that you would not see that on Australian fish farms. I agree with him.

In the Northern Territory a licence is required to catch, process or sell fish, and the requirement to label seafood was introduced in November 2008 by way of a licence condition on fish retailers and on licensees such as restaurants, cafes, bistros and hotels. The requirement means that all seafood not harvested in Australia and advertised for sale for public consumption must be labelled as 'imported'. 'Advertised' includes menus, menu boards, brochures and pamphlets. In terms of the Northern Territory experience, a study has shown that 90 per cent of fish retailers were compliant within three months of the introduction of the laws, and surveys of retail establishments have shown that costs of complying with labelling are between \$100 and \$500 per annum, largely due to ongoing menu changes.

These surveys have also shown that consumers respond positively to seafood labelling that provides them with information about their choices. Consumers

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have preference for local seafood and are prepared to pay a premium. After freshness, supporting local industry and origin labelling were key factors in consumer decisions. This has all meant that in the Northern Territory the trawl fishery has gone from a \$4 million to a \$30 million turnover in eight years, or from 500 tonnes to 3,000 tonnes, because Australians can see that they are eating Australian grown fish—Australian produce.

Just as we are seeing in the honey industry where some imported brands could be misconstrued as being Australian unless you investigate further, it is also happening in the seafood industry. Robert Fish, Chairman of the Northern Territory Seafood Council, told us of overseas imports riding on the good Australian name on labels. The committee has brought the misleading labelling of Australis Barramundi to the attention of the ACCC, as I said, which is actually farmed in Vietnam. The Australian Barramundi Farmers Association emphasised that, as country of origin is second only to freshness in guiding consumer choices, it was unacceptable that a cheaper product could dominate the higher value end of the market due to lack of consumer knowledge.

Proprietors of restaurants, bars and fish and chip shops in the Northern Territory who gave evidence to the committee upheld the view that consumers have a right to know what they are eating and why they may be paying more for local seafood. The point was made that labelling seafood not only informs consumers but also builds trust as consumers know what they are getting for the price they pay. Not everyone or every organisation took the view that mandatory labelling for all sectors was a good idea. The New South Wales Food Authority made the point that the Northern Territory produces iconic seafood species, including single-species of barramundi and mud crabs, while other states, in particular New South Wales, produce a diverse range of many different species of seafood, many of which do not entail demands for protection. It argued that, for this reason, mandating country-of-origin labelling at restaurants may add a burden to the industry without any benefit at retail level.

In summary, the committee holds the view that mandating country-of-origin labelling in relation to fish products sold in restaurants and other cooked seafood outlets comprises an effective, simple and cost-effective means of achieving a level playing field for Australian and overseas seafood producers. To this end, the committee recommends the removal of the exemption, subject to a transition period of no more than 12 months. I hope the government takes this recommendation on board as a matter of urgency, as it is a simple fix supported by the majority. We cannot afford to have our local industries competing with one hand tied behind their back against the imports which are not only coming in cheaper but even purporting to be Australian. For years I have pushed for a proper labelling system, and here is just a simple example of why.

I would like to thank those groups and individuals who lodged submissions and those who gave evidence and enlightened the committee on the way the seafood

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industry works. Thank you to the secretariat and also my fellow committee members; we were all on the same page during this inquiry. I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=CHAMBER;id=chamber%2Fhansards%2Fedffdf80-0ad5-47c0-9014-6e9c4b144774%2F0218;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2Fedffdf80-0ad5-47c0-9014-6e9c4b144774%2F0000%22>

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