



Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements
Productivity Commission
Australian Government

PFA Response to Natural Disaster Funding Arrangements Issues Paper

The Professional Fishermen's Association (PFA) of New South Wales would like to express our thanks in being provided the opportunity to provide input into the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper. For many years our industry has been expressing our concerns with the funding arrangements for Natural Disaster to both State and Commonwealth Government, but has not received any satisfaction with these approaches.

Recent experiences have shown our industry that there is a significant and impeding lack of recognition of the impact of natural disasters upon our commercial fishing industry. The fishing industry suffers from many natural disasters such as floods, pollution, pest invasions, urban runoff and droughts (changing major currents caused can result in widespread loss of fish stocks eg El nino and El nina).

Despite all the wide ranging impacts from a variety of vectors that have significant impacted on our industry and families, there is very little recognition and focus upon our industry. There is little allocation of resources to address our industry and we are typically grouped in with the Primary Industry arrangements with little comprehension of the different vectors impacting on our industry. However, the number of fence posts lost or the number of cattle lost does not fit to our situation. When natural disasters occur for our industry it impacts on what cannot be easily qualified – catchability of fish stocks, impacts on fish habitat and the benthic zone, and, more importantly, when stocks will return to previous levels.

For example, from 2011 to 2013 the northern NSW fishing industry was severely impacted by a series of floods that destroyed not only fishing gear and structure but also fish stocks and important habitat. The floods caused damage to fishing gear, equipment and fishing infrastructure. However, of more significant impact were the loss of income due to the flood's impact on fish stocks and the health of the waterways. The financial assistance provided to the fishermen to recover from these impacts did little to address their actual needs. Fishermen are faced with a loss of weekly income due to the loss of fish stocks within the flooded waterways. However, the finance package provided covers for the loss of gear, infrastructure or cost of clean up, not assistance to deal with the loss of income due to the floods impact on the waterways.

PFA providing effective representation on NSW commercial wild harvest fishing to all levels of government and other key stakeholders

In addition, the current criterion for the assistance package does not recognise the need for fishing businesses to diversify. The current criterion does not recognise fishers who cannot claim greater than 50% of their income from the affected fishery. Many fishers have aligned their businesses to the seasonal nature of their target fishery. They have therefore diversified their businesses and use other earnings to supplement their household incomes. As I am sure you would recognise, a 10% - 40% loss of income to any household would cause significant hardship to that family. These fishers all pay the same Governmental fees and have all suffered from the floods and yet there is significant divergence regarding how they are assisted.

Furthermore, the delay in receiving assistance caused suffering and stress to the industry and their families. The first floods occurred in January with the declaration of a natural disaster not occurring until 2 months later, thereby causing substantial anxiety and strain to an already stressful situation.

The PFA believes that this financial assistance package has done very little to actually assist those persons detrimentally affected by the 2013 floods. The lack of information, delivery, ineffective criterion, and the delay in providing this assistance package has demonstrated a failure in the government's ability to help those in need as a result of a natural disaster. We also ask that an easily accessible and timely form of allowance for credit be provided to enable those fishers impacted to provide some form of income to their family whilst they are unable to access the fish stocks. This is not the same as the Dole scheme which takes time to access and involves asset assessments. Asset assessments prove extremely problematic for fishers whose assets are their businesses (eg. trawlers and gear) which they can't utilise to provide an income due to the impact of a disaster but means that they are unable to access other normal financial assistance.

Furthermore, we strongly urge the government to devote higher amounts of research to ascertaining ways to mitigate the impact of natural disasters such as floods upon fish stocks. Specifically, research has shown that due to significant development and drainage upon floodplains, the waterways are unable to support fish stocks due to poor water quality after such large flood events. Research is therefore necessary to test possible mitigative measures that may enable a system to cope better with future flood events and to ascertain the relative socio-economic importance of coastal floodplains to agriculture and fisheries. PFA believes that this research is necessary to assist in preventing and reducing the impacts of future flood events.

Please don't hesitate to contact me to discuss this matter or any related matters.

Yours sincerely

Tricia Beatty
Executive Officer

10 June 2014