



Speech by

## Dr Mark Robinson

MEMBER FOR CLEVELAND

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### GLADSTONE REGION, FISH HEALTH

 **Dr ROBINSON** (Cleveland—LNP) (11.37 am): The Gladstone fish fiasco is another example of gross Labor government failure that is now starting to smell like a cover-up. Over the last few months large numbers of diseased fish of various species have been caught in Gladstone Harbour. Recently, a cluster of 20 fishermen have fallen ill while doing their work as fishermen. These fishermen who work in Gladstone Harbour have presented ill to hospitals and doctors' surgeries with common complaints of skin rashes, boils, lesions and nausea. The number of sick fishermen is higher than what would be considered normal. Fishermen's livelihoods have suffered greatly and, due to no fault of their own, men like Trevor Falzon have had their livelihoods impacted during already tough economic times.

The government and particularly the fisheries minister have displayed gross incompetence, negligence and even deceitfulness in the following ways: by doing nothing about a serious developing health issue over several months since the problem was first reported to Fisheries Queensland officers in May—and perhaps even earlier—but then claiming to know nothing about it until 15 September; by prematurely reopening Gladstone Harbour for fishing before it was safe to do so; by deliberately refusing to acknowledge and report the real number of diseased fish being caught; by falsifying test results by claiming that 160 fish had been tested but then later admitting that it was only four or five fish—it cannot be both, minister; by abusing science by pre-empting the findings of its own independent scientific inquiry before the panel met even once; by underestimating the human toll in terms of people falling ill and commercial fishermen's livelihoods; by placing at risk Gladstone's and even Queensland's seafood industry; and by ruling out dredging and water quality as a potential cause of sickness in diseased fish before toxicology results have ruled out the potential impacts of heavy metals—testing that is not due until November.

In terms of the underreporting of the scale of the issue, when Fisheries Queensland officers have worked as observers in the harbour they have failed to report any diseased fish species other than barramundi. When fishermen have asked why observers did not register sick salmon and other species, they were advised that Fisheries Queensland were counting only barramundi, so there appears to be a serious undercounting of diseased fish by deliberate instruction.

What does the minister know about this accusation by fishermen? Does he dispute it, or does he know nothing about this also? The minister this morning said of the Gladstone fishing problem that this disease is not unexpected. He also stated that 20 per cent of the fish tested were diseased; that is hardly a normal or expected level of sickness. The minister's strategy of counting only barramundi means that the government has underestimated the magnitude of the problem. Like Private Vanderbilt of *F Troop* fame, the minister is stumbling along and is unable to see diseased fish in front of his face.

What about the large numbers of diseased fish that are still being caught? Since the ban was lifted last Friday, commercial fishermen have continued to catch significant numbers of diseased fish—far in excess of the 20 per cent the minister is prepared to admit. Commercial fisherman Trevor Falzon fished on the day the harbour was reopened. He caught a significant number of fish and estimated that four in five—or 80 per cent—were diseased. Another fisherman reported to me this morning that in the last few days he

had caught two tonne of fish from the Gladstone Harbour but, to his dismay, 100 per cent of his catch was rejected as unfit for sale due to the suspicion of disease around Gladstone Harbour. These catches support the conclusion that there is still a major issue in the harbour that is not going to go away by itself no matter how hard the minister and government wish.

What about the impact on commercial fishing? What lurks below the murky waters of Gladstone Harbour is worse than a renegade great white shark. We still do not know what it is, but it is causing greater devastation to the commercial fishing than a trawler-destroying jaws ever could. Fishermen are going broke and they need support. If the government is shown to have been negligent, then the fishermen will be due compensation. The seafood industry in Queensland could also be decimated if the government does not handle this carefully.

Then there is the question of when the minister knew. He said 15 September, yet Fisheries Queensland officers knew in May this year. What is clear is that the Gladstone fish fiasco has blown up in the face of the government, which has put spin before science and politics before people.

*(Time expired)*