

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Decommissioning Oil and Gas Infrastructure

Leongatha – Wednesday 11 February 2026

MEMBERS

Ryan Batchelor – Chair

David Ettershank – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Gaelle Broad

Jacinta Ermacora

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

Sheena Watt

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Simon Boag, Executive Officer, South East Trawl Fishing Industry Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the proceedings of the Legislative Council Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Decommissioning Oil and Gas Infrastructure. Our final witness today joins us via Zoom. Simon, welcome.

All the evidence that we take is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information we receive today is protected by law. As a witness, you are protected against any action for what you say during the hearings, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of the Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Welcome. My name is Ryan Batchelor. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the Legislative Council and Chair of the Environment and Planning Committee. Committee members with me are –

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Good afternoon.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Could I ask you firstly just to state your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of for the Hansard record and then invite you to make an opening statement.

Simon BOAG: Sure. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here. My name is Simon Boag, and in this context I am the Executive Officer for the South East Trawl Fishing Industry Association, or SETFIA, which is a grouping of fishermen and an industry association representing Commonwealth-licensed trawl fishermen in south-east Australia. In terms of a written brief, my preference would be to not make one. Some months ago we provided a significant written submission, and then a few days ago I provided a more informal, much shorter submission, and I am hopeful that I can see that in front of the committee.

The CHAIR: We have the written documentation, so if you are happy to allow us to use that, we will get started then with some questions. It strikes me from your submission that the biggest concern that you have is making sure that the seabed is free of obstacles, to put a gross layperson's lens on matters. Would that be a fair assessment of where your industry is coming from, that ideally you would like the decommissioning process to end up in a space where there is more seabed available unobstructed for trawl fishing?

Simon BOAG: Sort of, yes. It is probably a little more nuanced than that. The context here is that, like a lot of south-eastern fishing sectors, the trawl sector has been heavily impacted by Commonwealth marine parks, unfishable ground that is just too rough to work naturally and fisheries closures that have been required to rebuild depleted stocks or protect breeding stocks or are there for other purposes, and in the future we will be significantly affected by offshore wind. So within that context, yes, at a very basic level we are very keen to see oil and gas assets in eastern Bass Strait completely gone.

However, I think there needs to be a decision made on balance and we need to balance the grounds that we will get back with the disruption that full removal might involve. For instance, if full removal was going to take 10 years of digging and activities in eastern Bass Strait, then I think the fishing industry would be a bit more circumspect around whether we want it all gone or we would be happy to leave some in situ and negotiate some sort of other agreement.

The CHAIR: You have obviously had to coexist with the industry for 60 years. How has that coexistence gone from your point of view?

Simon BOAG: I have been in this role for 16 years – I moved back to Australia in 2009 – and yes, the early probably three or four years were quite difficult and SETFIA reached a point in its history where the members resolved that they were either going to just sort of walk away from this and become obstructive with oil and gas or they were going to get inside the tent and be incredibly helpful and be their best friend and try to reduce mutual risk and impact by working with them. We resolved – members resolved – to do the latter. So probably for the last decade or perhaps a little longer, we have worked hand in glove with Esso and with Roc Oil, who became Cooper Oil, and Cooper Energy, who became Amplitude Energy. They are the two main players in that eastern Gippsland oil and gas field. We have an excellent, forthright, earnest, honest, productive relationship with them and work really, really well, and it is all about just trying to reduce mutual risk and impact. So we are just trying to get out of each other's way and not have any commercial impacts or risks.

The CHAIR: Obviously, you mentioned needing to – I do not want to put words in your mouth, so correct me, but a sort of case-by-case or balancing exercise for, in terms of removal, working together and figuring out what is best. Would that be probably a fair summary of –

Simon BOAG: Absolutely, yes. Amplitude Energy are removing all of their Basker Manta Gummy site. The whole lot is going, and that is fantastic and we are embracing that. We look forward to getting those grounds back. They were grounds that were once trawled and will be trawled again in the future. We are unsure about Esso's plans. They will be left with 20 wellheads once the superstructures are gone, or the topsides, as they call them. We are happy to work with Esso on a case-by-case basis to balance how long this is going to take and what the environmental impacts are going to be versus leaving it there. We are happy to try to be constructive and open-minded to what that might look like.

The CHAIR: Without seeking to prejudice your negotiations, at a certain point you are going to come to an agreement. Esso are going to conclude their commissioning process and, as a titleholder, hand back their obligations to the Commonwealth for largely what goes on in Commonwealth waters, which I assume is what you are concerned about. How do you see and who do you see negotiating with if you find matters post licence hand-back – problems with what you have agreed with in the past or what the final settlement of removal has been? Who do you think you should be dealing with after the decommissioning process ends for any problems that arise?

Simon BOAG: I think it will either be NOPSEMA or Esso or both. And yes, most of our fishing – not all of it – occurs 3 miles outside coastal waters in Commonwealth waters, but not all of it. We are meeting with NOPSEMA on the 18th of this month. We have the CEO and deputy CEO coming to Lakes Entrance. I am not sure if this is on the agenda, but I suspect it will be. I think these departing oil and gas companies – and we have enjoyed their product for 60 years, and it has helped us steam around and catch fish, for all of their product's environmental consequences – but I think Esso in particular will have an ongoing responsibility, a contingent liability almost. When they put this field in, construction standards were not like they are now. There were mistakes made and there was equipment lost; we still find that equipment and it does damage to our fishing gear. We have a protocol in place called a damages protocol, and we use that, usually quite successfully, to negotiate compensation, you know, and Esso go out and remove the hazard where possible. I mean, I would like that to some extent to continue into the future, because if they leave infrastructure in situ and depart and go back to Texas and that equipment breaks up and enters other parts of the fishery and becomes a hazard or a, you know, sort of commercial barrier to catching fish, then our view would be that Esso has some sort of ongoing liability.

The CHAIR: So that is under the sort of current damages protocol. Would you say that the protocol as it works now is reasonably effective at resolving issues?

Simon BOAG: Reasonably – I am sure we could improve it. It is a very old document. I am not sure when it was written, but it is a typed, photocopied document. I am sure we could do better and that perhaps, you know, we could come up with an improved draft going forward if indeed Esso leave equipment in situ.

The CHAIR: But your submission is that even once they hand back the licences, you think they are going to have an ongoing liability, a contingent liability, for anything that is left and/or anything they have left over the course of the operation of the field for the last 60 years.

Simon BOAG: That would be our view, yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have a view as to whether regulatory agencies share that view?

Simon BOAG: I am not sure. No, I do not know. I am hoping that our discussion with NOPSEMA on the 18th, which is with some senior NOPSEMA people – and the fact that they are coming from Western Australia to Lakes Entrance, to eastern Victoria, I think is a very positive sign. I am sure we will ask that question, and I hope that NOPSEMA are supportive of that.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I am just going on, but I think this is useful. Is that to do with the Amplitude field or to also talk about the Esso projects?

Simon BOAG: Well, Amplitude Energy are fully removing all their infrastructure. Their environment plan, you know, says they must remove everything. Esso have only applied thus far to remove their topsides, and they are not sure yet about stage 2 of their decommissioning, which is the infrastructure that connects the seafloor. We are not sure what that will look like. They did put an application in, I think – an EPBC application – and then withdrew it. Until they make that application, we do not know what they are going to be proposing. As I explained, we are open-minded, but in any event, we think they have an ongoing liability.

The CHAIR: And you are seeing them on 18 February, you say.

Simon BOAG: We are seeing NOPSEMA on 18 February, yes.

The CHAIR: Excellent. I will stop.

Simon BOAG: We do talk to Esso a lot.

The CHAIR: Sure, yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I just thought –

Melina BATH: No, it is very good. It is quite concerning when you say in your submission that less than 5 per cent of historical trawl grounds now remain workable. Can you just, for Hansard, give us an overview of how that has diminished over time? Is it all the environmental grounds, the physical grounds? Paint that picture if you can briefly, thanks, Simon.

Simon BOAG: I appreciate the opportunity. There is some impact from oil and gas exclusions, but they are in the petroleum safety zones. But they are the smallest collective footprint. The largest one would be fisheries closures that have been put there to address overfishing that occurred in the 1980s and early 90s. The next largest areas that we do not work would be Commonwealth marine parks. We have 14 Commonwealth marine parks in south-eastern Australia between Sydney and South Australia, encompassing Victoria and Tasmania, and they cover I think 288,000 square kilometres, excluding the Macquarie Island Marine Park, which was put into that network more recently – but we obviously do not fish at Macquarie Island. I suppose the third group would be areas that are just too rough to trawl. But when I talk about the 95 per cent, they are hard closures, so they are oil and gas fishery closures and marine parks. So we have a very small area left within which to fish, which is – you know, we are where we are; we just do not want it to get any smaller. I suppose the biggest threat at the moment is offshore wind, and I know this is not an offshore wind inquiry, so I will be incredibly brief –

Melina BATH: But it is part of the discussion.

Simon BOAG: Yes, it is part of the context, I suppose. We are certainly not opposed to renewable energy or offshore wind, and we have excellent relationships with the nine remaining feasibility licence holders in Gippsland. The trawl fishery is not hugely impacted by offshore wind in Gippsland. It is in other states that are not Victoria, so I will not go into that. But the shark fishery, which is an allied fishery, is heavily impacted potentially by the development of offshore wind in Gippsland. There is one site that we are very concerned about, and that is the easternmost site, the feasibility licence closest to Lakes Entrance. That has significantly more trawl fishing in it than the other eight combined. So there is a way through offshore wind, and that is giving strong consideration to commercial fishing. You can have offshore wind and commercial fishing, provided there are the decision-makers who are – and it is a complicated decision-making framework because

the Victorian government is buying the electricity but the Commonwealth government is giving out the feasibility licence. But if the right decision is made and the correct offshore wind sites are selected, then certainly you can have offshore wind energy with minimal impact on commercial fishing.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I have only got a few moments left, but should we care, should Victorians care, about trawl fishing? Should we shut it down? The government has got a very big focus on recreational fishing, and we all love recreational fishing; it is a great thing. How important is trawl fishing and the fishing industry to our food source? Can you paint that picture?

Simon BOAG: The trawl fishery that I am here representing – the Commonwealth trawl sector – is the largest supplier into Melbourne and Sydney of fresh local fish. Seventy per cent of the fish that we consume in Australia is imported, and with every fishery closure that number goes up and up and up and up. I think people are quite shocked to hear that in a nation girt by sea we are importing more than two-thirds of the seafood we eat. I think we are all looking forward to seafood labelling laws changing in July, when cooked seafood will have country-of-origin labelling. If people want to eat local fish, we need trawl fishing, and our trawl fishery by volume is 85 per cent MSC-certified; it has passed the highest sustainability standards that the globe has to offer. There is no better managed fishery. I have worked in lots of international fisheries, but there is no better managed fishery. If people want to eat local fish, then they need this trawl fishery.

Melina BATH: Not for a moment am I suggesting that the 28,000 square kilometres should be diminished, but they are grounds for growing fish as well, so you have got those exclusion zones. Enlighten me: how are the fish? How is the fishing industry? How are the grounds, the fisheries? Is it a healthy situation? Or has it been overfished in the 80s and is never coming back? What does it look like under there?

Simon BOAG: It is 288,000, not 28,000.

Melina BATH: Sorry, I missed a zero. I beg your pardon.

Simon BOAG: It is 288,000, so it is an enormous area. If you look at it on a map, it is a couple of New South Waleses. It really is a significant area. Some fish stocks have recovered incredibly well. Orange roughy and school shark in particular have just boomed. I am in for stock assessments today in Melbourne, by the way, and that is why I am dialling in and I am not with you in person. Those two stocks have recovered incredibly well, others have not. The marine parks do not do anything for fisheries management, and they certainly do not help stocks to recover. Where stocks need persistence in recovering, then commercial catches and commercial effort are dropped. What marine parks do is protect sensitive marine benthic environments against potentially damaging fishing activities, trawling probably being top of the list. I think you need marine parks in a balanced management system to protect against the impacts of trawling, but marine parks certainly do not do anything. There is no suggestion from those in charge of marine parks that they do. We have really good fisheries management. You do not need marine parks to rebuild fish stocks. I understand that goes against popular belief. We understand that the community probably thinks that marine parks help fish stocks.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Thanks very much.

The CHAIR: Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for your submission and for appearing today. Just further on the consequences if the remaining infrastructure, in particular the pipes, is not fully removed, if we end up in a situation like that, you have suggested that there should be ongoing liability. If for whatever reason that does not end up being the case and the companies do not have any ongoing liability and that infrastructure is left, what are your concerns about that situation?

Simon BOAG: I think there is something like 900 lineal kilometres of pipelines in that field. I think it is something like that, Esso's footprint of pipelines. Some or most of them are what we call overfishable, but some of them are not. It kind of depends on when they were put in and how the pieces of pipeline join into each other with lugs. Contrary to popular belief, trawling cannot occur on rough bottom. We trawl on sand, shale and mud. If there is a join in the pipeline that has a lug that protrudes, then we cannot fish over it. Our strong preference would be that – we are happy to talk about Esso leaving pipelines – they must all be overfishable. They might need to do some remedial work to fix pipelines that are not overfishable. They have already come to us, and we have provided a kind of baseline study by talking to fishing boats and getting data from their

navigational systems. We have already provided that to Esso. They contracted us to do it. It was their request, about which parts of which pipelines we can and cannot fish over. I think that is a very basic requirement or an expectation that all pipelines either need to go or must be overfishable. It would be really difficult to operate in eastern Bass Strait and not be able to go near pipelines for fear of snagging, and when you snag fishing gear you kind of put the whole vessel at risk.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One of your suggestions in your submission is to set up a fisheries compensation fund, and apparently they have got something like that in the UK. Can you elaborate on that a bit?

Simon BOAG: We borrowed this concept from Scotland, and I think they call it a legacy fund. What they do is they have a set amount of money per kilometre and per wellhead that these companies pay annually. The money goes into an independent fund and is administered by an independent board for the betterment of the fishing industry. So it would not just be trawl fishing, it would be all commercial fishing in East Gippsland. It might be used to improve safety, upgrade electronics, undertake marketing campaigns. We might be able to promote what is going to happen in July with country-of-origin labelling on cooked seafood. We might find some great technology that reduces interactions with protected species or improves fish quality. It can be administered for the collective benefit of all, rather than a cash handout.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And is that per-kilometre contribution only post the decommissioning process for what is left there, or is that something that is just ongoing throughout the life of that infrastructure?

Simon BOAG: Esso have indicated that they are decommissioning, so our view would be that that legacy fund would start once they have officially decommissioned. So as soon as something is decommissioned, our expectation would be that that legacy fund should kick in.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Another issue you have raised in your submission is around safety zones and exclusion zones. You indicate that those safety and exclusion zones really disproportionately penalise fishers as a result of a hazard created by another industry. What sorts of changes would you like to see with respect to the safety zones?

Simon BOAG: The first thing I would say is I think it would be hypocritical of me to not acknowledge that a third of the cost of running our boats is fuel and that we have poured their product through our boats for – we have been operating for 60 years, with combustion engines on our fishing vessels. But that said – sorry, just ask me your question again.

Sarah MANSFIELD: I think it was just about explaining what you are proposing in terms of minimising safety zones.

Simon BOAG: Sure. Sorry, safety zones: at the moment safety zones – almost all of them but not all of them – are 500-metre circumferences, and that is understandable because it is an active oil and gas wellhead. But when they are inactive, if there is anything left in situ, we do not think it needs to be 500 metres. If you make it 400 or 300 or 200 or a smaller size, the nature of π^2 is that the area comes down logarithmically. So if you move from 500 to 400, you have kind of halved the collective footprint, and if you move to 300, you are kind of down to 20 per cent of the collective footprint. I am not doing the maths, but you take my point that very significant gains can be made with relatively small reductions to petroleum safety zones. We can get a lot of ground back if we reduce petroleum safety zones.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you have any examples of where that has been done successfully and safely?

Simon BOAG: The only one I am aware of is we were able to negotiate a smaller petroleum safety zone around some of Basker Manta Gummy. Basker Manta Gummy is an Amplitude Energy asset. It is quite deep. It runs down just off the shelf, so it is certainly in trawl grounds and used to be heavily trawled. I think we were able to negotiate it to about 350 metres in one area, and that was significant for us. That was a significant gain, and that has worked very well. There is a real risk – look, it really is this simple. You can see an oil rig. It shows up on the radar, and you can see it and it has a light. But once that topside has gone and it is just a subsea wellhead, it is invisible unless you have got really good navigational equipment.

We are currently working with Esso, and I think they are going to support us to upgrade all the navigational equipment on trawl fishing vessels in that area – not in the whole fishery but in that area – so that all the Esso

infrastructure, be it there or being left there, we would collect put it in our navigational software so that when vessels go near it, there is an audible alarm. It is a system known as geofencing, and we are really hoping to finalise that negotiation with Esso shortly.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. What other methods of commercial fishing are affected by the rigs?

Simon BOAG: Really all of the methods that are occurring in eastern Bass Strait, so it would be shark fishing with gillnets; shark fishing with hooks; scallop dredging; octopus potting; obviously trawling, which we are talking about now; and probably some that I have forgotten.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: I could not find them in a search, so that is why I asked.

Simon BOAG: I apologise to the sectors that I have forgotten. The methods that are occurring – I mean, really all fishing methods are potentially affected by big metal infrastructure on the sea floor.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Beautiful. Thank you. Is there regular testing of the flesh of the fish, and is it recorded over time around the rigs? There are no records.

Simon BOAG: No. The short answer is no.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: So there are no records to say that prolonged exposure to heavy metals potentially leaking from the rigs is having an effect on fish or anything? There are no records to prove that yet.

Simon BOAG: Not that I am aware of. I would say that most of the fish that we are catching are highly transitory, so they are moving in and out of the field. Gummy sharks in particular, which are not caught mostly by trawl fishery but are caught by the shark gillnet fishery, are very transitory, and they are moving large distances. But even species like tiger flathead, which are heavily caught by the trawl fishery, are making significant movements, so they are not just hanging out in the oil and gas field.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you. Just coming from a farming background, I was curious if the marine industry was doing the same – we have to test all the flesh of the stock these days. What would the ideal clear hazard warnings look like for potential remaining infrastructure? I know you were talking about your fencing, but what about other marine users on boats, like private boats? What kind of hazard warnings do you think would be the best to put up if there was any remaining infrastructure?

Simon BOAG: My understanding is that Esso's plans are to remove all topsides down to X metres below the surface of the ocean. What we are talking about is subsurface equipment. I think, really, that is only of consequence to commercial fishing who are fishing with big heavy equipment on the sea floor. Recreational fishermen – and I am beyond keen as a recreational fisherman – are not at risk from subsurface, old oil and gas infrastructure.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes.

Simon BOAG: They might be at risk of losing a sinker, but they are not going to be anchoring, I would not think, in sort of 70 metres. That being the case, I would not think they were significantly at risk.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Simon, thank you so much for the evidence you have given today. I think we have found it all very interesting and informative. We do appreciate the time you have taken, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to review in coming weeks. With that, we conclude today's hearing. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.