



Fish guardians under attack

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Body

Unprotected officers forced to confront criminals, seafood poachers and violent thugs

Fisheries officers patrolling NSW waterways have gone on strike, demanding stab-proof vests and pepper spray like their interstate counterparts, to help them combat what they claim are armed criminals and bikies at sea.

Working alongside NSW Police, fisheries officers investigate illegal fishing activity and protect marine life, but they say they're being threatened with knives, and guns pointed at their heads, and face daily incidents of abuse and aggression - with no means to protect themselves.

"Fisheries officers are being shot at, run down, they have fishing knives pulled on them, someone is going to get killed," said Troy Wright, the Public Service Association Assistant General Secretary.

"The only equipment we have at our disposal in situations where we are being abused or attacked are batons and handcuffs which are practically archaic.

"We're just asking to match other jurisdictions like Victoria where they have modern regulations and powers of inspection and enforcement such as capsicum spray, stab-proof vests and body worn cameras." Fisheries officers are now taking industrial action, refusing to inspect commercial trawlers without police assistance at night - with the union claiming the NSW government has failed to acknowledge, or act on their safety concerns.

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) took the matter to the NSW Industrial Relations Commission on Wednesday, and the two parties have been ordered to return to the IRC for arbitration on October 18.

Mr Wright pointed to an incident in 2020 where a trawler carrying 1.8m tonnes of cocaine was caught off the NSW coast: "If fisheries officers had boarded this boat they might have been killed." Fisheries officers also face violence from amateur and commercial fishers breaking rules and seafood poachers making fortunes from increasingly expensive fish, lobsters and abalones.

Fisheries officer, and PSA delegate, Joe Wright and his colleague once had a gun aimed at them when they were sitting in wait beside illegal fishing gear beside NSW a river after a tip-off from a member of the public.

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"We can't even use binoculars or cameras without the adjoining landowners permission," Mr Wright said.

"So we have to sit close to the illegal gear and wait for whoever owns it or is using it to return.

"So here we were - well outside mobile phone service - waiting when the landowner comes running down to us, and points a longarm rifle at our heads. In that moment, we were sitting ducks." Mr Wright said the union has raised concerns with the -department and NSW Agriculture Minister Tara Moriarty around what they see as a deterioration in regulations, and the effect it has on staff.

"In other states, fisheries -officers have access to car and boat licence records like police; they can find out if people are violent offenders and avoid dangerous situations, they can see if someone has a history of crimes against the environment - in NSW we can't do that," he said.

Fisheries officers have little power of investigation under the "antiquated" Fisheries Management Act 1994, Troy Wright said.

In other states officers can apply to a magistrate to put a tracking device on a boat, in NSW they cannot do that.

Changes to the Federal Telecommunications Act in 2014 saw Fisheries officers lose their ability to apply for phone records - even though that's been rectified in every other state and territory.

"We know drug traffickers have infiltrated the commercial industry, miles off the coast in the dead of night we need to board boats, yet unlike other states we don't have a GPS vessel monitoring system for our commercial fishing fleet, one day fisheries officers will board a boat and they'll get killed," Mr Wright said.

"This is why the NSW fishing fleet is so appealing to drug traffickers.". The Agriculture Minister's office said the industrial dispute is confidential.

KNIVES AND ABUSE August 2024: Fisheries Officers (FOs) on the Hastings River inspecting of unlawful oyster aquaculture cultivation threatened by a person brandishing a hammer.

March 2024: FOs working in Iluka and Yamba areas covertly observing illegal fishing approached by a man wielding a baseball bat and threatened with assault. They are later threatened with assault with a section of timber.

January 2024: FOs targeting illegal collection of intertidal invertebrates accosted and verbally threatened by people they apprehended, in incidents near Kurnell and Woollooware.

December 2023: A fisher on the Clarence River near Iluka who was using unlawful fishing gear became verbally aggressive and brandished a filleting knife at FOs. May 2021: FOs were conducting inspections of commercial ocean beach hauling operations near Crescent Head when a fisher drove his vehicle at speed directly at an FO, only to turn away just before collision.

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