



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, RESOURCES AND
RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS**

Management of Commonwealth fisheries

CANBERRA

Wednesday, 12 February 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, RESOURCES
AND RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

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Matters arising from Audit Report No. 32 1995-96 Commonwealth Fisheries Management: Australian Fisheries Management Authority.

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WITNESSES

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The committee met at 10.08 a.m.

Mr Adams took the chair.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Adams)—I declare open this eighth public hearing of the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Primary Industries, Resources and Rural and Regional Affairs into the management of Commonwealth fisheries.

In June 1996 a report by the Auditor-General on the management of Commonwealth fisheries was presented to the parliament. The report was then referred to the committee by the House of Representatives. Our task now is to review the audit report and to inquire into the matters raised by the auditors. We will report back to the House with recommendations for any government action that may be necessary to redress either the problems identified in the audit report or any problems that the committee itself may discover.

We come to this inquiry with open minds about the auditor's findings. The evidence we are taking at these hearings and the written submissions that have been made to us will be important contributions to our review of the issues. The committee appreciates the contributions it has received from the public, the fishing industry and government agencies. Today we will hear from a representative of the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation.

Committee proceedings are recognised as proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the House of Representatives demand. Witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege in respect of the evidence they give before the committee. Witnesses will not be asked to take an oath or make an affirmation. However, they are reminded that false evidence given to a parliamentary committee may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should witnesses at any stage wish to give evidence in private they may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to that request.

DUNDAS-SMITH, Mr Peter, Executive Director, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, PO Box 222, Deakin West, Australian Capital Territory 2600

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome. We have received a submission from you and have authorised its publication. Do you wish to add to that submission in any way?

Mr Dundas-Smith—I do, briefly. The FRDC is 4½ years old. Its achievements to date include establishing its leadership role in fisheries R&D with respect to setting strategic priorities; encouraging the development of state and fisheries research plans; and influencing the way other government and state funding agencies invest their money in R&D, thereby eliminating duplication in R&D effort nationally. The FRDC has also invested in essential industry development infrastructure with respect to information delivery, training, quality and value adding.

I believe that the FRDC, in its relatively short lifetime, has exceeded the expectations of its stakeholders—namely, the fishing industry and the Commonwealth government. I believe the same applies to AFMA. If you compare the management of Commonwealth fisheries today with the situation five years ago, it would be wrong to deny that AFMA has made significant improvements—particularly since, unlike the FRDC, AFMA did not start with a clean slate. I know the committee appreciates the state of affairs that AFMA inherited. AFMA, like the FRDC, set out five years ago to change the way things were done in the fishing industry. It must be allowed to continue this course.

The worst outcome from this inquiry, in my opinion, would be a structural change to AFMA to remove its independent status. I mention this because I am aware that the Commonwealth government is currently reviewing all its statutory authority arrangements. Probably the most appropriate outcome from this inquiry would be some legislative finetuning.

ACTING CHAIR—Thanks for that. The committee will have some questions to ask.

Mr WAKELIN—I have just a few general opening comments and then three or four questions to help me and, hopefully, the committee to understand this. In your submission you say, under the heading ‘The Link Between Sustainability and Funding’:

Compared with land-based resources, knowledge of fish resources is poor, and acquiring such knowledge is slow and expensive.

That seems to be the thing that comes out all the time, in this whole business. I am seeking to understand, in view of the \$50 million that is spent and the \$30 million that is managed by FRDC, things like collection costs—how difficult it is to collect the money—and practical things like that. We could run through three or four general things, or do you want to take up that one?

Mr Dundas-Smith—I do, because it is very close to my heart. The Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, being one of 15 R&D corporations, is the only one that relies on voluntary levy for much of its funding base. It gets a compulsory levy of 0.25 per cent from AFMA, but its contribution from the states is largely at the whim of the fishing industry and the governments within the states. Just recently we have had a lot of problems getting any contribution this year from Tasmania.

I feel that I have added responsibility over that of other R & D Corporation Executive Directors,

where I have to work continually to ensure our funding base. When you look at the issues with fisheries you see that this is a very contradictory situation, because there is so much need for research just to manage the public resource.

Mr ANDREN—Would you be suggesting an obligatory levy, built into the adjustment to the legislation?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes, I would, but I know that that is not too easy to achieve with the current Commonwealth government. I think the problem is—I am not too sure of the background to it—that we are also the second youngest R&D corporation and, at the time when we were established, the thought was that it should be left up to the states to collect the levy from the fishermen and then pass that levy on to us. That has not occurred as expected, and the way that the levy is collected from each state and passed on to us varies in every state. No two states collect it in the same way.

There is a positive side to this: it keeps us on our toes and it makes sure that we do address the priorities identified at the coalface. So, while I feel that the FRDC is disadvantaged as compared with other R&D corporations, I accept that the current arrangements may not change.

Mr WAKELIN—As compared with a compulsory levy, there is a voluntary nature to this—a ‘come and go a bit as you please’ type of approach?

Mr Dundas-Smith—That is so. A lot depends on the whim of the industry in the particular states, too, and how much pressure they put on their state governments to pass money on to the FRDC.

Mr WAKELIN—I have got about four points. Perhaps I should just go through them, and then I will be out of the way. I would like to hear a comment about the memorandum of understanding; I would like to hear a little bit more about fishing industry cooperation, which we have touched on. I think Mr Stevens, from AFMA, commented on developing the good relationship between bodies such as yours and AFMA, et cetera, as a sound basis for research. I would like to hear your comments about how effective the contribution of the fishing industry is—not so much in the dollars, which we have covered, but in terms of the practical information that the fishing industry is handing on—as an approach to that issue.

I am interested in three or four points, so I hope we can cover them all. A quick one is duplication. In the submission there is mention of duplication because of some multitude of sources of funding, et cetera. And the last one I would like to hear about is the fishing research advisory bodies, and how that matches up. So that is a conglomerate of things which may give us a bit better oversight.

Mr Dundas-Smith—First of all, the memorandum of understanding that we have with AFMA is unique, in that we do not have MOUs with the states. There is no reason why we could not, provided that the states met the same criteria. As I said, at the moment it is unlikely that they could do so. One of the reasons that we put the memorandum of understanding in place with AFMA was the recognition that the industry does contribute a compulsory levy to the FRDC, and therefore the industry wants some comfort that its R&D needs are going to be recognised by the FRDC in our funding processes.

The FRDC undertakes in that memorandum of understanding to ensure complete consultation, with

AFMA acting as the Commonwealth FRAB. That consultation is really no different from that which takes place between us and the states, as far as priorities are concerned now. But I should say that, as a partner to that consultation, AFMA is streets ahead of the states.

Mr WAKELIN—What about the fishing research advisory bodies?

Mr Dundas-Smith—These are fairly unique to our corporation. Other R&D corporations, such as grains, do have regional committees and they take a fair amount of ownership over those. We do not claim ownership over the FRABs, but we certainly played a major role in the development of the FRABs and the FRAB network nationally. What it does is to allow input, at fisheries-state-regional level, to setting R&D priorities. The FRAB network works well but it is not perfect, and I do not think it will ever be perfect. No sooner do you get a couple of states operating really well when the politics or something else shifts in the state and the FRDC may have to re-establish its relationship with the FRAB. It is important that the FRDC keep in contact with the FRABs and give them all the support we can, because they are very important to the way we operate. Without the FRABs we would be making ivory tower decisions in Canberra.

Do you want me to comment on duplication?

ACTING CHAIR—Sure, go for it.

Mr Dundas-Smith—I do not believe there is a lot of duplication. We have just been through the process of evaluating probably \$11 million worth of applications for this coming financial year. We have checked our own database and we have checked rural research in progress databases, and by and large the applications that come to us do not duplicate previous work. They might add to it, they might update it. I know there is a lot of talk about duplication in research and development, but I can say with confidence that I do not believe it is there in fisheries R&D.

You might ask: what about the other \$17 million of fisheries R & D that is not managed by the FRDC and that we do not see? That is largely funds that are made available through DIST and DEST programs and universities. They would not be duplicating the sort of research that we manage.

Mr WAKELIN—There is just one supplementary matter that I would like to pick up from one of your answers. You talked about the approach of the current government in terms of funding, and you were obviously detecting some change because of which you have concerns about the funding base.

Mr Dundas-Smith—No, I have not got concerns. In fact, it was not a criticism of government at all. It was just that the government defined the rules for putting levies in place and it makes the implementation of a compulsory levy a little bit more difficult. Perhaps that is not the way to go. But certainly I think state governments have got to play their role too.

ACTING CHAIR—Research priority seems to be important—who chooses the priority and whether we get the priorities right. You have a structure and criteria for all that, coming out of some arrangement with AFMA. How does all that work? How do you take a brief, or whatever?

Mr Dundas-Smith—We have detailed in our R&D plan what our program structure is, and essentially that is our strategic priorities. You will have a lot of people talking about strategic priorities, and I guess I am a bit pragmatic about this. Strategic priorities are not going to vary, no matter who puts them in place; what varies is the way they are presented. What is important is how those strategic priorities translate to project level, because at the end of the day what counts is what projects you have got in place—where you are putting the R & D investment.

The way it works with AFMA—and certainly the way it is supposed to work in the states—is that the research committees of the MACs will start in about July to review what their R & D priorities are for the forthcoming year. When they do that, they take account of a rough budget that they could expect for research. They then determine their priorities, and they pass those on to a higher level committee which we call the Commonwealth FRAB. The priorities get reviewed there, so in about August the Commonwealth FRAB has a pretty good idea what funding applications are going to be submitted to the FRDC.

There are a number of iterative processes which arrive at delivering to us applications for FRDC funding for the forthcoming year. I suppose I could hazard a guess and say that through the Commonwealth FRAB process well in excess of 100 applications or preliminary applications would be reviewed, which, by the time they come to us, have probably been distilled to about 15.

ACTING CHAIR—Does that fit in easily with your \$11 million?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes, it does. The Commonwealth FRAB calculates its expected returns from the FRDC - the compulsory levy multiplied by three gives you a rough budget for the year. The states do that to a large degree, too.

ACTING CHAIR—But you have set a strategic plan which they work under. Is that so?

Mr Dundas-Smith—They know what we will fund and what we will not fund, yes.

Mr NAIRN—You mentioned that you do not believe there is duplication, that the \$11 million that you allocate and the \$17 million—did you say—through DIST and all the other—

Mr Dundas-Smith—We have got apples and oranges here. The \$17 million I was referring to is the gap between the \$33 million that we manage and the \$50 million that is spent on fisheries R&D nationally.

Mr NAIRN—So you do not believe there is a duplication in research, because they do research in areas where you do not. But is it the most efficient way to spend the overall dollars for fisheries research? Would it be more efficient to bring that money through so that there is a total global look at the research side of it?

Mr Dundas-Smith—I get asked this question quite often. You might have asked the question last time we met.

Mr NAIRN—It was not on the record, then.

Mr Dundas-Smith—Certainly, with applied research and the sort of research that we would fund, there are a lot of advantages in putting the funding through the FRDC. There is also a need for some pretty basic research, the type of research that the universities undertake, and I think it is appropriate that they should be allowed to undertake that sort of research. But that is not all that universities do. Universities do receive our funding and, for that type of research, they will go through the FRAB system.

Mr NAIRN—That draws them into that overall control, I suppose.

Mr Dundas-Smith—It does, yes. There are some research institutes which would really prefer the FRDC to fund projects to 100 per cent. So there are other projects which are funded solely by institutes with their core dollars. You will hear that from institutes. But that is where you run the danger of getting duplication—for institutes to go and undertake the research that the researchers want to undertake, regardless of what industry may think. You might think that the FRDC wants to control everything. It is just that we do not invest in ourselves, so we do not have a vested interest in the money that we invest in R&D, but we are plugged into a very rigorous consultative system through the FRABs.

Mr NAIRN—I turn to a separate issue, the current research that is being done on the eastern gemfish. What has been the FRDC's role in that? Have you been involved in that at all?

Mr Dundas-Smith—We have, yes. We have made a major contribution to gemfish research. That has been ongoing for about five or six years.

Mr NAIRN—Yes, but it has probably accelerated in the last couple of years—

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes, it has.

Mr NAIRN—When, basically, people were stopped from catching it. The quotas, the TACs, were cut to zero. I just wanted to see where that is currently at, from your point of view and from the overall point of view, because it is a fairly major—

Mr Dundas-Smith—We have just had one major project finished, and there are going to be more projects looking at it in the future. I am really not in a position to discuss the outcomes of those projects. The system that we operate under—I do not know whether this is what you were getting at—is flexible enough to accommodate those emergency type research needs, where you have got fisheries collapsing or perceived to be collapsing. Although we work to a very rigorous annual cycle, for good reason, that does not prevent us from considering funding of high priority projects throughout the year. The recent gemfish one is a good example of a project that was funded by us out of our normal annual cycle.

Mr NAIRN—It is that flexibility I am interested in. Anecdotal evidence tells me that they are still catching mobs of gemfish. A lot of people will say that it was not necessary to have cut it like that, so dramatically.

ACTING CHAIR—Please excuse us, Peter. We have to go into the House for a division.

Short adjournment

Mr ANDREN—The ANAO report alludes to the quality of the researchers using the data, ‘and the data they do not yet have.’ It talks about the unreliability of the sort of research, the fact that we have been at this business for 50 years in the CSIRO, in the BRS for 10 years, and so on. You say that your objectives are to reduce the level of uncertainty about fish stock and habitats. Given that you are dealing with this mobile resource, how confident are you of setting realistic quotas that meet ESD guidelines?

Mr Dundas-Smith—The FRDC does not set quotas, but let me go back to how confident I am in the research that leads to the setting of TACs, given that the data is not always accurate. I think the data is getting better, but we have to do a lot more to improve the data. We are really dealing in an unknown area. We are dealing with an industry that historically has been suspicious of anyone wanting any information from it.

Last Thursday and Friday we had a large workshop in Canberra, all about economic statistics for the fishing industry. We planned on getting 50 people there; we got 92 people from around Australia. Largely, the people that turned up were the statisticians, the economists working in government departments, biologists, fisheries managers. We started off with about 10 from the fishing industry and finished on Friday afternoon with about five. It just indicates that the fishing industry needs to be educated, to be able to realise what cost to the fishing industry there is in dodgy data.

I do see that as a role for FRDC. As a result of the workshop, we will work with other interested parties to improve the statistics so that the research which is based on them is better. But it does require the development of relationships based on trust. I think you will see, as the years unfold, that people will start getting better data. Of course, electronics is helping us too.

Mr ANDREN—I turn now to the role of the CSIRO in all this. I guess that, in the orange roughy problems in the late 1980s, they may have blotted their copybook to some degree and lost a bit of the confidence of the industry. But it seems, according to what they told us in Hobart, that under their current budget they can afford only one research sweep down the west coast every year. Do you think we should be subsidising CSIRO’s fish research role more, rather than having it seek revenue overseas to research others’ fish stocks?

Mr Dundas-Smith—I am not sure. That is really a business decision for CSIRO. It gets its budget; it certainly gets the largest share of FRDC funding. It is a business decision, which means that they have to plan their usage of the *Southern Surveyor* to ensure that they maximise its usage. They should not be aiming just to keep the *Southern Surveyor* going, or researching for the sake of researching. I don’t know enough about the Southern Surveyor operations to really comment.

Mr ANDREN—What advantages might there be in AFMA having its own in-house research capabilities?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Do you mean its own funding, and funding research, or do you mean having scientists and undertaking research? If it is the latter, I would strongly advise against it. I do believe in the

competitive approach to research funding, and if we were not going down that line we might as well give the lot to CSIRO. But you would probably find that you would lose control of the priority setting if you did that.

As far as AFMA having its own funding is concerned, and funding its own research, I would not be in favour of it. I am not implying that it would not work. It could work very well. The only problem is, as you should bear in mind, that AFMA has not got a national responsibility; it has a responsibility for managing Commonwealth fisheries. I think one of the advantages of channelling or making FRDC responsible for funding is that you do get a national approach to the funding of research. This is evident when we look at applications. Even now, as I said, there is little duplication because we are there largely to police the funding so that we do not get duplication. But we see the duplication at the application stage.

Probably AFMA could handle it a lot better than the states, which do have their own funding base, but there would be no-one keeping an overall watch. I would not oppose AFMA having its own research funds.

Mr ANDREN—This final question concerns the memorandum of understanding. The possibility of tension or perhaps contradiction seems to come up in the ANAO report. The report refers to a clarification between maximising economic efficiency in the exploitation of fishery resources and ensuring that that exploitation is conducted in a manner consistent with ESD. Given that there is such imprecise biomass information or whatever we want to call it, is there a risk that, unless AFMA has control over both maximising economic efficiency and research, the two could be in conflict?

Mr Dundas-Smith—AFMA does have control over research. It just does not hold the funds and does not have the final decision. But through its MAC process and through the Commonwealth FRAB, it does determine its priorities. I think that last year every priority that AFMA identified got funded.

To come back to what I was saying about the national approach, sometimes maximising return from fisheries can be achieved other than on a fishery by fishery basis. As I said in my opening comments, we have put in place industry infrastructure like quality assurance processes, training, information delivery. That is how you can maximise your return. I guess that contrary to what I was saying about AFMA managing its own research funds, is that AFMA may then not be in a position to participate in some of these national programs, which are essential to maximising the return from fisheries—in other words, getting more return from fewer fish.

Mr ANDREN—You touched on this a moment ago. How quickly are the fishers coming around to the point of view that they will need to share data and perhaps something that has been commercially confidential to this point, in some regards, because it has been so competitive? How quickly are they coming round to the position that, unless they participate and be part of the research, it is not going to be sustainable?

Mr Dundas-Smith—You say ‘the fishers’, but there is no national answer to that because it needs to be reviewed on a fishery by fishery basis. I do not know whether the committee has gone to Wallis Lake cooperative at all. At Wallis Lake’s, you would find that there is a lot of goodwill between the catching sector and the processing sectors. They are putting in quality assurance, they are exporting overseas, and there is a lot of trust. In fact, the fishermen there realise the need to fish sustainably and they are participating in catch reductions. That is a good example.

All over Australia there are varying attitudes to this subject. You would have to take it on a fishery by fishery basis. We know where the good work is being done; equally we know where there is a lot of resistance to any change.

Mr ANDREN—Can you put on the record where you are getting support or where—

Mr Dundas-Smith—There is some anecdotal evidence. There is a lot of value adding being done in Queensland, with low value species. Wallis Lake is a classic example. Down at Eden they are starting to realise now—because they are not getting their price for fish—that they can do a lot better than they are doing, so we are working with them to develop up a program for increasing the value of the catch. Redspot whiting, up at the Clarence, and the sardine story over in Western Australia—there are a lot of good stories.

Mr NAIRN—Where are the negatives?

Mr Dundas-Smith—In other places.

Mr NAIRN—You are not prepared to elaborate to any degree?

Mr Dundas-Smith—No, because I may not be correct.

ACTING CHAIR—Could I just turn to industry development. Fisheries have never, other than one company going down a product stream, developed products or looked at ways of value adding. You have just commented, I think, that you are now involved in value adding or how to look beyond the boat when the fish is landed. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

Mr Dundas-Smith—First of all I might add that I think we would be the only ones funding anything of significance on the post-harvest side in the fishing industry. CSIRO, through its old Division of Oceanography, is starting to do that.

ACTING CHAIR—Sorry to interrupt you. The industry itself really has not done that, has it, in the past?

Mr Dundas-Smith—It has, but probably not to the degree or with the speed that it needs to. There is certainly market failure there, but when we talk about value adding we have also got to appreciate that we are talking about not only what goes in a can but also live fish. The southern bluefin tuna story I think is a good example of how value adding can work. I know that we have got problems with the price at the moment because of the value of the yen, but it is a good example of how value adding has helped to take the pressure off the wild resource. That was an FRDC funded initiative.

ACTING CHAIR—After the funding, with the data, it comes back that AFMA is actually making the decisions on management, isn't it?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes, it is.

ACTING CHAIR—You do not really have any input after the research is submitted. It is actually the decision making process on the data where the decisions for management are made, and that is all done in AFMA?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Correct.

Mr NAIRN—We were talking about funding within AFMA for research. Something like \$1 million has been taken from DPIE recently and given directly to AFMA for a discretionary research fund. Are you still involved in that expenditure, with AFMA? How is that \$1 million being handled?

Mr Dundas-Smith—From what I understand, that money is largely spent on the interpretation of the results and doing research in setting the TACs. In other words, it is a very hands-on stock assessment process. But you would need to confirm that with AFMA.

Mr NAIRN—Did you see the report by the working group on the adjustments in the south-east fishery? I know that most of that is not necessarily related back to research, but there were a couple of recommendations in there that could have some impact. Have you seen a copy of that at all?

Mr Dundas-Smith—I have seen a copy. I have not read it all.

Mr NAIRN—It talked about de-quotaing some species and various other things, and I just wondered whether there was anything in that that had rung any alarm bells or anything in particular that FRDC—

Mr Dundas-Smith—No.

ACTING CHAIR—A bit specific, I think.

Mr NAIRN—Possibly, but I was just covering all things while we have the opportunity.

ACTING CHAIR—Further questions?

Mr ANDREN—Some pretty negative publicity about the industry came out at the Queensland congress, yet the argument we are getting is that Australia has best practice and the rest of the world can certainly learn a lot from us. How do you see the research that has been done being bundled up and presented to the public in a proactive way, to show that it is world's best? There is a perception out there of an overexploitation. Obviously, one would think that we are on top of it. There have been newspaper articles regularly, and I am sensitive to the fact that we are now trying to come to terms with this whole AFMA management. I suspect that there is a very strong public perception out there that fisheries management is in the Dark Ages. If that is not the case, do you see any proactive role in getting this message out?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes, I do. I think that the fisheries managers—I am not singling out AFMA here—could do a lot more to promote their own successes. But I think the fishing industry could do a lot more, too. It was only by coercion, largely on my part, that we actually had industry representation up there in Brisbane. Looking after their own industry profile is something which they are not good at, and I think

you have got to change the public perception of fishermen. It is an industry that does not invest a lot in itself. I have said on many occasions that the peak body for the fishing industry, for the \$1.7 billion industry, runs on a budget which is less than that of the honey industry, worth \$89 million.

It is an industry that does not like infrastructure, it does not see the need for industry profile—all this came out at the workshop last week. It was quite clear what sort of statistical information we need to gather to be able to push it in front of the politicians and say, ‘Hey, this is what the industry is worth. This is what it is doing.’ But we have got a catch and effort mentality; that is where all the energy is being spent. We should be looking further and saying how many people this industry employs. No-one can tell you that. It is not for the FRDC; it is not for managers. The industry has got to get its act together and stop acting as though they operate in eight different countries.

Mr NAIRN—They just like to go and catch fish.

Mr Dundas-Smith—That is right.

ACTING CHAIR—So there is a great need for a more national process from the fishers’ point of view?

Mr Dundas-Smith—Absolutely. That would not be disputed by some of the fisheries leaders—and, I might add, there is a paucity of leadership in the industry. That makes it hard for all of us, because we are not working like other bodies—we do not have a national farmers federation. FRDC, AFMA and the state governments—if they would admit it—are all disadvantaged by not having strong industry representation to work with.

ACTING CHAIR—Or, usually, two or three different bodies within the one state.

Mr Dundas-Smith—Yes.

ACTING CHAIR—We have just about finished. Thanks very much for your attendance and your evidence today.

Mr Dundas-Smith—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Nairn):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by paragraph (o) of standing order 28B, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.04 a.m.