“TEAM AUSTRALIA” NEEDED TO FIGHT ILLEGAL FISHERS

Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries Kon Vatskalis will move a Motion in Parliament today urging Prime Minister John Howard to personally take action in the fight against illegal foreign fishing activity.

It comes on the day a 75 metre illegal foreign fishing vessel, suspected of being used as a mother ship for smaller illegal boats, has been escorted into Darwin Harbour.

Minister Vatskalis will call on the Prime Minister to convene a summit of all relevant ministers and stakeholders to develop a national strategy to tackle the problem.

A raft of Federal Government agencies are trying to deal with the influx of illegal foreign fishers – Customs, the Australian Defence Force, Coastwatch, Fisheries, Immigration and Foreign Affairs – but there is currently no coordinated across-Government approach.

Mr Vatskalis said the reality is that more than 8000 illegal foreign fishing vessels were sighted in 2004/05 and only 280 were apprehended last year.

“Any successful illegal fishing trip encourages further incursions. The key to Australia’s approach to the problem is greater apprehension and destruction of illegal foreign fishing boats to act as a deterrent.

“We need a plan that recognises the States and Territories as partners in a “Team Australia” approach. Without immediate action this situation will not only worsen – it will become a source of tension with our regional neighbours.”

He said his concerns have been raised with the former Federal Fisheries Minister Ian Macdonald “too many” times but most of his letters about the issue remain unanswered.

“I hope the new Fisheries Minister Eric Abetz will take a more cooperative approach so we can tackle this together. Illegal incursions are at record levels and appear to be increasing.

“So far the efforts made by Federal agencies to address the problem have failed. Customs officials themselves have admitted that what they are doing simply isn’t working.

“The Federal Government should help fund an expansion of the Territory’s Indigenous Marine Ranger Program – the rangers are already in place and have a proven track record in responding to illegal fishing activity. They provide a platform for Federal authorities to investigate and apprehend illegal fishers,” said Mr Vatskalis.