

Commission meeting

The Commission convened for its 91st meeting in Canberra, ACT on 8 November 2023.

Stakeholder Engagement

The Commission considered and discussed the written industry update reports from the Scallop Fishermen's Association of Tasmania Inc., the Australian Southern Bluefin Tuna Industry Association, Tuna Australia, and the Great Australian Bight Industry Association. The Commission also welcomed a verbal presentation from Annie Jarrett, CEO of the Northern Prawn Fishery Industry (NPF), on the challenging economic conditions in the fishery, resulting from changes in available markets, low prices, high catches of banana prawns, high global production and the continuing high price of diesel. This discussion included advice from the NPF related to progressing amendments to the *Northern Prawn Fishery Management Plan 1995*.

Several other industry updates highlighted a continuation of many of the economic and external pressures that the Commission has been considering over its past meetings, such as spatial squeeze, high cost of production, shortage of crews and market instability. The Commission and AFMA Management remain committed to ensuring that AFMA's regulatory settings pursue all our legislative objectives, while actively seeking to minimise impacts on the efficiency and viability of fishing.

Total Allowable Catch (TAC) and Effort (TAE) Decisions*Southern Bluefin Tuna (SBT)*

The Commission considered the outcomes of the most recent meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT). The CCSBT decision to increase the global TAC for SBT, based on continued stock recovery, is a positive reflection of the effective management action taken over the last decade. The Commission was pleased to note the projections that stock recovery will continue and is on track to achieve the target of 30% Total Reproductive Output by 2035. The Commission noted that Australia's Effective Catch Limit as agreed by CCSBT is 7,295 tonnes, and that the *Southern Bluefin Tuna Management Plan 1995* provides that the Australian National Catch Allocation (ANCA - commercial TAC) cannot exceed 95% of that amount, with the remaining 5% being set aside to cover recreational fishing mortality.

The Commission agreed to determine the ANCA at 6,930 tonnes for the next fishing season. The Commission also agreed to determine the following arrangements for the next fishing season:

- a) season dates to be 1 December 2023 to 30 November 2024; and
- b) actual Live Weight of a SFR to be 1.30152 kilograms.
- c) percentage of undercatch to be:
 - i. 20%, if the total commercial catch in the fishery for the season is less than the effective commercial catch limit minus 20% of ANCA for that season; or
 - ii. 100%, if the total commercial catch in the fishery for the season is greater than or equal to the effective commercial catch limit minus 20% of ANCA for that season.
- d) overcatch percentage to be 5%;
- e) overcatch amount to be 100 tonnes; and
- f) overcatch additional weight to be 2 tonnes.

The Commission reviewed detailed advice from the Tropical Tuna Resource Assessment Group and the Tropical Tuna Management Advisory Committee on the status of stocks managed by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), as well as indicators and available data from the ETBF and the application of WCPFC Conservation and Management Measures.

The Commission agreed to determine the following measures for each key ETBF species:

	TACC (t)	Overcatch %	Undercatch %	Determined Weight (t)
Albacore Tuna	2,500	10	10	2
Bigeye Tuna	1,056	10	10	2
Broadbill Swordfish	1,047	10	10	2
Striped Marlin	351	10	10	2
Yellowfin Tuna	2,400	10	10	2

Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery (WTBF)

The Commission reviewed detailed advice from the Tropical Tuna Resource Assessment Group and the Tropical Tuna Management Advisory Committee on the status of stocks managed by the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), as well as available data from the WTBF and the application of IOTC Resolutions. The Commission noted that fishing effort in the WTBF remains extremely low.

The Commission agreed to determine the following measures for each key WTBF species:

	TACC (t)	Determined Weight (t)
Bigeye Tuna	2,000	2
Broadbill Swordfish	3,000	2
Striped Marlin	125	2
Yellowfin Tuna	2,000	2

Southern Squid Jig Fishery (SSJF)

The Commission noted that, while increased from 2022, catch in the SSJF remains very low against the likely capacity of the target stock. The Commission noted that the continuing low effort is due to a range of economic and external factors, including dual endorsement of most squid boats in other fisheries and jurisdictions, rather than poor fishing conditions or a reflection on squid stock abundance. The Commission also noted that the conservative lower trigger had been reached. However, scrutiny by the RAG confirmed there were no sustainability concerns.

The Commission determined the TAE for the 2024 fishing season at 550 standard squid jigging machines.

Macquarie Island Toothfish Fishery (MITF)

The Commission considered advice from the Sub-Antarctic Resource Assessment Group (SARAG) and the Southern Management Advisory Committee (SouthMAC) on the status of the MITF toothfish stock, based on the 2023 stock assessment conducted by CSIRO and the application of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) decision rules.

The Commission agreed to determine the following TACs for the fishing year commencing on 15 April 2024 and ending on 14 April 2025:

Target species

Patagonian toothfish (*Dissostichus eleginoides*) 468 tonnes

Bycatch species

Each of the other species (other than Patagonian toothfish) 50 tonnes

Heard Island and McDonald Islands Fishery (HIMI)

The Commission considered advice from SARAG and SouthMAC on the status of the HIMI toothfish and mackerel icefish stocks, based on the 2023 stock assessment conducted by the Australian Antarctic Division and the decisions taken by CCAMLR at its recent meeting.

The Commission noted several uncertainties in the toothfish stock assessment had been identified by SARAG and CCAMLR, and concerns raised by SARAG about the level of precaution in the CCAMLR decision rule. The Commission noted that some of the identified uncertainties could lead to more optimistic outcomes, while others may lead to greater pessimism. The Commission supported the identified intersessional workplan to strengthen the stock assessment.

The Commission noted the CCAMLR decision to set the HIMI toothfish TAC at 2,660 tonnes, and the SouthMAC recommendation to set a lower TAC at 2,400 tonnes. The SouthMAC recommendation was based on SARAG advice that it would be more appropriate to use a shorter timeframe to achieve the target reference point of B_{50} than the timeframe in the CCAMLR decision rule. A TAC of 2,400 tonnes would allow the stock to rebuild to the target in 25 years, rather than the CCAMLR period of 35 years.

The Commission noted a recommendation from part of industry that the TAC should be held constant from 2023 at 2,510 tonnes, which would be higher than SouthMAC’s recommendation but still lower than the CCAMLR decision. The Commission considered this proposal against the various uncertainties in the stock assessment and the economic cost to industry of TAC reductions.

The Commission decided that a toothfish TAC of 2,400 tonnes represented a better balance between adding precaution to the CCAMLR decision in a structured way while minimising financial loss to industry. The Commission thanks HIMI industry representatives for their high level of proactive engagement and willingness to contribute to precautionary management, even where that comes at real cost.

The Commission determined the following TACs for the fishing year commencing 1 December 2023 and ending 30 November 2024:

Target species:

Patagonian toothfish (*Dissostichus eleginoides*) 2,400 tonnes

Mackerel icefish (*Chamsocephalus gunnari*) 714 tonnes

Bycatch Species:

Macrourus Caml and *M. whitsoni* 409 tonnes

M. holotrachys and *M. carinatus* 360 tonnes

Unicorn Icefish (*Channichthys rhinoceratus*) 1,663 tonnes

Skates and Rays (*Bathyraja spp.*) 120 tonnes

Grey Rockcod (*Lepidonotothen squamifrons*) 80 tonnes

All other species 50 tonnes (for each species)

The Commission received an update on the planned next phase of the trial of stereo video (SV) technology to monitor the transfer of SBT from two pontoons to grow-out cages. While the Commission was pleased with the success of phase one of the trial (February 2023), it noted that phase two will be more difficult, involving testing the technology in operational conditions on actual transfers.

The Commission considered that SV will not be well enough advanced would provide a robust means for monitoring transfers for the purposes of quota decrementation in the 2023/24 fishing season (and nor was this an objective of phase two). As such, the Commission agreed to continue the well-established “100 fish sample” as follows:

- a) average weight is to be calculated based on at least 100 fish each weighing 8kg or more taken from the tow pontoon (to two decimal places). If 150 fish have been taken and the number of fish weighing 8kg, or more, is less than 100 then the average weight shall be calculated from the 150 fish taken regardless of the individual weight of each fish;
- b) number of fish transferred is to be tallied by a farm representative and AFMA based on a side view video recording of the opening between the tow pontoon and the farm during the transfer of fish; and
- c) the weight of fish in the transfer is determined by multiplying the average weight by the number of fish transferred into the tow pontoon.

AFMA Climate Risk Framework

The Commission has been concerned for several years that climate change is already impacting several Commonwealth fish stocks and undermining fisheries management. With impacts expected to accelerate, and significant marine heatwaves predicted over coming months, the AFMA Climate Risk Framework has been developed as a transitional solution to integrate climate risk into TAC decisions (via a semi-quantitative approach) until such time as climate impacts can be more explicitly integrated into harvest strategies, stock assessments and/or ecological risk assessments.

The Commission approved the proposed Climate Risk Framework, with some suggested minor amendments, and agreed to proceed to trial implementation in early 2024. The Commission also agreed that AFMA would write to all RAG and MAC chairs explaining the Framework and the terms of the trial.

The Commission highlighted the important linkage between its actions to mitigate the impact of climate change and the review of the Harvest Strategy Policy being undertaken by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. In particular, the Commission noted the risk that if the future policy continues to place sole responsibility for species sustainability onto fisheries management outcomes, even where non-fishing impacts like climate change are causing declines, the inevitable result will be to close many commercial fisheries or to impose increasing regulatory responses that prevent fishing from being economically viable.

Amendments to the *Northern Prawn Fishery Management Plan 1995* (the Plan)

At its 89th meeting, the Commission considered a package of, mainly administrative, amendments to the Plan and agreed to seek further advice from the NPFI related to the proposed removal of the requirement for a minimum number of gear Statutory Fishing Rights (SFRs) to be held on each boat SFR.

Considering the advice from the NPFI Board, the Commission agreed that the package of amendments should not be progressed at this time.

Compliance

Commissioners congratulated AFMA and the fishing industry on the high levels of compliance being reported under the National Compliance and Education Program. While not in its direct purview, the Commission expressed its concern about the high level of illegal foreign fishing in Australia's north and encouraged all government agencies to work together on enhanced solutions.

Annual Report

The Commission noted its satisfaction with the AFMA 2022/23 Annual Report and expressed its thanks to all staff involved in the process and to the Minister for rapid approval allowing tabling prior to Senate Estimates.

Helen Kroger

Chairman