

**Commission meeting**

The Commission convened for its 92<sup>nd</sup> meeting in Canberra, ACT, on 12 and 13 March 2024.

Stakeholder Engagement

The Commission considered and discussed the written industry update reports from the Australian Southern Bluefin Tuna Industry Association, Tuna Australia, the Northern Prawn Fishery Industry Association, and the Great Australian Bight Industry Association.

The Commission convened AFMA's annual public meeting in accordance with the *Fisheries Administration Act 1991*. The majority of stakeholders that attended the virtual meeting were affiliated with the commercial fishing sector, although several overseas participants registered their interest, and one joined the session.

The Commission also met with the members of the Commonwealth Fisheries Association to discuss common challenges and opportunities in the fishery sector. The meeting considered AFMA and industry priorities and sought areas for cooperation in addressing these.

Senior Executives from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry also met with the Commission to discuss matters of common interest, most notably the ongoing review of the Commonwealth Fisheries Harvest Strategy Policy (CFHSP).

Commonwealth Trawl Sector (CTS) closures

The Commission reviewed available data on the catch and effort of at-risk species so far in the 2023-24 fishing season, as well as the impact on flathead catch and catch per unit effort (CPUE). In summary:

- Jackass morwong catch is estimated to be reduced by around 75% (against a target of 60%);
- Flathead catch is estimated to be reduced by around 15%; and
- Flathead nominal CPUE is estimated to have increased by around 10%.

The Commission was pleased to note that, while preliminary only, data available to date suggest that the combination of reduced bycatch TACs, constant flathead TAC, closures and structural adjustment appear to be meeting the stated objective of reducing significantly the at-risk species catch while minimising economic disruption to the fleet.

The Commission considered a proposal to adjust the eastern boundary of two closures to better align with the 210m depth contour, noting that the original intention had been for the boundary to follow that contour. Based on this and the preliminary results above, **the Commission supported the proposed amendments to closure boundaries in principle** and requested that the South East Management Advisory Committee consider it out of session.

Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark Fishery (SESSF) Harvest Strategy

**The Commission approved proposed amendments to the SESSF Harvest Strategy to implement the “trigger species” approach.** This approach identifies species that are at very low risk of falling to near or below their Limit Reference Point and deprioritises the need for them to be formally assessed on a regular basis. This creates efficiency and reduces cost. The revised harvest strategy will allow prioritisation of research and monitoring funding while maintaining precaution and risk-management. The amended harvest strategy and TAC Decision Support Tool will be published ([www.afma.gov.au](http://www.afma.gov.au)).

SESSF

The Commission considered detailed advice from relevant Resource Assessment Groups (RAGs), Management Advisory Committees (MACs) and AFMA Management to set TACs for the range of quota and non-quota species in the SESSF. The Commission was highly appreciative of the depth of analysis provided, including the ongoing development and consideration of climate sensitivity information.

TACs and relevant overcatch and undercatch settings determined by the Commission are provided in Table 1. Species where the Commission either departed from RAG/MAC/AFMA Management advice, or felt that additional context was required were:

- School and gummy shark –
  - The Commission noted that the advice from SharkRAG on a TAC for school shark differed from the MAC recommendation (which was lower). The difference was noted as being driven by two separate approaches – the RAG had developed a bycatch TAC, based on the amount of school shark expected to be caught in pursuit of the recommended gummy shark TAC. The MAC (based on AFMA Management advice) took a different approach that used the results of the last close-kin-mark-recapture stock assessment to determine a Recommended Biological Catch, and then deducted other known sources of mortality.
  - The Commission considered both methods and determined that the RBC approach was both more precautionary and more aligned to the CFHSP. As such, **the Commission set the school shark TAC at 197 tonnes.**
  - The Commission noted that the school shark TAC is 8% lower than the RAG-recommended bycatch TAC. As such, the Commission was compelled to reduce the gummy shark TAC to reduce fishing effort and ensure that the school shark RBC was not exceeded. **The Commission set the gummy shark TAC at 1,558 tonnes.**
  - The Commission took multiple factors into account in making these decisions, including the perceived unfairness of reducing catch on a sustainable species (gummy shark) based on increased catch of a companion species (school shark) by other fishery sectors (most notably state-managed fisheries in South Australia and Western Australia). While the Commission sympathised with that view, it was balanced by the status of school sharks under ABARES Fishery Status Reports, the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and the *Convention on Migratory Species*.
  - **The Commission agreed to write to state authorities to seek dedicated action to reduce catch of school and gummy shark in relevant fisheries.**
- Mirror dory – the Commission considered a proposal to set aside the “large change rule” in the SESSF Harvest Strategy given positive indicators for the stock and the potential for a very large TAC increase in 2024-25. While the Commission was pleased with the status of the stock, it also noted that the rule was designed with this situation in mind, and that catch is moderately lower than the current TAC, and well below the recommended TAC with the rule in place. As such, the Commission did not find the request compelling, and **agreed there was no justification to depart from the harvest strategy and set the mirror dory TAC at 182 tonnes** (an increase of 61 tonnes).
- Eastern pink ling – The Commission considered a late request from industry to hold the eastern pink ling notional catch limit constant, as opposed to the reduction recommended by AFMA (due to changes in discards and state catches). Given this stock is still building towards the Target Reference Point, and that the notional catch limit is based on a fixed catch scenario and associated risk matrix, there was no basis for the Commission to hold the catch limit constant. However, the Commission did note that the notional catch limit may not be caught this

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season, and that there is an arbitrary cap of 20 tonnes on the amount that can be carried forward to next season. **The Commission agreed to set the notional catch limit at 441 tonnes, but to remove the carry forward cap for consistency with most other stocks.**

- Tiger flathead – Noting the discussion above on the apparent success of the SESSF closures, the Commission considered whether the flathead TAC should be increased (as opposed to being held constant to contribute to at-risk species rebuilding). **The Commission agreed to hold the TAC constant (forgo increases) at 2,333 tonnes, but also requested that the RAG reconsider this matter to inform the 2025-26 TAC decision.** The Commission noted the importance of ensuring that catch of species such as jackass morwong is adequately avoided but remains committed to achieving this in the least burdensome way possible to industry.
- Silver warehou – The Commission noted that the proposed TAC for silver warehou is projected to assist the stock to continue to grow towards its Target Reference Point, but also identified some parameter estimates used in the stock assessment that require better explanation. **The Commission determined the TAC at 350 tonnes, as recommended, but requested that the RAG reconsider those parameters and provide specific advice for the 2025-26 TAC decision.**
- Silver trevally – The Commission was pleased to note that the most recent stock assessment confirmed that this stock is not overfished (biomass estimated to be 7% higher than the limit reference point). Nevertheless, noting current low catch and effort and the proximity of the stock to its Limit Reference Point, **the Commission determined to maintain the TAC at 25 tonnes to assist continued rebuilding of the stock.**
- Deepwater flathead – The Commission noted that the RAG and MAC recommended TAC was based on the long-term recruitment trend, even though there has been a sustained period of below average recruitment. **The Commission determined that the low recruitment trend was significant enough to depart from the RAG/MAC advice and reduce the deepwater flathead TAC to 940 tonnes to ensure adequate precaution.**

#### *Small Pelagics Fishery (SPF)*

The Commission considered advice from SPFRAG and SEMAC on TACs for the main target species. **The Commission supported the RAG/MAC advice on each species.** TACs and relevant over catch and undercatch settings determined by the Commission are provided in Table 2.

#### *Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery (WTBF)*

The Commission determined the following provisions in the WTBF:

- Undercatch and overcatch – 10%
- Determined weight – 2 tonnes

#### Electronic Monitoring Trials

The Commission was pleased to note the commencement of at-sea Electronic Monitoring trials in the Northern Prawn Fishery and Great Australian Bight Trawl fishery. The Commission also welcomed that trials are about to commence in the CTS and sub-Antarctic fisheries as well. The Commission expressed thanks to those operators directly participating in these trials and the industry bodies that have been closely involved in their planning and implementation.

#### Fraud Policy and Control Plan

The Commission welcomed the draft policy and plan as a key component to AFMA's accountability framework. **The Commission supported the draft policy and plan, subject to minor amendments.**

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Commissioner Appointments

The Commission welcomed the participation of Mr Will Zacharin in his first meeting since being appointed as a part time Commissioner in December 2023. Will brings valuable skills and experience in fisheries and broader public sector management to the Commission.

The Commissioner also congratulated Mr Scott Spencer on his recent appointment as Deputy Chair of the Commission.

Noting this was the first meeting since the departure of the previous Deputy Chair, Ms Catherine Cooper, the Commission took the opportunity to reflect on the enormous contribution that Cath has made to AFMA, and Commonwealth fisheries during her tenure. The Commission wished Cath well in her future endeavours.

All part time Commissioners have been appointed until 30 June 2024.

Next meeting

The Commission agreed that the next meeting would be held in Darwin on 13 and 14 May 2024. The following meetings will be determined subject to the appointment of Commissioners before June 2024, but the Commission generally agreed that the next two meetings should be:

- 08 and 09 July in Canberra, ACT; and
- 12 and 13 September in Hobart, Tasmania, to coincide with Seafood Directions 2024.

Helen Kroger

Chairman

Table 1. Recommended SESSF TACs, determined amounts and percentages for overcatch and undercatch for the 2024-25 fishing season.

Quota Species	TAC (t)	Overcatch %	Undercatch %	Determined Weight (kg)
<b>Great Australian Bight species</b>				
Bight redfish	959	10	10	2,000
Deepwater flathead	940	10	10	2,000
Orange roughy A/E	50	0	0	2,000
Gummy shark	1,558	10	10	2,000
School shark	197	0	0	2,000
Saw shark	525	10	10	2,000
Elephant fish	114	10	10	2,000
Orange roughy (east)	879	10	100	2,000
Orange roughy (cascade)	397	10	10	2,000
Oreo, basket	137	10	10	2,000
Deepwater shark (east)	24	10	10	2,000
Deepwater shark (west)	327	10	10	2,000
Smooth oreo dory (cascade)	150	10	10	2,000
Smooth oreo dory (other)	90	10	10	2,000
Orange roughy (S/PB)	98 (67 Pedra Branca)	0	0	2,000
Orange roughy (west)	60	0	0	2,000
Blue Warehou	30	0	0	2,000
Flathead	2,333	10	10	2,000
Jackass morwong	50	0	0	2,000
John dory	60	0	0	2,000
Mirror dory	182	10	10	2,000
Ocean perch	318	10	10	2,000
Redfish	30	0	0	2,000
School whiting	914	10	10	2,000
Siver trevally	25	10	10	2,000
Alfonsino	1,017	10	10	2,000
Blue eye trevalla	263 (36 t Seamounts)	10	10	2,000
Blue grenadier	17,084	10	10	2,000
Gemfish (east)	100	0	0	2,000
Gemfish (west)	180	10	10	2,000
Pink ling	1,533	10	10	2,000
Ribaldo	393	10	10	2,000
Royal red prawn	628	10	10	2,000
Silver Warehou	350	10	10	2,000
<b>Non-Quota Species</b>	<b>TAC (t)</b>	<b>Overcatch %</b>	<b>Undercatch %</b>	<b>Determined Weight (kg)</b>
Boarfish (E)	200	N/A	N/A	N/A
Orange roughy (E)	50	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hagfish	80	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 2. Recommended SPF TACs, determined amounts and percentages for overcatch and undercatch for the 2024-25 fishing season

Species	TAC (t)	Overcatch %	Undercatch %	Determined Weight (kg)
Australian sardine east	8,130	10	10	2,000
Blue mackerel east	11,530	10	10	2,000
Blue mackerel west	3,240	10	10	2,000
Jack mackerel east	18,650	10	10	2,000
Jack mackerel west	2,100	10	10	2,000
Redbait east	5,390	10	10	2,000
Redbait west	3,340	10	10	2,000