

AFMA AND PAIR TRAWLING IN THE AUSTRALIAN SMALL PELAGIC FISHERY: A WORD OF CAUTION

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This is not about the merits or otherwise of allowing pair trawling in the SPF - we've had that debate.

This is about AFMA's management and monitoring of pair trawling in the SPF both of which need to be public and transparent if the sensitivity of the recreational fishing sector, the conservation movement and the Australian community generally, already aroused by the operation of super trawlers in the SPF since 2012, is not to become a political issue again both for AFMA and the commercial sector.

And this is the problem. All the indications I've had recently, as a recreational fishing sector advocate and long-time recreational fishing representative in the management of the SPF, are that AFMA is continuing its slide into secrecy and unaccountability, particularly in relation to its management of the SPF and of pair trawling in the fishery.

In fact, the recent evidence I have is that in its response to my queries about its management of pair trawling in the SPF – responses which I have no doubt are the same as the responses it gives to similar questions asked by others – AFMA is in breach of the Objective of the newly amended Fisheries Management Act 1991 which states (Section 3(1)(d) that AFMA must ensure “accountability to the fishing industry and to the Australian community in AFMA's management of fisheries resources”.

My initial questions in October to AFMA CEO, James Findlay, about whether the pair trawling operation was going to provide its catch to a new small pelagic fish processing plant apparently recently established at Moruya, NSW, was basically rebuffed, fobbed off. My email had also complained about the paucity of detail in AFMA's 29 September 2017 news release on the new 40m midwater trawler in the SPF.

That AFMA news release gave negligible information about the new vessel and referred readers to the Small Pelagic Fishery Industry Association (SPFIA) if they wanted more detail about AFMA's announcement.

For an Australian Government agency to be referring any member of the Australian community to a fishing industry lobby group with a reputation and credibility as low as that of the SPFIA, is in my view worthy of report to the Minister and to the news media.

The SPFIA was established as an industry front for the SPF's super trawlers – it was and is no more than a propaganda outfit and no federal government agency should be deferring to it.

Further follow-up questions and attempts to elicit from AFMA what should be, after all, factual, public information about pair trawling management in the SPF, resulted in further defensiveness, obtuseness and more of what I consider to be improper referrals to the SPFIA.

I have waited until this forum to raise the issue in the hope that we can take actions here to prevent a continuation of AFMA's deficient and increasingly secretive and defensive attitude to the dissemination of SPF management and monitoring information.

If this attitude is not reversed quickly, it will most certainly eventually result in the sort of controversy and political interest which we've seen until recently surrounding the SPF since the beginning of 2012.

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