

PZJA Torres Strait Finfish Working Group

29 November 2019
Thursday Island, Torres Strait

Meeting Record

Note all meeting papers and records are available on
the PZJA webpage:

<https://www.pzja.gov.au/torres-strait-finfish-groups>



Australian Government

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

Agenda Item 1 – Preliminaries

1.1. Opening Prayer, Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners, Welcome, Apologies

The meeting was opened at 0845 hrs at the Torres Strait Regional Authority Boardroom, Thursday Island. The Chair welcomed attendees and acknowledged the Traditional Owners of the land on which the meeting was held.

Dr Trevor Hutton was welcomed to the FFWG by the Chair as a newly appointed permanent observer.

QDAF member Mr Tom Roberts, Traditional Inhabitant Member Mr Harry Nona and Malu Lamar (Torres Strait Islander) Corporation RNTBC were noted as apologies. FFWG noted that Traditional Inhabitant member Frank Loban would join from morning tea and that Traditional Inhabitant Member Cr Rocky Stephen would leave the meeting at 1300hrs.

The FFWG noted that the meeting was being recorded by AFMA to assist in the preparation of an accurate record. AFMA advised that these recordings are stored securely and are deleted once the final record is published.

1.2. Adoption of Agenda

The FFWG adopted the agenda as circulated.

1.3. Declaration of Interests

Table 1. Torres Strait Finfish Working Group members and declarations of interests

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
Andy Bodsworth	Independent Chair	Independent Consultant – Cobalt Marine Resource Management. Has previously been commissioned to undertake Torres Strait related fisheries research projects (For example the Torres Strait Finfish Fishery Action Plan).
Hilda Mosby	Traditional Inhabitant Member, Kulkalgal Cluster (Masig, Warraber, lama, Poruma) TSRA Board Member for Masig.	No direct interest in fisheries but has long history with Torres Strait fisheries through family involvement.
Rocky Stephen*	Traditional Inhabitant Member, Kemer Kemer Meriam (Ugar, Mer, Erub) TSRA Board Member for Ugar.	Councillor for Ugar, Chairperson of Kos and Abob Fisheries Ugar, Works with brother in a commercial fishing business on Ugar, Eastern cluster member for the PZJA Finfish Working Group. Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee. Does not hold a TIB licence. Finfish RAG industry member. TSRA Board Member for Ugar. Newly appointed to the TSRA Finfish Quota Management Committee.
Frank Loban**	Traditional Inhabitant Member, Maluialgal Cluster (Badu, Moa, Mabuia)	TIB licence holder (crab and crayfish) no finfish endorsement. Industry member on PZJA Hand Collectable Working Group and Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee to represent interests of western cluster.
Tenny Elisala	Traditional Inhabitant Member, Gudmalulgal (Saibai, Dauan, Boigu).	TSRA Ranger Dauan, TIB licence holder.

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
Andrew Trappett	Executive Officer FFRAG and FFWG.	Co-investigator on TSSAC research projects for Spanish mackerel stock assessment and mackerel biological sampling in a data services and industry liaison role. Co-investigator role is provided as an in-kind contribution from AFMA (in addition to the direct funding provided by AFMA).
Selina Stoute	AFMA Member	Manager of AFMA staff member Andrew Trappett who is co-investigator on Torres Strait research.
Allison Runck	TSRA Member	TSRA holds finfish allocation on behalf of Traditional Inhabitants. Involved with administration of leasing access to finfish fishery to sunset sector fishers. No role personally in decision making on access or quota pricing. Co-investigator on mackerel ageing project.
Michael O'Neill	Scientific Member	Principal Fisheries Scientist, Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Principal scientist for TSSAC project to develop a harvest strategy for the Torres Strait Finfish Fishery.
David Brewer	Scientific Member	Director – Upwelling P/L (David Brewer Consulting) which has no current Torres Strait projects or pecuniary interests. Honorary Fellow – CSIRO. Chair - Torres Strait Finfish RAG. Scientific member – Torres Strait Finfish Working Group. Scientific member – Northern Prawn Fishery RAG. Current consultancies with Quandamooka Yoolooburrabee Aboriginal Corporation, Redlands City Council. Co-investigator on current Torres Strait research project scoping study for non-commercial take.

*Cr. Rocky Stephen left the meeting at 1300 hrs.

** Frank Loban joined the meeting at 1030 hrs.

Table 2. Meeting observers and declarations of interests

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
Tony Vass	Industry permanent observer	No financial interest in Torres Strait Fisheries. Previous Torres Strait finfish operator.
Trevor Hutton	Permanent observer	CSIRO employee, CSIRO deliver a range of research projects in the Torres Strait. Was the Principle investigator on recently completed project to develop a draft Harvest Strategy project HS project and is expected to provide small contribution to the AFMA funded project <i>Climate variability and change relevant to key fisheries resources in the Torres Strait</i> .
Yen Loban***	TSRA	TSRA Fisheries Portfolio Member, TIB licence holder, TSRA Board Member, Torres Strait Council, Traditional Inhabitant Torres Strait.
Madeina David	TSRA	TSRA Fisheries Program, Cadet. No interests to declare.
Mark Anderson***	TSRA, Program Manager	Managing creation of an independent entity to hold resource rights (divesting from TSRA) by 1 July 2020, working on rolling out 20 million dollar investment in Torres Strait

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
		Fisheries covering, 180 traineeships over the next two years and fisheries infrastructure.
Liz McCrudden	TSRA	No interests declared. TSRA role involves supporting traditional inhabitant member on PZJA advisory committees and community visits for the Spanish Mackerel Biological Sampling project

***Yen Loban and Mark Anderson left the meeting at 1200hrs and re-joined at 1330hrs.

The Chairperson advised members and observers, that as provided in PZJA Fisheries Management Paper No. 1 (FMP1), all members of the Working Group must declare all real or potential conflicts of interest in the Torres Strait Finfish Fishery at the commencement of the meeting. Where it is determined that a direct conflict of interest exists, the Working Group may allow the member to continue to participate in the discussions relating to the matter but not in any decision making process. The Working Group may also determine that, having made their contribution to the discussions, the member should retire from the meeting for the remainder of discussions on that issue.

Declarations of interests were provided by each meeting participant. These are detailed in the meeting participant tables above.

The FFWG followed a process where each group of members with similar interests were asked to leave the meeting room to enable the remaining members to:

- freely comment on the declared interests;
- agree if the interests precluded the members from participating in any discussions; and
- agree on any actions to manage declared conflicts of interest (e.g. the member may be allowed to participate in the discussions relating to the matter but not in the formulation of final advice).

The FFWG also noted that interest can be revisited throughout the meeting and that if any member becomes aware of a potential conflict throughout the meeting, they must immediately disclose the interest.

Fishing interests

Members with declared commercial fishing interests were asked to leave the meeting room (Mr Tony Vass, Cr. Rocky Stephen, Mr Tenny Elisala and TSRA officers). The FFWG noted that while fishers and/or their communities may have an interest, real or perceived, in management decisions, it was agreed that their expertise was critical in the development of management advice. It was also noted that interests can be revisited throughout the meeting. On this basis, it was agreed that the excused members be permitted to participate in discussions under all agenda items and the formulation of recommendations.

Research interests

Members with research interests (Andy Bodsworth, Michael O'Neill, Dave Brewer and Andrew Trappett, Allison Runck, Liz McCrudden) were asked to leave the meeting room. The FFWG noted that researchers and/or consultants may have a perceived or real interest in both advice on future research priorities and outcomes of currently funded research projects. The FFWG noted that future research priorities were not part of the meeting agenda and noted the benefit of having scientific expertise available at the meeting. On this basis, it was agreed that the excused members be permitted to participate in discussions under all agenda items and the formulation of recommendations.

Torres Strait Regional Authority

TSRA staff and TSRA Finfish Quota Management Committee members were asked to leave the meeting room (Allison Runck, Tenny Elisala, Yen Loban, Mark Anderson, Hilda Mosby, Liz McCrudden, Madeina David). It was noted that the TSRA have a role in administering the Finfish Quota Management Committee (FQMC) which uses community expertise to guide TSRA Board

decisions on the amount of catch to be seasonally leased to sunset fishers with revenue from leasing held by TSRA on behalf of Traditional Inhabitants. Members further noted TSRA's investment commitments for Torres Strait Fisheries designed to support growth in the TIB sector (increased participation and catch). Members agreed the importance of understanding these interests to ensure any real or perceived conflicts of interest can be managed throughout the meeting. It was agreed that the excused members be permitted to participate in discussions under all agenda items and the formulation of recommendations.

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

AFMA staff were asked to leave the meeting room (Selina Stoute and Andrew Trappett). Members noted that AFMA is focused on the sustainability of the fishery and management frameworks. Members noted the need to also ensure sustainability objectives are balanced with other objectives important to Torres Strait Fisheries such as having economic development opportunities for communities. It was agreed that the excused members be permitted to participate in discussions under all agenda items and the formulation of recommendations.

1.4. Actions and record from the last FFWG meeting, 20 March 2018

The FFWG noted the record of the previous meeting and status of actions arising. The FFWG noted that all actions were complete aside from a presentation on biosecurity monitoring for invasive pest fish species which is to be scheduled for a 2020 meeting of the FFWG.

Agenda Item 2 – Working group updates

2.1 Industry updates

The FFWG noted the following general updates from industry members and observers:

- Little fishing effort has been occurring in eastern Torres Strait communities due to poor weather over the last seven months but a change in the weather has seen communities resume fishing focusing on Spanish mackerel (Ugar and Erub) with Mer focusing on coral trout.
- The Spanish mackerel biological sampling project has been progressing well and visits to engage communities in the research have been well received, particularly hands-on involvement in collecting fisheries data (measuring fish and collecting ear bones for ageing). FFWG noted a good response to the engagement video played during community visits (FFRAG industry members extracting ear bones at QDAF Northern Fisheries Centre Cairns).
- Industry members advised that they are encouraging fishers to support the adoption of daily fishing logbooks and that they will continue to seek all available support from government for community visits with a focus on data to support sustainable fisheries and information flow.
- Industry advised that Warraber community had a continued interest in pursuing development of a local baitfish industry.

In noting the industry updates, the FFWG strongly supports continued inter-agency co-operation in focusing communication of management, data and science in Torres Strait communities noting the positive feedback to this engagement during 2019.

Action 1: TSRA to circulate the baitfish scoping study report presented at the 2018 Fisheries Summit to the FFWG.

2.2 Government agencies updates

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

The FFWG noted the written updates from AFMA (page 23 to 54) outlining a number of management updates. The AFMA member discussed three key updates from the paper.

Torres Strait Finfish Fishery Management Plan 2013

At its meeting on 19 November 2019 the PZJA agreed in-principle to establish an Independent Allocation Advisory Panel (IAAP) to consider options for the allocation of Finfish quota units under the *Torres Strait Finfish Management Plan 2013*. The PZJA Standing Committee has been directed by the PZJA to develop draft Terms of Reference for an IAAP for the PZJA's consideration.

Quota units are yet to be allocated under the Finfish plan. Although there is no formal quota system in place, leasing of individual catch allowances occurs annually. TSRA holds sunset licences on behalf of Traditional Inhabitants and, in consultation with stakeholders, administer an annual leasing process of those licences with agreed individual catch allowances. Catch allowances are implemented through licence conditions.

Of note, the *Tropical Rock Lobster Management Plan 2013* (TRL Plan) requires the PZJA to review the allocation of quota units to the Traditional Inhabitant sector within two years of the TRL Plan commencement (30 November 2020). At the commencement of the quota system on 1 December 2019, the TSRA will hold quota units on behalf of the Traditional Inhabitant sector.

Separate to the allocation review to be undertaken by the PZJA, the TSRA is working with stakeholders to establish an independent, non-profit entity to manage community-owned commercial fishery assets under the *Fisheries Regional Ownership Framework* project (FROF project). TSRA, through the FROF project, is consulting with stakeholders on the development of an entity to manage all entitlements currently held in trust by TSRA. This includes those in the Finfish Fishery. Clearly defined access entitlements, such as quota units, will be necessary to transfer the finfish leasing process to a non-government entity and/or person.

Tactical call for research funding applications

The Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee call for funding applications to address tactical research priorities are to be released in December 2019 and responses will be considered by FFWG in early 2020.

Legislative amendments

The current process to progress a range of amendments to the Torres Strait fisheries act and regulations is likely to take some years to complete due to completing Government priorities. Noting the need for improved catch reporting however, AFMA is aiming to work with stakeholders to develop a strategy to encourage a level of voluntary logbook reporting by TIB Fishers.

Torres Strait Regional Authority update

The TSRA member advised that the fisheries program was presently focusing on three key areas:

1. Working with stakeholders on the establishment of an independent entity to manage community-owned commercial fishery assets with a target date of July 2020.
2. Support of PZJA traditional inhabitant members in PZJA advisory groups, including training and development and increased support to improve communications with the broader Torres Strait community.

3. Rollout of Fisheries Infrastructure and Warpil – Fishing for our Future traineeship support packages to increase participation in full-time commercial fishing.

TSRA also advised that they have now completed and published a *Guide for Exporting Seafood Product handbook*.

Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries

The FFWG noted the following updates from Science Member Dr Michael O'Neill, QDAF:

- The Queensland Government fisheries reform agenda continues to be implemented under the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy with new regulations introduced 1 September 2019.
- A present focus is on modernisation of data as newer technologies provide better information from fishing operations to help support stock assessment and management. Future research projects will investigate options including electronic monitoring systems.
- Stock assessments are being updated for Great Barrier Reef Red Throat Emperor and Coral Trout in 2020.
- A QDAF Spanish Mackerel Working Group is to be formed.
- Outcomes of the state-wide recreational fishing survey indicate that 943,000 Queenslanders identify as recreational fishers with participation rates up from the 2013 survey 15% levels to 19% of the population.

2.3 Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority (NFA) update

The FFWG noted NFA officers were unable to attend the meeting. However they wished to acknowledge their support for NFA's ongoing participation in future meetings.

2.4 Native title update

As Malu-Lamar RNTBC were not in attendance, no native title update was provided to the FFWG.

Agenda Item 3 – Advice on Total Allowable Catches for Spanish mackerel and coral trout

Agenda item 3.1 Spanish mackerel TAC recommendation for 2020-21 fishing season

Having regard for the FFRAG advice, presented as key outcomes from the 27-28 Nov 2019 meeting (**Attachment B**), the FFWG agreed to recommend a Spanish mackerel TAC of 59 tonnes for the 2020-21 season (based on an Recommended Biological Catch (RBC) of 71 tonnes minus a total estimated catch outside the Fishery of 12 tonnes (10 t for traditional/subsistence fishing and 2 t for recreational fishing). In making this recommendation the FFWG:

- a) noted biomass has been estimated to be declining since 2009-10; i.e. the standardised catch rate of legal-sized Spanish mackerel (the abundance index), using logbook data from sunset fishing operations, had declined since 2009-10. Standardised catch rates have reached levels comparable to periods where total fishery harvests were significantly higher and did not substantially differ in 2018-19 to the last assessment using data up to 2017-18;
- b) noted the results of the stock assessment update suggesting the estimated median 2018-19 biomass was 23 per cent (ranging between 14% to 37% (B14 and B37) of unfished biomass (B0) estimated in 1940-1941 and that this value is close to the default *Commonwealth Fisheries Harvest Strategy Policy: Framework for applying an evidence-based approach to setting harvest levels in Commonwealth Fisheries* (June 2018) (harvest strategy policy) limit reference point of 20 per cent of unfished biomass. Although still in development, the FFRAG and FFWG have recommended B20 as the limit reference point for the Spanish mackerel;

- c) noted FFRAG advice that overfishing is unlikely to be occurring meaning the biomass decline is likely associated with factors, other than fishing pressure, such as broader environmental factors driving below average recruitment;
- d) noted the FFRAG advice to consider applying a constant harvest rate of either F 40 or F 48 (i.e harvest rates that build the stock to either B 40 or B 48) based on the current exploitable biomass rather than applying a Maximum Sustainable Yield (FMSY) harvest rates based on the need for precaution as the estimated level of biomass approaches the limit reference point;
- e) supported the FFRAG approach to assume below average recruitment scenarios in assessing stock projections for a range of harvest control rules and agreed that this an appropriate risk-management strategy given the proximity of the stock to the limit reference point;
- f) noted FFRAG advice that risk associated with either an RBC of 56 or 71 tonnes of the stock falling below the limit reference point (B20) is consistent with the harvest strategy policy. An RBC of 71 tonnes has slightly higher risk but is still within accepted risk thresholds under the harvest strategy policy;
- g) noted advice from the FFRAG that the best estimates of catches taken outside the commercial Fishery remain unchanged since the last season and supported the use of the same estimates noting that the members also had no new information. The catch estimates are detailed in **Table 3 of Attachment B**.
- h) agreed that based on best available information, the recommended TAC seeks to:
 - ensure the sustainability of the stock by allowing for the stock to build and avoiding unacceptable risk of the stock falling below the limit reference point;
 - minimise potential economic and social impacts such as the potential loss of available fisheries expertise (that can be shared with TIB fishers) from sunset licence holders and/or impacts on supply chain/market dynamics (although the likelihood of the latter occurring were considered low); and
 - minimise impacts on the CPUE data series that may occur as a result of a reduced TAC and hence less sunset licensed vessels fishing for Spanish Mackerel; also noting application of new data is expected in the next stock assessment.

The FFWG discussed and sought advice from the scientific members on future data needs and possible options to improve our understanding of the stock (including a possible alternate index of abundance (noting TSRA concerns about the limited number of boats driving the estimated decline in abundance and other issues that might be impacting such as change in fisher experience and increased shark depredation). Members noted the current CPUE series based on daily logbook information submitted by sunset licence holders, may be at risk as the sector reduces. The scientific members provided the following advice:

- stock assessments can deal with breaks in a CPUE. However a break does introduce additional uncertainty. For the Finfish Fishery it would be prudent to have a few years of overlap between the TIB CPUE series (in development) and the long-standing Sunset Licensee (ex TVH licences) CPUE series to enable the model to merge the two data sets.

- the next stock assessment update (2020) is expected to incorporate additional data including two years of TIB catch (and some effort data) from the Fish Receiver System, ageing and length frequency data from the biological sampling project plus analysis of environmental drivers. While additional data is likely to reduce uncertainty in the stock assessment, it may improve, maintain or even reduce our estimate of stock status.
- the close-kin genetic technique, if developed and applied successfully, could provide an estimate of absolute abundance (fish numbers) for the stock independent of the existing CPUE series. Tissue samples from Torres Strait Spanish mackerel are being collected and stored under the funded biological sampling project which may aid development of such a project and reduce some initial costs.

Action 2, FFWG 29 November 2019: FFRAG to advise on the feasibility and likely cost of the close kin genetic technique to examine absolute abundance in the Spanish mackerel fishery and consider recent advances in the field (e.g. Southern Bluefin Tuna, School Shark), noting also that collection of Spanish mackerel tissue samples is occurring under biological data. FFRAG should also advise on any other data and research priorities that could assist in improving the assessment of the Torres Strait Spanish mackerel stock.

Agenda item 3.2. Coral trout TAC recommendation for 2020-21 fishing season

The FFWG agreed to recommend maintaining the current TAC for coral trout for the 2020-21 season but instead of the TAC being 134.9 tonnes that it be set at 135 tonnes. In making this recommendation the FFWG considered FFRAG advice (**Attachment B**) that:

- the results of the preliminary stock assessment presented for the previous fishing season (2018/19), which indicated that the stock biomass is likely to be high (the preliminary stock assessment estimated biomass to be around 80 percent (B80) of estimated virgin biomass with all of the model estimates of spawning biomass being above B65);
- continued low levels of reported catches (less than 20 tonnes (17.3 t) was reportedly taken in 2018/19 fishing season by sunset licensees and TIB combined); and
- there is no new information to justify (or guide) a changed management approach.

The FFWG further noted advice from the FFRAG that given the low reported catches, it did not consider it a priority at this time to develop estimates of catches taken outside the Fishery and for the TAC to be reduced accordingly. However the FFRAG did recommend that this work commence in 2020.

Agenda Item 4 – Harvest Strategy

The FFWG noted that the project tasked with developing a draft harvest strategy for the Torres Strait Finfish Fishery has closed and a final draft report has been provided to AFMA however the Principal Investigator is finalising further edits to the report. Once completed the report will be circulated to members.

The FFWG noted that the FFRAG is working through a range of outstanding matters with the

harvest strategy with further work to be undertaken next year. Members did however note that the objectives and design principles recommended by stakeholders for a future Finfish Fishery harvest strategy were relevant in considering advice on future TACs. For example, if biomass decreases be cautious, stock is not to go below the limit; and if biomass increases 'bank' fish by leaving more in the water.

Agenda Item 5 – Western Line Closure

The FFWG noted the outcomes of public consultation on the potential removal of the Western Line Closure (the Closure) as detailed in agenda paper. The FFWG noted that there is varied support for the removal across communities within the area of the Western Line closure and that Eastern communities largely reserved commenting on the proposal (noting it was a matter for communities affected/within the closure).

Generally communities in the Gudamalagal (top-western) area support the removal of the closure while communities in the Kaiwalagalgal (inner-western) area of the closure do not support its removal due to concerns on the potential ecological and technical interactions with the Tropical Rock Lobster (TRL) Fishery and traditional fishing. Other concerns raised more broadly were in relation to how potential changes in fishing effort (total levels and distribution) might impact risk of localised depletion, kai-kai (traditional/subsistence fishing) fishing catch rates and the TAC for the stock.

The FFWG noted advice from the FFRAG that:

- research on ecological interactions between coral trout and TRL (e.g. to understand the risk to the TRL stock from increased trout harvest) would be difficult and costly to perform successfully and that analysing fishery dependent catch data would also yield little understanding about the effect of increased trout harvests on TRL or kai-kai finfish catch rates over time;
- an adaptive management experiment could be performed by opening a selected area of the fishery and monitoring the response of TRL and trout over time however the likelihood of detecting an impact would be low;
- coral trout within the Torres Strait is currently assumed to form a single stock. Accordingly, the TAC represents a Total Allowable Catch for the stock irrespective of whether or not the Western Line Closure is in place or not. Removal of the Western Line Closure would not warrant a change to the TAC for the purposes of managing risks to the level of the stock;
- there is risk of localised depletion for reef-associated species such as coral trout. Coral trout have been found to have high site fidelity (meaning they don't move far as adults) and monitoring would be required to understand fine scale fishing effort in areas of the fishery over time if understanding localised depletion was a management priority;

The FFWG noted advice from the Traditional Inhabitant members and observers that Gudumalualgal communities respected the views held by inner-western communities and are only seeking access to finfish in waters north of Turnagin Island. Unlike inner-western communities who participate the TRL Fishery, Gudumalualgal communities have little employment opportunities, including fisheries (there is limited TRL fishing around Gudumalualgal communities). Within their

waters, Gudumalualgal communities wish to fish for other-reef line species such as barramundi, salmon and jewfish, not coral trout.

Having regard for community views Traditional Inhabitant members and observers supported the removal of the part of the Western Line closure north of Turnagin Island.

The AFMA member also supported this approach noting both advice from communities and advice from the FFRAG. The AFMA member noted however that further advice on concerns raised during public consultation would be sought from the TRL Resource Assessment Group in December. This advice would be shared with the FFWG.

The TSRA suggested that the Western Line Closure Review could be progressed at the Torres Strait Fisheries Summit planned for April 2020, which would enable a discussion to be had by all stakeholders and attempt to reach some consensus from industry about maintaining or removing the closure.

Agenda Item 6 – Other business

No other items of business were nominated.

Agenda Item 7 – Next meeting and meeting close

The FFWG noted the next meeting was tentatively scheduled for 25-26 November 2020, a two-day meeting on Thursday Island, and that AFMA would canvas member availability for this date.

The FFWG Chair thanked attendees for their time, noting that their extensive and constructive discussion of the issues had resulted in a productive meeting.

The meeting was closed at 1700hrs.

Attachments

FFWG 29 Nov 19 Attachment A: Meeting agenda as adopted

FFWG 29 Nov 19 Attachment B: Summary of FFRAG 6 (27-28 Nov 2019) key outcomes on RBC advice Spanish mackerel and coral trout.

FFWG 29 Nov 19 Attachment C: Update table of Finfish Fishery Draft Harvest Strategy developed as tabled at FFRAG 5 (31 Oct - 1 Nov 2019) with FFRAG comments.