

PZJA Torres Strait Finfish Working Group

15 March 2019
Rydges Plaza Hotel, Cairns

Meeting Record

Note all meeting papers and records are available on
the PZJA webpage: www.pzja.gov.au



Australian Government

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

Agenda Item 1 – Preliminaries

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

The meeting was opened in prayer at 0845 hrs. The Chair welcomed attendees and acknowledged the traditional owners of the land on which the meeting was held.

Mr Frank Loban was welcomed to the Working Group by the Chair as a newly appointed Traditional Inhabitant Member. FWG welcomed attendance from PNG-NFA officer Mr Joseph Posu as an invited participant and Mr Egon Stewart, sunset sector fisher as a meeting observer for the industry update and stock assessment agenda items.

QDAF member Mr Tom Roberts and newly appointed Traditional Inhabitant Members Mr Harry Nona and Mrs Hilda Mosby were noted as apologies received.

The FWG noted that the meeting was being recorded by AFMA to support an accurate record being produced. AFMA advised that these recordings are stored securely and are deleted once the final record is published.

1.2. Adoption of Agenda

The FWG adopted the agenda as circulated noting a request to consider research updates either under the AFMA update or under other business.

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.
Rocky Stephen	Traditional Inhabitant Industry Member, Kemer Kemer Meriam (Ugar, Mer, Erub)	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. Sits on Prawn MAC and TS Scientific Advisory Committee. Does not hold a TIB licence.
Frank Loban	Traditional Inhabitant Industry 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 Industry Member, Gudmalulgal (Saibai, Dauan, Boigu).	TSRA Ranger Dauan, TIB licence holder.
Andrew Trappett	Executive Officer FRAG and FWG.	Co-investigator on TSSAC pre-proposal project for Spanish mackerel stock assessment as data services and industry liaison role. Staff time to be an in-kind contribution to the project.
Selina Stoute	AFMA Member	Nil
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.

Name	Position	Declaration of interest
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.

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.
Joseph Posu	PNG NFA Officer, FWG invited participant	No interests to register.
Egon Stewart	FWG observer	Torres Strait finfish fisher, Sunset licence holder (seasonally leasing fishery access) since 2008-09 leasing process started.

Consistent with the *Protected Zone Joint Authority Fisheries Management Paper No. 1 (FMP 1)* which guides the operation and administration of PZJA consultative forums the FWG noted the requirement for participants to declare all perceived or real interests in Torres Strait fisheries to protect the integrity of advice being provided by the group. Each meeting attendee declared their interests as documented in **Table 1** above. The FWG followed a process where each group of members with similar interests left the meeting 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 to any methods to treat the declared interest (e.g. the member provides preliminary input but leaves the room when any advice is formed).

Following this, groups of members were asked to re-join the meeting and the considerations were tabled in front of all members.

Traditional Inhabitant Boat sector interests

Members with declared direct commercial fishing interests in the Traditional Inhabitant Boat (TIB) sector left the meeting (Mr Frank Loban, Cr Rocky Stephen). The FWG recognised the benefits of having industry expertise on fishing behaviour, economics and the state of the resource at the working group. The FWG noted that while fishers or their communities may have an interest, real or perceived, in the outcomes from FWG advice to PZJA, the licences held by members were geographically dispersed across the area of the fishery. It was also noted that with access to the fishery 100 per cent owned by traditional inhabitants this sector had preferential access to catch and the benefits of management arrangements meaning there may be less incentive for conflicted advice. TIB sector members re-joined the meeting.

Sunset sector interests

Attendees with declared interests in the sunset sector of the industry left the room (Mr Tony Vass, Mr Egon Stewart). The FWG agreed Mr Vass provides good expertise based advice as a permanent observer to the FWG and balances his interests and advice well. The FWG considered

that having Mr Stewart as an active sunset fisher added valuable expertise to inform FWG consideration which would need to be balanced against a perceived interest in levels of total allowable catch or fishery access. Attendees rejoined the discussion and Mr Stewart was advised that his advice on the industry would be valued by the group. The chair reiterated that FWG business was confidential until published on the PZJA website and that, as an observer, Mr Stewart should not contribute towards formation of any FWG recommendations.

Research interests

Members with research interests (Andy Bodsworth, Michael O'Neill, Dave Brewer and Andrew Trappett) left the room. The FWG noted that these members may have a perceived or real interest in potentially receiving contracting for future research projects or live TSSAC proposals being commented upon at the moment. It was noted that these members may have an interest either directly or through perceived employer affiliation or personal career interests. The FWG agreed that these interests would need to be declared by the member at any discussion on research, and if necessary, to leave the room to allow free discussion and to not participate in the working group forming its advice on these projects. These members re-joined the meeting.

Torres Strait Regional Authority

TSRA staff left the room (Ms Alison Runck and Mr Tenny Elisala). The FWG noted previous advice tabled at the FWG that TSRA advice was highly valuable given their direct role in the PZJA and direct interests in the Finfish Fishery through holding and leasing access through sunset licences. TSRA also had an important role in assessing research projects to be funded. It was noted that the TSRA have a role in administering the Finfish Quota Management Committee (FQMC) using community expertise to guide TSRA Board consideration on amounts to be retained to cover TIB sector catch and the amount to be seasonally leased to sunset fishers. It was noted that both John Tabo on the Finfish RAG and Hilda Mosby (FWG member) were members of the FQMC. FWG noted that this would foster good cross-committee support and shared understanding. The FWG agreed to treat TSRA interests as they arise at the relevant agenda items. TSRA staff re-joined the meeting.

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

AFMA staff left the room (Ms Selina Stoute and Mr Andrew Trappett). The FWG noted that allocation of management priorities and resourcing across different fisheries may be perceived as an interest. AFMA staff re-joined the meeting.

Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority

PNG-NFA officer Mr Joseph Posu left the room. The FWG noted that PNG-NFA provided valuable input to discussions and no direct conflicts of interest from the agency could be considered by the FWG. The group noted that the Australia-PNG Joint Advisory Council meeting and bilateral discussions were noted as the primary forum for Torres Strait Treaty stock sharing issues. Mr Posu re-joined the meeting.

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

The FWG noted the agenda paper detailing the record from the last meeting and actions arising. The FWG noted that most actions were complete aside from a presentation on biosecurity monitoring for invasive pest fish species which is scheduled for the June 2019 FWG meeting.

Agenda Item 2 – Working group updates

2.1 Industry updates

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

Traditional inhabitant advice that infrastructure to support fishing business remains the key strategic challenge for Traditional Inhabitant Boat sector of the fishery given remote communities. FWG noted that TSRA infrastructure improvements will likely see community freezers reopening within 12 months which may not have much impact on the fishery over the next 2019-20 season

(starting 1 July 2019). This likelihood of renewed infrastructure is reported to be increasing interest in finfish within the central cluster who historically had harvested a lot of finfish. Ugar community reports strong catches of Spanish mackerel with 3-4 tonnes of mackerel reported caught over two-three month period working to privately owned chest freezers.

There is some general interest from Torres Strait based seafood businesses and within western communities in investing in finfish with several business buying or seeking to buy commercial fishing boats with reports that 2 to 4 boats are in the process of entering the fleet on Badu Island. This interest has reportedly been in response to the 2017-18 season low Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for Tropical Rock Lobster, as well as small TACs for beche-de-mer, and potential removal of the reef-line western area closure. Some operators may be looking to fish finfish as a contingency,. It was considered that these western communities would likely be seeking to establish markets for finfish in the near future.

The industry observer from the sunset sector advised:

- The fishing operation was mainly targeting mackerel to supply the local domestic market with the Sydney Fish Market buying some whole mackerel for export to the Asian market.
- Torres Strait fishery appears to be in good health generally. The operation has been taking their allocated catch in recent seasons with less skilled dory drivers available but have been taking more time to take the same harvest.
- Beach price for mackerel fillets remains steady at around \$16.50 / \$17.50 kg but may peak to support market demand around Chinese new year (\$26/kg for whole, un-bled fish under 10 kg).
- Species substitution was reported as an issue in some markets where other mackerel species such as grey mackerel was being onsold as Spanish mackerel when availability is low. Industry are supportive of a national standard for seafood labelling to address this concern.
- There is concern from some buyers in taking large sized mackerel from Torres Strait due to more northerly, warmer waters which may have increased associated risks of ciguatera poisoning. The group noted ciguatera had not previously been a problem for Torres Strait sourced mackerel.
- The key strategic issue for the industry was the increasing costs on a number of parts of fishing operations including:
 - Concern over rising fuel and bait prices.
 - Cold storage fees (\$20 per time to access stored catches)
 - Packaging (cartons and liners) prices increasing \$4000 over five years (\$6000 per season, now \$10,000).
 - Rising freight prices both southwards – product leaving Torres Strait via barge – but also now for northbound freight to resupply the fishing operation which until recently was free to fishing businesses shipping substantial amounts of catch southwards.
- Crews were still generally reporting round figures for effort (hours fished per session) in logbooks. AFMA urged fishers to help improved the standardisation of the catch rates by supplying the most accurate data in daily fishing logbooks.

The FWG advised that it would be interested in examining more economic detail on similar fishing operations as a full package including costs, beach prices for catch and lease prices for access (noting the *2016 Finfish Action Plan* is a resource providing info on economic drivers in the fishery) with a view to increasing FWG understanding of the economic viability of the fishery.

Catch reporting

Industry noted the present management focus on data collection with upcoming community visits on the Torres Strait Fish Receiver System. The FWG encouraged the TIB sector to continue to supply accurate and complete catch disposal records including effort data. Scientific members encouraged key finfish fishers in communities (those working a large number of days) to also complete daily fishing logbooks which are a powerful and cost effective way of meeting the data needs of the fishery. Industry members advised that managers and scientists needs to be

respectful of community wishes to be aware of where data is housed, how it is treated and how it is used to support the fishery.

Catch depredation

Industry advised that sharks taking hooked fish (depredation) was an issue with an increasing number of sharks following the dories prior to, and during fishing. It was considered that a data need for the fishery was to understand how many fish per day were lost to sharks and that the daily fishing logbook should be amended to capture this data.

2.2 Government agencies updates

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

AFMA presented the FWG with the prepared agenda paper detailing relative matters to the Torres Strait Finfish Fishery. The following points were noted by the group:

- The FWG noted that the fishery was operating at present under notional catch limits. AFMA advised that work is progressing on moving the fishery towards formal and enforceable total allowable catches particularly in regard to the establishment of an independent traditional inhabitant led commercial entity to hold an allocation and take over leasing access on behalf of traditional inhabitants.
- AFMA advised that a standing item is to be introduced to future FWG meetings for the group to monitor the performance criteria and indicators of *The Torres Strait Finfish Fishery Management Plan 2013* in meeting its objectives to support management of the fishery.
- AFMA also advised that consideration is being given to how the Plan can support formal TACs and allocation ahead of the establishment of a Traditional Inhabitant entity to hold fishing entitlements.

TSRA advised that table 58 of the prepared paper on seasonal leasing to sunset fishers only reflects the leasing arrangements at the start of the season. TSRA advised that mid-season administration is available to support any additional available catch to be leased out to sunset fishers through the season. It was noted that in-season data on TIB sector catches from the fish receiver system can support this administration.

Torres Strait Regional Authority

TSRA provided the FWG with an update as follows:

- The program for infrastructure investment is underway with the design of island community freezers completed and engineers have been working on upgrades in some communities already;
- Some land access issues are delaying implementation;
- Work is progressing on export and branding of product from Torres Strait with a focus on understanding how to improve potential value for TIB fishers and participation in commercial fisheries.
- A round of community consultation has given the TSRA a mandate to progress the establishment of an independent commercial entity to take over leasing. The TSRA board have approved a model to be progressed.
- No advice is yet available on leasing for the 2019-20 season which would be dependent on total allowable catch decisions to be informed by outcomes of the present FWG meeting.

Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries

The FWG noted the following updates from Dr Michael O'Neill, QDAF:

- Individually Transferrable Quotas and Competitive Quotas have been introduced for east coast fisheries.
- Harvest strategy development is progressing and is aiming to be completed by the end of 2019.
- Vessel Monitoring Systems are being rolled out on commercial boats (primaries and dories).
- Work will progress over the next two-three years on developing a production system to run and publish the outputs from up to 30 stock assessments per year to an accessible portal.
- The QDAF FISHNET website is a publically available resource on a fishing authorities, licensing and available quotas in Queensland fisheries: <https://fishnet.fisheries.qld.gov.au>. For example the site indicates that 50 per cent of available coral trout catch has been filled, and 35 per cent of Spanish mackerel. The FWG noted that the east coast Spanish mackerel fishery appears to be on a downturn, with available catches being well under-caught in recent seasons.
- A new state-wide recreational fishing survey is to occur in 2019, with similar surveys to be funded for replication every 2-3 years. The survey includes monthly phone calls to take data from fishing diaries. These catches are entered to a database which is extrapolated to give total catch estimates which feed into stock assessments to support commercial fisheries. 52 boat ramps are monitored by QDAF with 10 days a month of sampling. The FWG noted advice that many recreational fishing harvests are likely bigger than commercial harvests for some species/areas.
- The Fisheries (Sustainable Fisheries Strategy) Amendment Bill was passed through Parliament on 28 February 2019. The Bill is the first step in amending the *Fisheries Act* and includes four key elements: modernising the Act objectives to recognise key stakeholder groups, clarify the decision making processes and establishing harvest strategies, and strengthening compliance powers and penalties to address series offences such as black marketing. This is an important step to provide the legislative basis for implementing the Strategy.

2.3 Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority update

The FWG noted an update from PNG-NFA:

- There is little interest among PNG commercial operations in fishing for mackerel or accessing catch sharing arrangements under the Treaty.
- The main commercial fisheries for finfish species in PNG are barramundi and jewfish. Some mackerel and coral trout are landed but mainly in artisanal fisheries which are sold at local markets.
- The main commercial fishing area available for Western Province villages is on north Warrior Reef. Fishers from these villages want to have engagement in commercial fishing to earn money. PNG-NFA is working with these villages by reviewing management arrangements and will potentially provide assistance.

A FWG industry member queried whether PNG Treaty villagers could work on Australian Torres Strait commercial fishing boats noting some of them are experienced dory drivers and divers. AFMA advised that this suggestion was good in principle but would need to be arranged in line with Australian Immigration Laws.

2.4 Native title update

The FWG noted that Malu Lamar were invited to attend the meeting but had declined the invite. AFMA advised that Malu Lamar had advised AFMA that they were not attending PZJA advisory groups until they were made full members rather than invited participants. An industry member ventured that it is important to have Malu Lamar advice in the context of the sea claim in progress. AFMA advised the FWG that they will progress consideration of full membership with the PZJA standing committee.

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

Spanish mackerel total allowable catch advice

Having regard for the FRAG advice the FWG agreed to recommend a **Spanish mackerel TAC of 82 tonnes** (RBC of 94 tonnes minus total estimated catch outside the Fishery – 12 tonne (10t for traditional (subsistence) fishing and 2 t for recreational fishing, **Table 2**). The FWG noted:

- a) That the recommended TAC balances the need for stock rebuilding recognising the apparent biomass decline and both modelled and observed CPUE reductions in recent years, with the need to minimise potential economic impacts on the Fishery. The FWG noted that any TAC reduction was most likely to be given effect through reducing the amount of Spanish Mackerel catch leased to sunset fishers;
- b) Industry members at the WG (all being Traditional Inhabitants) supported the proposed RBC and TAC reduction in order to be precautionary and recognising the importance of the fishery to Traditional Inhabitant livelihoods now and in the future; and
- c) Concern that the proposed TAC reduction may reduce available catch information to support future stock assessments at a time when stock is declining and in need of accurate assessments (catch per unit effort provides an index of stock abundance and is used in modelling stock biomass). It was noted that the proposed TAC reduction could reduce the number of dedicated Spanish mackerel sunset licence operators from three to one or two. This is down from four analysed in the latest stock assessment using 2017-18 data, as one operator has been excluded from TAC reductions in previous years. The FWG noted that future data needs is an important consideration in setting the RBC and TAC. The stock assessment scientist advised that a reduction to two vessel operations could still be analysed in the catch rate standardisation (identification of dory and skipper data, with VMS would mitigate the risk). However, irrespective of the number of fishing operations (2–5), the fishery dependency of the catch rate data (i.e. the amount of fishing by each fishing operation, locations and times) can influence results. Encouragingly, FRAG and FWG traditional commercial operators reiterated the importance of accurate catch and effort information from all sectors, and discussed how to improve and supply their catch-effort data to support the stock assessment process.
- d) TSRA concern that the historical catch data set being used to derive the CPUE time series not being accurate and as a priority should be investigated further.

Catches outside the fishery

FWG considered available estimates of mortality on the Spanish mackerel stock outside of the commercial fishery and supported the use of 10 t for subsistence take and 2 t for recreational harvest. The FWG noted that although there was uncertainty associated with these estimates they

were the best available figures to support decision making and there was no rationale to depart from using these figures.

Coral trout total allowable catch advice

Having regard for FRAG advice the FWG agreed to recommend **maintaining the 134.9 t TAC for coral trout for the 2019-20 season** noting the likelihood of a healthy stock, and that recent catches have been substantially below the TAC. Assuming current catch levels remain unchanged, the FWG supported maintaining this TAC until it can be reconsidered in light of an agreed harvest strategy and stock assessment. The FWG noted FRAG advice that the current stock assessment is preliminary.

In making this recommendation the FWG noted:

- the current notional TAC of 134.9 t has been in place since 2008 and is based on average catches between 2001 to 2005;
- an initial stock assessment for Torres Strait coral trout was presented to the FRAG and was welcomed and deemed preliminary by the RAG due to its present stage of development and the range of uncertainties associated with the assessment;
- the approach of the preliminary assessment was accepted by the RAG. The approach uses biomass estimates from known Great Barrier Reef (GBR) habitats using underwater visual survey data and infers and scales these values to Torres Strait habitats using satellite mapping data to model the population and infer abundance;
- though it was deemed a preliminary assessment by the RAG the outputs do suggest that the trout stock has a healthy level of biomass which is reinforced by industry advice from industry members. The FWG noted the preliminary stock assessment indicates the spawning biomass is around 80 per cent of virgin biomass with the lowest model estimate of biomass being around 65 per cent of virgin biomass.

Agenda Item 4 – Western line closure advice

Noting advice from FRAG on likely negligible stock impacts, the FWG reiterated its previous advice on this issue and continued to support removal of the Western Line Closure. The FWG noted the Western Line Closure has no management purpose and its removal would increase economic opportunities for Traditional Inhabitants in the Finfish Fishery.

The FWG noted that PZJA approval would be sought to undertake further and more focused public consultation on removing the Western line Closure. The FWG recommended that AFMA work with TSRA and industry members to ensure community meetings are convened during the public consultation period alongside other scheduled community visits. Meetings were seen as more appropriate for gathering comments from Torres Strait Islanders compared to seeking written submissions.

Agenda Item 5 – Torres Strait Finfish Fishery management budget

The FWG noted the draft 2019-20 management budget for the fishery as detailed in the agenda paper. The FWG noted that the AFMA was working to present the full costs incurred in managing the fishery at future meetings including compliance, data entry services, logbooks and salaries.

FWG members noted that Malu Lamar attendance was budgeted for at Finfish RAG and FWG meeting and members supported their ongoing input to FWG discussions.

Industry members also recommended as far as possible for future budgets to support sunset licence holders to attend the FRAG and FWG meetings to provide input such as industry updates.

Agenda Item 6 – Other business

TSRA noted that the PZJA would likely be developing a policy to support future consideration of applications for developmental permits to support TIB sector training and skills development on commercial TIB fishing boats. AFMA advised that there was no current policy and all PZJA working groups would be given an opportunity to contribute to development of this policy.

The FWG noted that several pre-proposals to meet identified Torres Strait research needs had been received and considered by the Torres Strait Scientific Advisory Committee Meeting on 27 February 2019. It was noted that following this TSSAC meeting two proposals were put to the Finfish RAG for further clarification; enhancing biological data inputs to Torres Strait Spanish mackerel assessment and Spanish mackerel stock assessment with the RAG providing support and comments for both projects.

Agenda Item 7 – Next meeting and meeting close

The FWG noted the next meeting was scheduled for 18-19 June 2019 with a focus on the final draft harvest strategy.

The FWG chair thanked attendees for a productive meeting and the meeting was closed in prayer at 1700 hrs.