

# Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee

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## Chair's Summary – Meeting #5

The Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee held its fifth meeting on Wednesday 24 March 2021 online via Microsoft Teams. The focus of this meeting was on recreational fishing management arrangements and collection of cockles at McLoughlins beach, however the defined boundary of the fishery was also discussed in detail. The Victorian Fisheries Authority (VFA) also provided an update on the risk assessment process for the fishery. Key discussions and outcomes from that meeting were as follows:

### 1. Boundary of the Corner Inlet fishery

- Some commercial fishers have proposed extending the boundary back further offshore which would help reduce fishing pressure in the inlet by providing a greater area to commercially operate. They also believe this could help protect these offshore waters, including possible breeding grounds of some key species that can occasionally be taken in high amounts through methods such as trawling (e.g. King George whiting).
- Commercial fishers also raised the option of shared access to this area outside the entrances of the Inlet through the issue of restricted permits (e.g. McLoughlins to Rabbit Island) which would not remove other licence classes from the area. The intention would mostly be fishing for crabs, long-lining, and seine netting, while net reels would be prohibited and restrictions applied to boat lengths (e.g. 30ft).
- The VFA indicated there are a wide range of implications for management, and other stakeholders, that would need to be carefully considered. As one example, bays and Inlets are classed as internal waters under existing OCS Memorandum of Understanding Agreements. This creates complications around take of species such as gummy shark outside the current boundary of the Inlet (where daily catch limits currently apply and there is a total allocated catch for Victoria). It also noted potential benefits would need to be weighed up against potential conflict with recreational fishers and other licence classes who fish outside the entrances of the Inlet, taking environmental, social and economic factors into account.
- Commercial fishing representatives will continue discussions with their fellow fisherman and seek to form a consensus on this proposal, including the Corner Inlet Fisheries Habitat Association (CIFHA).
- The VFA agreed to circulate the sort of decision criteria that would be used to further consider this proposal and to inform decision-making.
- The VFA advised it is already likely to extend the offshore Hook and Line Permit trial to this region to provide better access for locals to high-value table fish and may include this as an action in the management plan for consultation. These permits have been successful in other locations and allow permit holders to catch up to 2 tonnes of fish using hook and line and sold locally.

### 2. Research priorities

- The VFA agreed to list additional research priorities for the Corner Inlet fishery and could set some of these out in the management plan to support decisions on future research funding and management.

### 3. Recreational fishing management arrangements

- The VFA provided a summary of the key management controls currently in place for recreational fishing in Corner Inlet and their intended purpose. Many of these rules apply to marine waters state-wide and remain relevant to the Inlet, however members are invited to raise any items for further discussion at the next meeting.
- Having consistent and easy to understand fisheries regulations across the State is important where appropriate. As such, any changes to state-wide regulations would likely need to address a specific issue or risk relevant to the fishery.

### 4. Collection of cockles at McLoughlins beach

- The VFA is aware of concerns raised by local residents regarding the take of cockles at McLoughlins beach. These concerns mostly related to impact on seagrass and sustainability of the cockles.
- Fisheries Officer observations to date indicate that while it is possible there has been minor decline in seagrass in small parts of the most popular harvesting area, the seagrass still appears to be growing

there. It was noted that the harvesting activity is not overly destructive to the substrate as fishers are mostly bare foot when collecting cockles and digging instruments are already prohibited under fisheries regulations.

- The VFA considers the recreational fishery for blood cockle at McLoughlins Beach to be sustainable as it is spatially limited to a small area and seasonally limited (generally occurring in the summer months). Fisheries Officers patrol the McLoughlins Beach area periodically and generally report a high compliance rate with the catch limit amongst harvesters. However, it was noted that recent months have seen some of the most popular days to date and on occasion there are fishers without a rec fishing licence or have taken more than the bag limit.
- One commercial fisher noted that black market sales of these cockles could potentially be addressed if industry were able to harvest them sustainably in other areas using gear such as a rake. It was noted that meeting Primesafe requirements to ensure the product is safe has proven to be cost-prohibitive for hand collection by commercial fishers.
- The VFA confirmed that its position is this is an important multicultural recreational fishery that provides enjoyment to many families. The VFA and the Steering Committee are currently considering a proposal to reduce the bag limit for cockles from 5L to 2L per person for the Corner Inlet fishery. This would still maintain access to the multi-cultural fishery but better share the resource. This type of change has proven successful in similar recreational fisheries like Venus Bay for pipis. The VFA noted it has also been engaging with some members of the local community to fully understand their concerns.
- Parks Victoria advised it supports a sustainable recreational fishery for the cockles and noted some basic monitoring of seagrass in the area would be beneficial. It also noted some of the community concerns were additionally related to the high levels of visitation and lack of infrastructure. It was noted that the public toilet closed mid last year and the jetty that has been closed for some time.  
*Note: The Chair of Seafood Industry Victoria raised a potential conflict of interest on this agenda item given they are a member on the Gippsland Ports board. As Gippsland Ports is responsible for the McLoughlins jetty and that they did not express a view in regards to the jetty.*
- It was noted that the lack of data to demonstrate visitation and economic value from the fishery can make it difficult to inform funding decisions for such infrastructure.

## **5. Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) risk assessment**

- No additions or comments on the list of risks were received from members on the first draft of the risk assessment. The VFA will now populate each of the risks with a brief analysis/summary and a draft score for members to review.
- Once a short-list of highly scored risks is settled in consultation with the Committee, further key actions worthy of inclusion in the draft management plan can be discussed and for consultation.

The next meeting of the Committee is set to take place in early May 2021. This will be held in person at either Port Albert or Port Franklin.

Dallas D'Silva  
Chair  
March 2021