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19/03/2023

Travis Dowling
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Via email c/o: Lachlan.Smith@vfa.vic.gov.au; Toby.Jeavons@vfa.vic.gov.au

Dear Travis,

Draft 2023/24 Further Quota Order (FQO) for the Banded Morwong Fishery

Seafood Industry Victoria (SIV) welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Further Quota Order for the Banded Morwong fishery. SIV has reviewed the consultation paper provided by the VFA and liaised with the two current Banded Morwong licence holders for further input. Concerns were raised by the licence holders regarding factors that should be considered before finalising a total allowable commercial catch (TACC) for the 2023/24 fishing year, including several variables that have impacted the reliability of recent measures of catch per unit effort (CPUE). They have called for a more comprehensive assessment to better predict future stock health and inform fisheries management decisions.

It is noted in the VFA consultation paper that an under-catch of the TACC in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 seasons was predominantly due to the impacts of Covid on the live fish market and reduced activity of operators. Unfortunately, one of the two licence holders has reported suffering from long Covid, inhibiting their ability to operate as recently as May 2022, which is known to be a productive month for Banded Morwong fishing. As a result, they needed to fish in less productive conditions in 2022/23 to maintain business viability. Further, the

considerable impact of food service lockdowns in the height of the pandemic on demand for live fish has continued to influence market dynamics and therefore fishing effort.

Banded Morwong growth rates are thought to be potentially influenced by water temperature¹, although the impacts to behaviour are at this stage poorly understood. One licence holder reported low catch rates for Banded Morwong despite having sighted them in high abundance in that same area while diving for abalone only days before. This was assumed to be due to winter water temperature influencing the behaviour of fish, causing them to be less active and therefore more difficult to catch in mesh nets relying on fish movement. Swell action when fishing also influences catch efficiency. The licence holders have commented that fishing effort for Banded Morwong in the past three years was concentrated on days where swell and other weather conditions prevented them fishing for abalone.

The graphs in the Appendix of the consultation paper date back to 2000 when the dynamics of the Banded Morwong fishery were very different. Since the period when much higher catches were achieved, there have been changes in daily catch limits and closures of some fishing areas. The current Banded Morwong licence holders have commented that the area accessible for fishing is also influenced from year to year by the shifting prevalence of sea tulips that destroy nets. The VFA has recommended action be taken by the two licence holders to better spread future fishing effort to potentially increase fishing efficiency and mitigate risk of localised depletion. The licence holders are aware of regions that have not been fished in recent years, however, are understandably hesitant to explore these areas where catch rates are unknown and could therefore negatively impact annual CPUE and future TACC.

Assessments of the Banded Morwong fishery in Tasmania in 2021/22¹ did not solely rely on commercial catch data and included biological information, in particular size and age compositions. In this sampling program, fish were collected by commercial fishers working under permit. A standard weighting was applied to the biological and commercial catch data to maximise the accuracy of the model. Findings indicated that despite 2021/22 incurring the largest drop in average CPUE since 2012/13, it is unlikely that the biomass of Banded Morwong in Tasmanian waters is depleted and that the current level of fishing mortality will cause the stock to become recruitment impaired. Banded Morwong in Tasmanian waters was thus classified as a sustainable stock.

¹ Kruesk, N and Stacy, B (2022), Tasmanian Banded Morwong Fishery Assessment 2021/22. *Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies, University of Tasmania*.

Having recently invested in the Banded Morwong fishery the two current licence holders are motivated to preserve fish stocks for years to come. To this end, they have been vigilant in keeping records of soak times for their mesh nets and would be willing to assist in the collection of biological samples and/or a fish tagging program to contribute more data toward stock assessments. The incorporation of biological data and appropriate weighting of CPUE data in stock assessments would provide the current licence holders with the confidence to undertake the VFA's recommendation to better spread future fishing effort, without fear of unduly impacting CPUE and therefore future TACC.

Based on the VFA's acknowledgement in their consultation paper that there is not currently a reliable biomass estimate for the Victorian Banded Morwong fishery and uncertainty exists in the reliability of CPUE as a proxy for biomass, SIV calls on the VFA to maintain the current TACC (2920 fish) until such time a more reliable assessment regarding the status of the fishery is available.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wassnig', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matthew Wassnig
Chief Executive Officer
Seafood Industry Victoria