

Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee

Chair's Summary – Meeting #10

The Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee held its 10th meeting in Port Welshpool on Wednesday 20 April 2022. The meeting follows the 60-day public consultation period on the draft Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan which was released publicly on 29 December 2021. In line with the Committee's Terms of Reference, the Committee discussed matters raised in stakeholder submissions and provided advice to the VFA on any amendments to the draft Plan. Key discussions and outcomes from that meeting were as follows:

1. Update on issue of Commonwealth trawlers targeting King George whiting

Victoria has been seeking urgent action from the Commonwealth for many months, requesting a halt to the take of this species by Commonwealth trawlers in waters adjacent to Victoria. The VFA noted there has been some positive discussions between the Victorian and Commonwealth Ministers (with responsibility for fisheries) and Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) have been directed to work with the VFA over the next two months in developing recommendations that are mutually agreeable for both jurisdictions. The VFA will consult with key Victorian fisheries representatives as this matter progresses. One member noted it is important that Commonwealth catch statistics are publicly available to inform discussion of this issue.

2. Overview of public consultation process and submissions received

The VFA gave an overview of the 60-day public consultation process which commenced on 29 December 2022. The VFA thanked Committee members for promoting the release of the Plan on their platforms including social media, TV and radio shows. The VFA noted it also phoned all 18 Corner Inlet Fishery Access Licence holders during the consultation period to check if fishers had any questions regarding the draft Plan that was sent out or on how to make a submission, and it was evident from those calls there was a general feeling of support for the move to the management plan.

The VFA gave an overview of the 38 submissions received (6 from key organisations, 17 from members of the community and 15 from respondents to the survey sent out in the VFA's recreational fishing newsletter 'Nibbles'). The VFA also presented to the Committee its preliminary analysis of each of the stakeholder issues raised and a proposed response. Opportunity was given for each member to raise any queries or points of difference with the proposed approach and in relation to the proposed amendments (where applicable) to the Plan.

Where no change or minor wording edits were proposed by the VFA, this was endorsed by the Committee. The VFA also sought views on a range of more complex matters raised through the public submissions and Committee consensus was reached on a number of topics, including:

- To include an action in the Plan to change the name of the fishery to 'Corner Inlet – Nooramunga Fishery' to better reflect the area which incorporates the Nooramunga side of the fishery.
- To revise the Vision for the fishery and inclusion of a new objective, to better incorporate Traditional Owner cultural heritage and values into the Plan.
- For the VFA to encourage participation of, and work with, Traditional Owners to better understand and factor in the importance of culturally important species (e.g. flathead) for the VFA's monitoring and assessment activities
- In relation to habitat restoration, it was agreed there is greater benefit for all sectors for seagrass restoration efforts rather than shellfish reef restoration. There is a shared commitment from both the commercial and recreational sectors to collaborate on seagrass restoration projects in future.
- That the current arrangements in the commercial Fisheries Notices are satisfactory at present including where they relate to the operation of two Corner Inlet licences by the one operator (i.e. it is a requirement that a trip under one licence be fully completed before undertaking a second trip on another licence)
- That there is not currently a need for marking nets with lights at night. Fishers noted this would increase interference from others and can actually cause safety issues of its own (confusing navigation of boaters).
- That the Corner Inlet Fishery Management Advisory Committee (when it is established) consider the need for limiting soak times on mesh nets and potentially this could be trialed in a future voluntary Code of Practice.

- To include an action which commits to bycatch improvements if they are feasible and assuming there is clear evidence supporting the change. The VFA noted there is already some understanding of seine netting from previous research which shows limited impact on bycatch, however the current information gap relates mesh nets.

Key organizations represented on the Committee offered to write a letter to the VFA indicating their support for the management plan which may be included as supporting statements within the plan and assist with the approval process and consideration by the Minister.

The VFA agreed to prepare a pamphlet style summary document (between 1-4 pages) on the management plan (once declared) which would be helpful as a communication tool.

3. Upcoming Fisheries Notice review

The VFA noted there is a Fisheries Notice set to expire on 19 June 2022 and the rules appear to have been effective to date in bringing down total seine and mesh effort from the levels that were occurring around 2019. It understands (based on phone surveys and analysis of stakeholder submissions) there is still general support for maintaining the current rules amongst the holders of the 18 Corner Inlet Fishery Access Licences currently, noting that there were still a small minority that wanted to change the 'one type of gear in the water at a time' rule. One member noted that the rule in question was implemented as a regulatory requirement almost two years ago now, and, despite a very small minority, commercial fishing businesses have adjusted accordingly. There was general consensus amongst the Committee that adjusting the single gear rule could actually create more uncertainty and issues (and stakeholder concerns) than it would solve and would be a step backwards for the fishery at this time. The VFA noted that unless there is evidence supporting a clear need for change (e.g. if the Fisheries Notice were not effectively managing fishing effort), it intends to consult on a re-make of the existing Fisheries Notice.

4. Management Plan implementation timelines

The VFA noted it will continue working separately with the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) given a representative was unable to attend recent meetings and to ensure that GLaWAC are supportive of the recent edits. The VFA intends to settle the Plan by the end of May, prior to briefing the Minister for Fishing and Boating. It is anticipated that the final management Plan could be implemented in June 2022 if it is approved and declared by the Minister.

In relation to key actions in the draft management plan (table 4.2), a number of revised implementation dates were suggested to ensure these could be met on time. The Committee endorsed a number of the proposed changes.

Mr Toby Jeavons (Manager Marine and Estuarine Fisheries, VFA)
Chair
April 2022