

Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee

Chair's Summary – Meeting #2

The Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee held its second meeting online on Friday 27 November 2020. Key discussions and outcomes from that meeting were as follows:

1. The VFA (Simon Conron and Dr Justin Bell) presented information on scientific monitoring and the stock assessment process for the Corner Inlet fishery:
 - Data from the commercial sector demonstrates that commercial catch is at a historic high and is largely driven by a period of high whiting abundance. It is also attributed to increased landings of flathead (rock flathead and southern bluespotted flathead) due to increased mesh netting effort.
 - It was noted rock flathead CPUE has generally decreased over the last ten years and should be discussed throughout the management planning process. Both rock flathead and bluespotted flathead could be largely resident in Corner Inlet - an upcoming FRDC tagging research project will help assess this. If that is the case, these flathead species could be prone to localised depletion and differ to species such as whiting that temporarily reside in the area.
 - Recreational fisher creel surveys only commenced in the Corner Inlet region a few years ago. Preliminary results indicate recreational fishers are primarily targeting flathead, gummy shark, King George whiting and snapper. On average, roughly 75% of fishers interviewed were either quite satisfied or very satisfied with their experience fishing in Corner Inlet.
 - Boat ramp cameras are being installed in the new year at key ramps across the region including Port Welshpool and Port Albert (the two main ramps), which will help provide indicators for fishing effort based on boat launches. This will contribute to a sophisticated model that will indicate trends relevant to recreational fishing. This will be supported by data from the GoFishVic angler diary application.
2. Members identified that there is a need for further discussion around fishing practices (e.g. mesh soak times and the subsequent implications for fish quality and bycatch survival). The next meeting of the Steering Committee will focus on commercial fisheries management.
3. It was considered that the fishery would benefit from a total catch survey (conducted across all sectors) in the early life of the management plan. It was noted that estimating recreational catch would not be too difficult given the small number of ramps in Corner Inlet and a lower cost relative to other bay and inlet fisheries like Port Philip Bay and Gippsland Lakes. However, the Committee would need to agree what the management need or objective of a total catch survey would be and how the results would be used, prior to any additional funding being potentially sought.
4. Dr Paul Carnell (Deakin University) presented on coastal wetlands powering Australia's inshore fisheries.
 - Sub-tidal seagrass area in Corner Inlet has generally seen a slow decline since the mid-1960s. The coverage of Posidonia (Broad leaf seagrass) appears to be relatively stable, but the coverage of fine-leaf seagrass (Zostera) area is declining. Expanding sea urchin populations have also been identified as an issue, damaging seagrass beds and causing barrens.

- Seagrass powers Corner Inlet's fisheries, particularly for whiting, salmon, garfish, rock flathead and snapper. The fishery could benefit from future research that investigates how fisheries catches change over time with seagrass coverage.
5. Members noted that seagrass has a common importance in benefitting both recreational and commercial fishing and has flow-on impacts for the local community and wider Victoria. Clearly, if seagrass coverage is high, the viability and sustainability of the fishery benefits. It was agreed that those involved in current seagrass restoration projects be invited to meet with the group in early 2021 to discuss this topic further and how it could be incorporated into the management plan.
 6. Current fishery management issues – it was raised that winching of seine nets with long ropes is still seen as an issue that creates risk for boating safety, sustainability and social licence. The VFA advised it is reviewing this practice and any potential impacts on sustainability of the fishery. It was noted that the licence holder survey conducted in September provided good information on licence holder views about this practice.
 7. The Committee agreed to a field trip to observe fishing practices in Corner Inlet. Suitable dates for the field trip will be determined out of session.

The presentations and points raised by members will be taken into account for planning of future meetings and in identifying opportunities to improve scientific monitoring for the fishery.

The next meeting will focus largely on commercial fisheries management.

Dallas D'Silva
Chair
November 2020