

Chair's Summary – Meeting #8

The Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee held its 8th meeting on Tuesday 24 August 2021 online via Microsoft Teams. Key matters for discussion at this meeting included drafting of the management plan, establishing management review triggers for mesh netting, harvest strategies for key flathead species, and the timeframes and consultation approach for finalizing the project. Key discussions and outcomes from that meeting were as follows:

1. Drafting of the Management Plan

- The VFA has prepared a first draft version of the fishery management plan for the Committee's review. This has taken into account discussions and advice provided by the Committee over the last 7 meetings, including key work on the fishery risk assessment and management objectives, strategies and actions.
- There will be at least two rounds of reviewing the document with the Committee prior to seeking the Minister's approval to release a draft for public consultation.
- The Plan will cover key components such as:
 - Background on the fishery with information on key fish stocks and their status, the sectors utilising the resource, catch history, and environmental significance and threats.
 - Relevant legislation and policy.
 - The Ecologically Sustainable Development risk assessment of the fishery.
 - Objectives, strategies and management actions to enhance management of the fishery and ensure it is managed in line with the objectives of the Fisheries Act 1995.
 - Management arrangements relevant to recreational and commercial fishing.
 - Reference points for fishing effort and catch rates whereby a management review would be expected to commence if exceeded, including development of a harvest strategy for higher risk target species such as rock flathead.
 - Monitoring, assessment and research, including research priorities.
 - Timeline for review of the management plan once declared.
- The VFA agreed to include some additional information on tourism and the economic importance of the fishery.

2. Inclusion of fishery reference points in the management plan

2.1 Developing a harvest strategy for rock flathead and other flathead

- The VFA explained the rationale for developing harvest strategies for select species as part of the management plan, as this represents best practice fisheries management and are widely used in fisheries around Australia and the world. Harvest strategies establish three types of reference points and these are based on key performance indicators for the fishery (such as catch-per-unit-effort, CPUE):
 - *target reference points* (TRP) - where we want the fishery to be
 - *trigger reference point* (TrRP) - early warnings of stock decline
 - *limit reference point* (LRP) - where we don't want the fishery to be – likely requiring strong and immediate action to significantly reduce or prevent fishing mortality for that species

This type of framework helps ensure all stakeholders are aware of at what point management changes need to be considered when there are substantial changes in the relative abundance of key species.

- It is proposed to establish these reference points relating to CPUE for rock flathead and other flathead (consisting of southern blue-spot flathead and sand flathead) based on historical catch and effort data. These species are prioritized following consideration of their risk rating under the Ecologically Sustainable Development risk assessment and since they are likely to be stocks resident to Corner Inlet (and suitable to include within the scope of the management plan).
- If a reference point is exceeded, a review of the management arrangements relevant to that species could commence (e.g. if the catch rates were to go below a certain reference point) and this would be a consultative process. The VFA would seek fishers' views on whether there are other reasons for why the trigger reference points may have been exceeded.
- Harvest control rules may also be developed with industry in future so there is a pre-agreed management approach when the reference point thresholds are exceeded, however these would be developed over coming years and not be included in the management plan document.
- While no comments were received from industry representatives on this aspect of the draft Plan during the meeting, these may be provided out of session.

2.2 Inclusion of a reference point for mesh netting effort

- There is currently a limit on seine netting effort in the commercial fishery (i.e a maximum number of shots). However, the current management arrangements for mesh netting (such as maximum net length, single gear use rule) do not mitigate the risk of a substantial increase in mesh netting effort from occurring over time. Further increases to mesh effort are possible – for example, from changing fishing practices and/or a transition of licence operators and their targeted method.
- The VFA noted that while further regulations for mesh netting are not currently being considered, it intends to include an upper reference point in the management plan to help industry to together monitor mesh netting effort into the future. This is considered important given mesh netting effort has shown an increasing trend over time and latent effort in the commercial fishery was identified as a key risk under Ecologically Sustainable Development risk assessment.
- The upper reference point would be set well above recent averages, but if the year-on-year trends continued to rise to unprecedented levels for the Corner Inlet Fishery Access Licence class and exceeded the reference point, it would indicate that the dynamic of the fishery has changed and require a review. Subsequently, the VFA would review the data and consult with industry in considering the need for changes to management of mesh netting to mitigate any sustainability risks. This would include consideration of suitable measures to better control mesh effort.
- There are several benefits of establishing this reference point in the management plan, as it demonstrates best practice fishery management techniques to the community and helps all stakeholders to monitor how the fishery is tracking (including any potential new entrants considering buying into the fishery). Similar to the species harvest strategy it would help ensure stakeholders are aware of at what point management changes need to be considered.
- One commercial fisher suggested that if there is going to be a threshold set for mesh effort then this should be on individuals rather than the whole fishery. However, another commercial fisher acknowledged that some fishers generally only mesh net (and do not seine) so setting this fairly may not be possible. The VFA noted setting individual limits for mesh netting would be similar to the concept of individual quotas which were already previously discussed and were not supported by the Committee.
- Commercial representatives noted they were surprised mesh effort rose in the last year following the Fisheries Notices and noted the definitions for nets could be tightened to ensure integrity of the data.
- The VFA noted the concerns but also acknowledged increases in mesh effort can be influenced by a small number of fishers if they focus on mesh netting (as most Corner Inlet commercial fishers typically focus on seine netting). The VFA noted it regularly monitors integrity of catch and effort logbook reporting and can cross-reference this with VMS polling to investigate incidences of misreporting. It noted it is a requirement of the Fisheries Act for fishers to provide accurate information and that any illegal activity should be reported to 13FISH.
- The VFA noted there would be some hesitancy from commercial fishers around inclusion of the reference point but reiterated that there were no control rules set against this (it is not a set regulatory change) and is simply a benchmark to monitor the fishery against. It will review the terminology used in the draft plan to clarify this.

3. Project timeline and consultation approach

- The VFA provided a summary of the proposed project timeline and consultation approach. In summary:
 - A draft version of the management plan could be prepared as soon as October 2021 for consideration by the Minister for Fishing and Boating.
 - If endorsed, the VFA would then run a 60-day consultation period seeking comment from all key stakeholders and the public.
 - The Steering Committee would then be reconvened in early 2022 to discuss the issues raised and to provide advice to the VFA on any recommended changes.
 - A final Plan could then be provided to the Minister as soon as February for consideration and declaration.
 - The VFA will use various mediums in seeking public comment including writing to key stakeholders, the Corner Inlet Connections Partner Group, website content, newsletters, media release, advertisement and social media.
- Local forums in South Gippsland not currently possible due to COVID restrictions but the VFA hopes to be able to run these during the 60-day consultation period.
- SIV noted it would like the timeline extended slightly to allow the SIV board to endorse the Plan as a draft and the process to go out to public consultation. The VFA agreed to review the timeline for this.

4. Other

- Commonwealth trawl catch of King George whiting remains a serious concern to the VFA, VRFish, FutureFish and the Corner Inlet Fisheries Habitat Association.