

Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee

Chair's Summary – Meeting #4

The Corner Inlet Fishery Management Plan Steering Committee held its fourth meeting on Wednesday 24 February 2021 online via Microsoft Teams. The meeting largely focused on existing controls / management arrangements for the commercial fishery. The VFA also provided an update on the risk assessment process for the fishery. Key discussions and outcomes from that meeting were as follows:

1. The VFA has prepared a draft list of risks identified under the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) fisheries risk assessment framework of relevance Corner Inlet fishery. Some of the key risks relevant to commercial fishing were presented to the group to consider in the context of discussion on current regulations. In summary these risks related to:

- social license and public perceptions of commercial netting,
- fishers changing their practices to increase effort under an input-controlled fishery,
- boating safety,
- gaps in monitoring of bycatch, and
- potential for recruitment overfishing of some flathead species in C.I.

There are a range of other important risks for the fishery, including those associated with other sectors. The list of draft risks was sent out to members after the meeting for initial comment as a first step. The next draft will include further information and preliminary analysis.

2. The VFA presented a list of the current controls for the commercial fishery and their purpose. Members were invited to discuss views on whether these remain suitable for the fishery into the future. Key discussions / actions included:

Boundary of the Corner Inlet fishery

- Some licence holders have suggested there may be benefits in reinstating the original boundary which was brought closer to the entrances of the Inlet many years ago.
- The VFA will try to identify any information on why this boundary was originally changed and report back to the Committee. It was noted that there would need to be a substantive reason for the boundary to be shifted including consideration of environmental, economic and social factors.

Fishing areas

- VRFish noted that reports from concerned recreational fishers over recent years have been associated with levels of commercial catch of King George whiting and blue-spotted flathead, and commercial fishing activity in the Nooramunga end of the fishery between Port Welshpool and Manns Beach.
- There were competing views between some rec and commercial stakeholders on whether this end should be managed differently to other areas of the Inlet. It was noted that the recent Fisheries Notices may address some rec fisher concerns.
- The VFA advised that VMS would eventually provide a good picture of the spread of fishing effort across the fishery.

Fishing effort

- There is some latent effort in the commercial fishery at present with some commercial licences being fished much less than others. It was noted that these licence holders may eventually sell to full-time operators and so there is a risk of increased overall fishing effort in the fishery.

Temporal closures

- It was noted that the weekend closure is generally working well, as most recreational fishers (which are usually present in highest numbers on weekends) are out of the water by

5pm on a Sunday. Further consideration would be given to whether any changes would be appropriate.

June 2020 and March 2021 Fisheries Notices

- It was suggested that an action in the management plan could be to transition the rules in current Fisheries Notices into regulation if they are proven to be effective.
- The VFA supports this, however noted that it would review each Notice on its merits closer to the end of its 12-month life to determine whether it remains effective and if it may be appropriate to transfer into regulation. The VFA is also aware some fishers would like to see the prohibition on more one type of gear in the water at a time revised and/or removed completely.

Catch and effort reporting

- It was noted that catch and effort reporting data is primarily for the VFA to monitor of catch rates and assessing fish stocks, but it also releases a seafood production statistics via a bulletin and on its website each year: <https://vfa.vic.gov.au/commercial-fishing/commercial-fish-production#fp-ci-catch>
- The VFA noted there was interest from Seafood Industry Victoria in obtaining this information in a more frequent manner and could include this as an action going forward. It was noted that collection of market seafood prices of Corner Inlet fish would also be useful.

Code of Practice

- It was noted that the Corner Inlet fishers' voluntary Code of Practice is now obsolete as there are no important measures that are not already in regulation.
- Some commercial representatives agreed it would be worthwhile discussing with other licence holders whether a new Code of Practice could be achieved as it is a beneficial tool for the sector to demonstrate responsible fishing and improve social licence.
- The VFA advised it could consider contributing some financial support for an independent consultant to assist with this type process. Licence holders could also work with the Steering Committee to identify worthy measures to include in a possible Code of Practice.

3. Following a request by commercial representatives at the previous meeting, the VFA clarified its regulatory approach for how seine net shots are to be counted under the 2-shot per day (midnight to midnight) rule and how fishers should record these in logbooks. Guidance has now been sent out to all licence holders with the details.
4. Neville Clarke (commercial licence holder) advised that the Corner Inlet Fisheries Habitat Association (CIFHA) met earlier in February 2021. CIFHA has put forward its current position on specific management options that were briefly raised during the previous meeting. In summary CIFHA is not in favour of quota management, a cap on seine net shots, tradable seine net shots (i.e seine effort quota), or soak times for mesh nets. It is in favour of allowing use of fishing lines or hoop nets while mesh netting and long-lining, and also supports use of fishing lines while seine netting.

The next meeting is planned to take place in late March 2021 and will include discussion on recreational fishing management arrangements for Corner Inlet.

Dallas D'Silva
Chair
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