

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

TWENTY-FOURTH REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 3-7 August 1992)

COUNTRY STATEMENT

AUSTRALIA

Overview

The retained catch of fish, crustaceans and molluscs by Australian fishermen was 205,000 tonnes in 1990-91 and is estimated to have decreased to 188,000 tonnes in 1991-92. The gross value of production was around \$A1175 m in 1990-91, and is expected to have reached over \$A1200 million in 1991-92, and is forecast to reach \$A1275 million in 1992-93. The increase is associated with good catches and prices for rock lobster, and a strong 1990-91 prawn season. While a poor prawn season occurred in 1991-92, continued good rock lobster catches and prices are expected to maintain overall value. The value of aquaculture production increased to \$A237 million, with molluscs accounting for \$A167 million. Total exports of fish PRODUCTS (mainly to Japan and USA) were valued at \$A780,000 for 1990-91, with imports (predominantly from Thailand, New Zealand, Malaysia, Canada, Japan and USA) in the order of \$A445,000. (Source: Australian Bureau of Agricultural Resource Economics).

A major change to the institutional arrangements for Commonwealth management of fisheries occurred on 3 February 1992 with the replacement of the Australian Fisheries Service (AFS) by a statutory authority, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA). As part of the Australian Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE), AFS was directly responsible to the relevant Minister through the head of the department. AFMA will be more independent. It will be run by a Board which will share a wide range of scientific, business, industry and fisheries management skills.

Australian Fisheries Management Authority

The legislation establishing AFMA gives it authority to manage Federal fisheries on the Government's behalf (State Government controls are not affected; the States continue to manage their own fisheries). The legislation works on the basis of fishing concessions allowing access only to specific areas of the Australian Fishing Zone (AFZ). It also provides for longer term access rights to managed fisheries as well as fishing permits for those which are either developmental or are not yet under comprehensive management. Revenue to cover attributable costs of management is raised by a levy upon the catching sector, based on quota rights held, units of capacity or entitlements. The legislation also makes provision for greater public input into the development of management plans.

Most of the AFS responsibilities are covered by AFMA but some remain with a new (small) branch in the Minerals and Fisheries Group within DPIE called the Fisheries Policy Branch. The branch provides strategic policy advice on fisheries issues and is responsible for intergovernmental matters on both the domestic and international fronts. In the context of the South Pacific, this means that the branch will play an active role in bilateral and multi-lateral relations.

AFMA Personnel

The chairman of the AFMA board is Jim McColl, previously Director-General of Agriculture in South Australia. His Board includes Geoff Gorrie (previously Director of AFS), Max Ball (General Manager of Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative Ltd.), Stuart Richey (a Tasmanian fisherman of long standing, directing his family-owned fishing company), Bernard Bowen (the recently-retired Executive Director of Fisheries in Western Australia), Robert Seldon (a merchant banker and finance consultant), Meryl Williams (Executive Director of the Australian Bureau of Rural Resources), and Peter Young (Chief of CSIRO Division of Fisheries).

The new Managing Director of AFMA will be Richard Stevens (previously Director of Fisheries in South Australia and Chief Administrator, Norfolk Island), replacing the Acting Managing Director, Geoff Gorrie. His three General Managers will be Martin Exel (Northern and Pelagic Fisheries; previously Manager, Tuna Fisheries in AFS), Geoff Rohan (Southern Fisheries; previously Senior Economist, South Australian Department of Fisheries) and Graham Peachey (Corporate Services, previously Manager - Fishing Operations in AFS). Applications have also been sought for a Chief Scientist and a Chief Economist (to provide high-level scientific and economic advice) and an Executive Secretary.

Atlas of Australian fisheries Resources

Work has progressed steadily on the Bureau of Rural Resources' fisheries atlas, and it is scheduled for publication around the end of the year. It will be a high quality publication covering more than 100 species, their selection based on a production of at least 100 tonnes. The text of the atlas will contain details of history, biology, distribution, fisheries (commercial and recreational), gear, management and marketing, together with 25 years of catch statistics. It has involved contributions from in excess of 250 fisheries workers around Australia and the adjacent regions, to the extent that it will provide access to much information not otherwise conveniently available.

Status Reports

One of the functions of the Australian Bureau of Rural Resources is to report regularly on the status of Australian fishery resources. A series of short outlines is under development. The first six included reports on the Torres Strait Lobster, the Northern Fish Trawl species and Torres Strait prawns. The next six will include Northern Prawns, Northern Pearls and Western Deepwater/North West Slope species.

MAJOR FISHERIES OF INTEREST TO SPC MEMBERS

Queensland East Coast Otter Trawl Fishery

The state-managed Queensland east coast otter trawl fishery extends from the Queensland/New South Wales border to Cape York. Approximately 940 vessels are currently licensed to take prawns and scallops in these waters. The total annual prawn catch in 1989/90 was almost 7000 tonnes, worth in excess of \$A56 million. Species include eastern king prawn, red spot king, blue leg king, brown tiger, grooved tiger banana, bay and endeavour prawns. The average annual catch rate was 7952 kg/boat. There are clear seasonal and regional differences in prawn species composition and catch rates along the coastline. The annual scallop (*Amusium balloti*) catch is more variable and ranges between 800 and 1400 tonnes (meat weight) worth approximately \$A20 million. (Source: Queensland Department of Primary Industries)

Queensland East Coast Line Fishery

The Queensland line fishery extends from the Queensland/New South Wales border to Cape York. Approximately 1950 vessels are currently endorsed to take all unprotected fish species in these waters, with the exception of tunas and billfishes which are managed under separate arrangements by the Commonwealth Government. The 1989/90 catch was 4070 tonnes. Coral trout (*Plectropomus spp.*) represent the major component of the catch (31%), with red-throat

emperor (*Lethrinus miniatus*: 14%) and Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus commerson*, 23%) also important. Catch rates averaged 110 kg/day. (Source: Queensland Department of Primary Industries)

East Coast Tuna Fishery

Longline: Approximately 170 vessels operate in this Commonwealth-controlled fishery, and the annual catch of the main species is in the order of 600 tonnes of yellowfin and 15 tonnes of bigeye. The catch is airfreighted fresh-chilled to Japan and USA sashimi markets.

Purse seine and poling: Skipjack catches in 1990–91 and 1991–92 have been in the order of 6000 tonnes, which is well above the long-term average for the fishery. The catch is canned locally.

Trolling: A survey testing commercial viability of a troll fishery for albacore was carried out during the 1991–92 summer. Catches were quite variable partly because the range and duration of the vessels were limited by weather conditions. Some reasonable catches were taken by other vessels at times, and there is likely to be ongoing interest in albacore as a part-time target for multi-purpose east coast vessels.

Northern Pearls

The gold-lipped pearl shell, *Pinctada maxima* is the main species taken both for mother-of-pearl and for pearl culture. The value of the product from Western Australia, Northern Territory and Torres Strait is probably in the order of \$A80 million, \$A10 million and \$A2 million respectively. Total Allowable Catches (TACs) are in place in Western Australia (approximately 550 000 shells shared among about 14 participants) and Northern Territory (120 000 shells shared equally among 6 participants); limited access applies in Queensland. The fishery is managed as a joint-authority fishery (joint State and Commonwealth control) with State legislation operative in Western Australia and Northern Territory, and Commonwealth legislation in Torres Strait.

Trochus in Torres Strait and Queensland East Coast

Rapid interest in this fishery was stimulated by good prices (\$A10/kg) in 1990, but prices have since fallen to \$A4–7/kg) and interest has subsided. The fishery is considered to be over-exploited, with many areas of local depletion. The weight of trochus shell landed from Torres Strait and the Queensland east coast in 1991 was 210 tonnes. The current Queensland management arrangements involve individual operators holding non-transferable quotas. Other measures include limited entry on the east coast, a TAC there of 350 tonnes, a TAC of 150 tonnes in Torres Strait, a minimum base diameter of 8cm, and a maximum base diameter of 12.5 cm. A review of management arrangements is being undertaken and is expected to be completed by December 1992.

Torres Strait Tropical Rock Lobster

The tropical rock lobster, *Panulirus ornatus*, are speared or hand collected by divers in the Torres Strait fishery. Lobsters are generally taken in the 0.7–1.25 kg size range but exceptional specimens are up to 6 kg. The value of the catch (about 200 tonnes) in 1991 was approximately \$A5.5 million.

Torres Strait Prawns

This fishery, like the Torres Strait Rock Lobster fishery, involves catch sharing arrangements between Australia and Papua New Guinea. This is implemented via vessel number controls rather than total catches, and takes into account vessel catching capacity and distribution of the prawn stocks. There are about 110 licensed vessels. The catch in 1990 was 854 tonnes valued at about \$A10 million, and in 1991 was 1674 tonnes valued at about \$A18 million.

Northern Prawn Fishery

This fishery straddles Indian and Pacific Ocean regions, extending from Cape Londonderry in Western Australia to Thursday Island in the east, taking in parts of the Timor and Arafura Seas and the Gulf of Carpentaria. The main species are banana prawns (*Penaeus merguensis*), endeavour prawns (*Metapenaeus endeavouri* and *M. ensis*) and tiger prawns (*Penaeus esculentus* and *P. simsulcatus*). The banana prawn catch in 1991 was 7000 tonnes, with a total 1990-91 catch in the order of 10200 tonnes valued at around \$A110 million. Economic assessment of the fishery indicated too much fishing effort in the fishery, so a voluntary adjustment scheme was introduced whereby industry and government funded 'buy-back' of units. The fleet of 215 vessels in December 1990 decreased to 171 in June 1992; however, the rate of attrition has been inadequate so compulsory surrender of about one third of the effort units remaining will be required in December 1992.

Foreign fishing in the Australian 200-mile zone

The main foreign activity off the Pacific coast of Australia is a longline fishery involving Japanese vessels operating under a bilateral licence arrangement. Areas and seasons of operation are closely controlled, and there are limits on the number of vessels or of boat days. The size of the bilateral-licensed fleet has declined in recent years with the development of joint-venture arrangements between Australian and Japanese industry interests, but most of the developments in this regard have involved longline vessels targeting southern bluefin tuna rather than the component operating in temperate and tropical regions of the AFZ and targeting yellowfin, bigeye, broadbill swordfish and marlins.
