




The Hon Mark Furner MP
Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries
and Minister for Rural Communities

Our ref: CTS 09560/22
Your ref: A869695

1 William Street Brisbane 4000
GPO Box 46 Brisbane
Queensland 4001 Australia
Telephone +61 7 3719 7420
Email agriculture@ministerial.qld.gov.au

Mr Neil Laurie
The Clerk of the Parliament
Queensland Parliamentary Services
Parliament House
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Queensland Legislative Assembly	
Number: 5722T920	
 23 JUN 2022	Tabled <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
MP: HON FURNER	By Leave <input type="checkbox"/>
Clerk's Signature: <i>W.A.</i>	

Dear Mr Laurie

Thank you for your letter of 25 May 2022 regarding Petition 3724-22 received by the Queensland Legislative Assembly about proposed changes to the Queensland Spanish mackerel fishery.

I would like to reiterate at the outset that no changes have been made to recreational or commercial fishing rules for Spanish mackerel at this time and none will be made until consultation with recreational and commercial fishers has been completed.

Stock Assessment

A stock assessment for the east coast Spanish mackerel estimated the biomass to be around 17 per cent of unfished levels.

The stock assessment used a leading population model, known as stock synthesis, to assess the status of the fishery up to 2020. Stock synthesis is one of the most widely used and tested stock assessment models in the world and is currently used by other Australian fisheries jurisdictions, including: the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO); the South Australian Research and Development Institute; the Australian Fisheries Management Authority; and the Victorian Fisheries Authority.

The stock assessment used data on annual harvests taken by all fishing sectors, commercial catch rates of fish, age-length measures of fish, and biological parameters for fish growth, natural mortality and spawning activity.

The data used in the 2020 stock assessment is the same as previous assessments with the benefit of another four years of data analysis. The Spanish Mackerel stock assessment has one of the largest datasets of Queensland fisheries and includes more than:

- 231 000 Queensland commercial logbook records
- 7 000 New South Wales commercial logbook records
- 37 600 Queensland charter logbook records
- 70 100 recreationally and commercially caught Spanish mackerel measured through routine biological monitoring and more than 1 400 boat ramp surveys
- 18 100 age data records.

Key assumptions used included:

- the Queensland east coast stock being reproductively isolated from other stocks in Australia
- the standardised catch rate index reflecting changes in abundance of legal sized Spanish mackerel
- the fishery was in an unfished state in 1911
- the ratio of fish that are female at birth is 50 per cent
- fish not changing sex during their life
- the first mature age of fish is after two years.

An independent review of the Spanish mackerel stock assessment was conducted by Dr Neil Klaer, a former CSIRO fisheries scientist. The reviewer agreed the data was used appropriately in the assessment and that the assessment model itself was suitable. The reviewer questioned the model value for 'steepness' or how resilient Spanish mackerel are after high fishing pressure, and was unable to support conclusions until this uncertainty was resolved. This reservation did not relate to the validity of the input data for the stock assessment.

Subsequent work conducted by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF) in response to Dr Klaer's review showed that his preference for a higher steepness value was not supported by model testing and that the stock assessment had used a more appropriate value.

The stock assessment and Dr Klaer's review were presented to the Sustainable Fisheries Independent Expert Panel. In a communique from the meeting, the Expert Panel commented that while Dr Klaer's comments were justified, the department's response was considered appropriate. Further, given DAF's model is more precautionary than the reviewer's, the Expert Panel considered that the most responsible way forward is to accept the stock assessment base case as the most credible scenario and to make management decisions accordingly.

This is further supported by an estimate in the recent stock assessment of Spanish mackerel in the Torres Strait conducted by the Australian Government. The Torres Strait assessment estimated steepness at 0.47. DAF used a value of 0.45 for the east coast fishery, while Dr Klaer's preference was higher at 0.7.

The need for action is further supported by longstanding concerns about sustainability, with evidence of a 70 per cent reduction in the number of Spanish mackerel spawning aggregations within two decades, a decline in historically important spawning aggregations from waters east of Cairns, a reduction in the size and frequency of spawning aggregations in the Lucinda region and a long-term decline in commercial catch rates.

Consultation on Management Action

Under Federal and Queensland Government harvest strategy guidelines, appropriate management action is required to rebuild fish stocks when the biomass falls below the limit reference point of 20 per cent biomass. Doing nothing is not an option and would go against the fundamental principles of the Queensland *Sustainable Fisheries Strategy 2017–2027*, the main objective of the *Fisheries Act 1994* and the Queensland Government's responsibility to ensure our public fishery resources are managed in a responsible and sustainable manner.

If action is not taken, there is a real risk of further biomass decline and long-lasting and far more significant economic impacts for commercial fishers, recreational fishers, fish processors, café and restaurant owners and the broader community.

A discussion paper and survey were designed to elicit and better understand the preferences of stakeholders who have an interest in the fishery.

The survey sought to describe specific aspects and relationships of management measures and stakeholder groupings. It is acknowledged that the survey data collected is from individuals with vested interests and is therefore subjective. In designing the survey questions, it was acknowledged that there is no single correct answer, but some combinations would be more effective than others at achieving rebuilding. However, they were appropriate to be considered and were used in modelling predicted rebuilding timeframes for the fishery.

The discussion paper was released on 6 April 2022 and used a structured online survey to elicit stakeholder feedback on possible management measures to rebuild the Queensland east coast Spanish mackerel fishery to sustainable levels. The discussion paper was open to everybody to make a submission through DAF's engagement hub website at <https://daf.engagementhub.com.au/spanish-mackerel-2022> and was widely communicated through a media release, social media and communication with fishing tackle associations and peak bodies representing both commercial and recreational fishers. Submissions could be made online or in writing.

Public consultation closed on 5 May 2022 and 1 470 submissions were received, including 1 437 responses to the online survey and 33 written submissions.

The majority of survey respondents were from recreational fishers (78 per cent), with submissions also received from commercial fishers (five per cent), charter fishing operators (four per cent), interested community members (seven per cent), seafood wholesales/marketers (one per cent), hospitality workers/owners (one per cent), fishing tackle retailers (one per cent), Traditional Owners/fishers (one per cent) and environmental, industry peak body and other non-government organisations (one per cent). Nearly 1 000 free-form written comments were also received through the survey.

At the request of the commercial fishing industry, DAF met with commercial Spanish mackerel fishers who are likely to be most affected by potential changes to management arrangements. Invitations were sent to 48 identified commercial fishers and charter fishing operators. Meetings were held in Townsville on 21 April 2022, Cairns on 26 April 2022 and the Sunshine Coast on 3 May 2022, at which 33 commercial fishers attended. No charter fishing operators accepted the invitation and attended any of the meetings.

DAF also met with representatives of the recreational fishing sector and fishing tackle industry during the public consultation process.

A further round of consultation will be undertaken on potential management action before a final decision is made by the Queensland Government later in 2022. This will provide a further opportunity for Queenslanders to have a say, including those who may not have taken up the opportunity as part of the initial round of consultation and those who form part of this petition.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Furner'.

MARK FURNER MP

**Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and
Minister for Rural Communities**