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FISHERIES & AQUACULTURE

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## **NOTICE TO MARINE SCALEFISH FISHERY AND NORTHERN ZONE ROCK LOBSTER FISHERY LICENCE HOLDERS**

### **Reduction in the King George Whiting catch cap in the West Coast Fishing Zone**

Dear licence holder,

Further to the letter dated 30 June 2022, which outlined a reduction in the fishing cap for King George Whiting (KGW) in the West Coast Fishing Zone (West Coast) for the 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023 period, I write to further elaborate on the basis for this decision.

#### Background

Through the development of the reform of the commercial Marine Scalefish Fishery (MSF), it was identified that the harvesting of priority species in the fishery should be constrained within sustainable catch limits and move to output controls in the form of total allowable commercial catches (TACCs) or 'fishing caps'.

The Snapper Management Advisory Committee (Snapper MAC) was established in October 2019 to provide advice to the former Minister for Primary Industries and Regional Development on issues in relation to Snapper. This committee was also tasked with providing recommendations for the setting of catch limits for the four priority species in the MSF for the 1 July 2021 - 30 June 2022 period.

With the exception of SE Snapper<sup>1</sup> the Snapper MAC recommended TACCs for all MSF Tier 1 stocks be set at the previous five-year average commercial catch (2015-2019) for the 2021-22 period on an interim basis, noting that the harvest strategies provided in the *Management Plan for the Commercial Marine Scalefish Fishery* (the Management Plan) were in need of updating. Applying the five-year average catch, the Snapper MAC recommendation for West Coast KGW was 102 tonnes.

The Snapper MAC recommendations were adopted with the exception of West Coast KGW, where a fishing cap was set at 473 tonnes for the 1 July 2021 – 30 June 2022 period. This decision was based on the maximum 28% total harvest fraction<sup>2</sup> consistent with the arrangements for KGW described in the Management Plan. The estimate of biomass was derived from the WhitEst stock assessment model.

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<sup>1</sup>In the case of SE Snapper, a total allowable catch (TAC) was recommended to be set based on a modelled harvest fraction of estimated biomass provided in the 2020 stock assessment.

<sup>2</sup> The harvest fraction is the proportion of the population (the fishable biomass) removed by fishing each year.

### MSFMAC recommendation for 2022/23

The Marine Scalegfish Fishery Management Advisory Committee (MSFMAC) was established as part of the reform of the MSF and replaced the Snapper MAC. The MSFMAC was established to provide advice to guide the management of South Australia's largest and most diverse shared access fishery, including the setting of catch limits for the commercial MSF.

The MSFMAC recommended catch limits for the 1 July 2022 - 30 June 2023 period during its second meeting on 8 April 2022. As outlined in the Chair's report for this meeting, the MSFMAC considered a range of factors in developing its recommendations, including the approach applied to setting catch limits for 2021/22 and management and scientific information available in the stock summaries. The Chair's report and stock summaries are publicly available on the Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA) website at <http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/msfmac>

### Stock status

An updated stock assessment was published in 2021 for KGW which maintained the 'sustainable' classification for all KGW stocks in the State. The total harvest fraction was 10% in 2019 for the West Coast KGW stock. The assessment model suggested the biomass of KGW in the West Coast had been increasing and the harvest fraction decreasing.

The MSFMAC noted there was assessment uncertainty for the offshore component of the stock and the MSFMAC Science Subcommittee noted that obtaining a better understanding of age structure and spatial dynamics would be beneficial and was identified as a future research need. This information would reduce uncertainty in the assessment and help to understand if any localised depletion could occur in the limited inshore areas where fishing for the species was primarily undertaken on the West Coast.

### Current understanding of KGW biology

At the time the Management Plan was developed in 2012/13, the decision rules to guide sustainable commercial fishing for KGW was set at a 28% harvest fraction as this level was considered the international standard. However, based on what is currently known about the life history of the species - in particular the longevity of the species being 20+ years - and the uncertainty in the stock assessment, the MSFMAC considered a 28% harvest fraction was too high and no longer appropriate.

### Harvest fraction and catch options for West Coast KGW

Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) is defined as the maximum average annual catch that can be removed from a stock over an indefinite period under prevailing environmental conditions. MSY is a widely adopted fisheries management target reference point in fisheries throughout the world. Further,  $\frac{2}{3}$  of natural mortality (M) is a recognised proxy for fishing mortality that produces MSY<sup>3</sup>. Applying this proxy in the case of KGW results in a harvest fraction of 12.5% which equates to a recommended biological catch (RBC) (across all sectors) of 262 tonnes. The commercial component of this is 183 tonnes, applying the regional distribution (70:30) of the state-wide allocation.

Through the reform of the MSF, there had also been a small change to the boundary of the West Coast/Spencer Gulf Fishing Zones which meant that 11% of the catch from areas

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<sup>3</sup> Wise, B.S., St John, J. and Lenanton, R.C. (Editors) (2007). Spatial scales of exploitation among populations of demersal scalegfish: implications for management. Part 1: Stock status of the key indicator species for the demersal scalegfish fishery in the West Coast Bioregion. Final report to Fisheries Research and Development Corporation on Project No. 2003/052. Fisheries Research Report No. 163, Department of Fisheries, Western Australia, 130p.

around the greater Coffin Bay region that had previously been included as West Coast catch, were now within the Spencer Gulf Fishing Zone.

The three options for guiding setting of a TACC for KG Whiting: 28% harvest fraction (F); 5-year average catch; and  $\frac{2}{3}$  of natural mortality (M) have been adjusted accordingly to account for the change in the West Coast.

Whilst a reduction from 473 tonnes in 2021/22, setting the TACC at 183 tonnes:

- represented a harvest fraction (12.5%) reflective of MSY;
- was significantly above the 2021/22 reported catch in the zone of 56 tonnes;
- was more than double the recent 5-year average catch of 91 tonnes; and
- was above the previous Snapper MAC recommendation of 102 tonnes (based on the 2015-2019 average catch - the approach applied to all other stocks except SE Snapper).

Considering these factors, the MSFMAC recommended an RBC of 262 tonnes and subsequent TACC of 183 tonnes for the 1 July 2022 to 30 June 2023 period.

#### Comparison with other KGW stocks

The quota unit values and corresponding TACCs for KGW in the Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent/Kangaroo Island Fishing Zones for the 2021/22 year were set based on the previous five-year average catch. This meant that these TACCs were already substantially lower than levels relating to the maximum 28% harvest fraction in the Management Plan and closer to levels relating to MSY.

The 2021 KGW stock assessment indicated positive trends for these stocks. Noting this, the MSFMAC considered there was no basis to change the 2021/22 TACCs in these fishing zones and recommended the same TACCs be applied for the 2022/23 period.

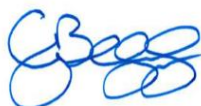
As outlined in the notice to fishers dated 30 June 2022, in determining the quota unit values for the MSF priority species and the catch cap (for West Coast KGW), I carefully considered a range of factors and information sources and supported the MSFMAC recommendation for the TACC for West Coast KGW to be set at 183 tonnes.

#### Future setting of catch limits

An updated assessment for KGW is expected in March 2023 which will guide future setting of catch limits, and PIRSA/SARDI will soon also commence work to develop a draft harvest strategy framework for the MSF. Guidance from the MSFMAC will be sought and consultation with industry will be undertaken before new harvest strategies are finalised.

Should you have any queries regarding the MSF, you can contact Sam Stone, Fisheries Manager on (08) 8429 2101 or email [sam.stone@sa.gov.au](mailto:sam.stone@sa.gov.au).

Yours sincerely



Prof Gavin Begg  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**  
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