

Marine Scalefish Fishery Management Advisory Committee

Meeting #3 – 21 November 2022

The Marine Scalefish Fishery Management Advisory Committee (MSFMAC or 'the Committee') held its third meeting on 21 November 2022 at PIRSA, West Beach, and via online video conference call.

Six new members had been recently appointed to the MSFMAC and all positions on the Committee were now filled. The new members included: Dr Ilona Stobutzki (Independent chair), Mr Anthony Simpson and Mr Shane Hodgens (Representatives of the recreational fishing sector), Mr Douglas Milera (Aboriginal traditional fishing member), Dr Timothy Ward (Independent conservation scientist), and Dr Annabel Jones (PIRSA fisheries management expert). On behalf of the Minister for Primary Industries and Regional Development ("the Minister"), the Executive Director, Fisheries and Aquaculture, Department of Primary Industries and Regions (PIRSA) welcomed and thanked all members for their contribution to the MSFMAC.

A focus of this MSFMAC meeting was to consider the Snapper Stock Assessment Report 2022 and to prepare recommendations for the management of Snapper beyond 31 January 2022. Since 2012, successive management interventions had been made to Snapper stocks in the Gulf St Vincent (GSV) and Spencer Gulf / West Coast (SG/WC) in response to stock assessment findings. Despite these interventions, the stocks had continued to decline. The Snapper fishery had been closed to all sectors in all waters, except the South East region, since 1 November 2019, following consultation on potential management measures and the classification of the stocks as 'depleted' and 'depleting' for the SG/WC and GSV stocks respectively, and 'sustainable' for Snapper in the South East, that was part of the Western Victoria stock. In 2020 an updated stock assessment also classified the GSV stock as 'depleted'.

The Committee and invited experts and observers noted the key points and findings of the Snapper stock assessment:

- Snapper is a long-lived and slow-growing species, with episodic and variable recruitment (of juvenile Snapper to the population);
- the current closure appears to have arrested declines in fishable biomass for the SG / WC and GSV stocks, but there is not yet evidence of stock recovery;
- the SG/WC and GSV stocks remain classified as 'depleted' with low biomass whilst Snapper in the South East remains classified as 'sustainable';
- the SG/WC and GSV stocks have had extended periods of poor recruitment (a decade for the GSV stock and two decades for the SG/WC stock);
- there is some evidence of return to natural aggregating behaviour of Snapper which may increase spawning potential;
- expected timeframes for recovery of SG/WC and GSV stocks are unknown but may take several years or possibly much longer.

The South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) presented the stock assessment and its key findings to the meeting attendees, who discussed various components of the assessment, including the role of the Daily Egg Production Method (DEPM) in the overall assessment findings. The DEPM had been applied in several fisheries throughout the world and it was introduced in 2013 to provide a fishery independent estimate of biomass of Snapper in South Australia. The Committee noted that the DEPM played an important moderating role on the estimates of biomass in the assessment particularly for the SG/WC stock. Other inputs to the stock assessment model include fishery statistics and length and age information.

Attendees also discussed the research that had been undertaken on the West Coast, where there had been dedicated trips to collect age and size information. However, there was a knowledge gap in relation to the Snapper population dynamics for the West Coast component of the SG/WC stock and it was not currently possible to determine to what extent self-replenishment occurs in the region and what level of fishing could potentially be sustained there.

Some Committee members and attendees considered there was substantial uncertainty in relation to the various components of the stock assessment and that observations from some fishers on the water did not correspond with the findings of the stock assessment.

Snapper management recommendations

The MSFMAC Science Subcommittee had met previously and considered the Snapper Stock Assessment 2022 and provided advice to the MSFMAC regarding management implications for Snapper and research priorities. This advice was considered by the MSFMAC, along with submissions from various stakeholder bodies that had been provided to the MSFMAC.

Members expressed concern regarding the short timeframes that stakeholders had been afforded to consider the Snapper stock assessment and provide comments. It was noted that while PIRSA had invited comments on the implications of the report, there were no management options for consultation. PIRSA noted the timelines had been constrained to provide fishers with as much notice as possible before 31 January 2022.

The Committee noted reports from members and attendees that there had been severe economic hardship on some businesses as a result of the existing Snapper closure. Many businesses had been waiting for the end of the closure, and the continuation of the closure was likely to exacerbate social and economic hardships.

After significant deliberation and discussion, the MSFMAC approved to provide the following recommendation to the Minister.

Some MSFMAC members (Commercial MSF, Charter and Recreational) raised concerns that stock assessment outputs, such as fishable biomass and recruitment estimates, were inconsistent with fisher observations. It was recommended a review of the scientific model used to monitor the rebuilding of snapper stocks should be prioritised, as well as investigating alternative methods for monitoring (such as development of a recruitment index, hydroacoustic surveys, CPUE standardisation, West Coast Snapper population dynamics / self-replenishment, and evaluation of close-kin mark-recapture methods)

The MSFMAC advise there is a critical priority to develop a rebuilding plan for Snapper to provide guidance on an appropriate level of stock biomass (or proxy) to allow sustainable fishing without inhibiting the continued rebuilding of the fish stocks.

The MSFMAC noted there had been substantial social and economic impacts to stakeholders. These impacts are likely to accelerate if the closure persists. The MSFMAC recommended consideration of measures to address the economic and social impacts.

The MSFMAC agreed the stocks are depleted on the basis of the Snapper Stock Assessment Report 2022.

Some members suggested there was an opportunity for limited access to alleviate social and economic impacts of an ongoing total closure, whereas the majority of members suggested the total closure should continue to maximise the opportunity for the stock to rebuild.

Harvest strategy development

The MSFMAC and attendees considered a review of current harvest strategy practices commissioned by SARDI (“the Review”). The Review outlined fisheries target and limit reference points and decision rules that were applied in harvest strategies in other Australian jurisdictions and internationally. It proposed a way to progress with the development of a harvest strategy framework for the MSF.

The Committee noted there was a pressing need to develop harvest strategies for the Tier 1 species in the Marine Scalefish Fishery (MSF) to guide the setting of catch limits. However, the development of harvest strategies needed stakeholder involvement and was linked to the development of a replacement management plan for the commercial MSF and would take time to complete. The Committee considered that if feasible, the harvest strategy framework should be completed to guide the consideration of 2023-24 catch limits and the detailed species/stock specific harvest strategies and decision rules developed for use the following year. The Committee agreed to progress the development of a draft harvest strategy framework and requested a detailed workplan be developed by PIRSA and SARDI with input from the Active Chair of the SSC and provided to the MSFMAC for consideration out-of-session.

Due to extended discussions in relation to Snapper management, several agenda items were held-over for discussion out-of-session. These included:

- An update on discussion papers being prepared
- Process for development of a replacement management plan
- Forward agenda and workplan including a request to review the MSFMAC’s recommendation in relation to the West Coast King George Whiting 2022-23 catch limit.

The timing of the next MSFMAC meeting would be confirmed out-of-session.

Dr Ilona Stobutzki

Independent Chair, Marine Scalefish Fishery Management Advisory Committee