



Australian Government

Australian Fisheries Management Authority



REF: MNMC2015-00232

7 September 2015

Ms Christine McDonald
Secretary
Environment and Communications References Committee
PO Box 6100,
Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms McDonald

Inquiry into the threat of marine plastic pollution in Australia and Australian waters

Thank you for your letter of 2 July 2015 inviting AFMA to make a submission to the Inquiry into the threat of marine plastic pollution in Australia and Australian waters.

I note that the terms of reference for the Inquiry are - the threat of marine plastic pollution in Australia and Australian waters, with particular reference to:

- a. the review of current research and scientific understanding of plastic pollution in the marine environment;
- b. sources of marine plastic pollution;
- c. the impacts of marine plastic pollution, including impacts on species and ecosystems, fisheries, small business, and human health;
- d. measures and resourcing for mitigation; and
- e. any other relevant matters.

While AFMA has an interest in all these elements of the terms of reference, our major focus is on mitigation measures, particularly in relation to abandoned fishing nets or "ghost nets". Many of these nets have a significant plastic component.

Although the vast majority of these nets originate from outside the Australian Fishing Zone they present an ongoing problem for Australia as they have a significant impact on species and ecosystems and fisheries, particularly in northern Australia.

In terms of clearer coordination for ghost net mitigation in Australia, the relevant governing legislation for managing harmful marine debris, including synthetic fishing nets, is the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, which is administered by the Department of the Environment. The Department of the Environment's *Threat Abatement Plan (TAP) for the impacts of marine debris on vertebrate marine life* sets out objectives and actions to mitigate the risk to the marine environment through coordination and partnership amongst Commonwealth

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and State/Territory Governments. The Marine Debris TAP is currently being reviewed and you may wish to contact the Department of the Environment for more information about the review process.

In addition to the Department of the Environment, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) has legislative responsibility for marine pollution, including marine plastic pollution, and in providing safe navigation under the *Navigation Act 2012*.

While the Department of the Environment and AMSA both have the legislative responsibility for ghost nets, the issue is complex and may be best dealt with via a broad government response to achieve the most effective outcome. Since 2012 there have been a series of multi-agency meetings held to identify key actions and agency responsibilities for dealing with the threat posed by ghost nets. The following describes the current processes and agency responsibilities for dealing with foreign fishing nets that may have drifted into the Australian Fishing Zone.

Nets sighted by a Northern Prawn Fishery (NPF) operator are ideally removed upon sighting or their location reported to World Animal Protection (WAP). WAP is an environmental non-government organisation that is currently involved in launching the Global Ghost Gear Initiative. All other net sightings are reported to Australian Border Force (ABF) who then assigns a vessel to recover the foreign fishing net. Where the foreign fishing net cannot be recovered due to logistical issues, such as being too large or in unsurveyed waters, AFMA contracts a civil recovery operation. All foreign fishing nets received by AFMA from either an ABF vessel or civil contractor are disposed of by AFMA. Costs of these operations are currently shared between agencies under an agreement. Statistical information on nets, net recovery and any wildlife interaction is maintained by the Department of the Environment.

The arrangements currently in place for retrieval and destruction of ghost nets located off northern Australia appear to be working reasonably well.

Yours sincerely

Dr James Findlay
Chief Executive Officer