



City of Port Lincoln
Seafood Capital of Australia



Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Algal Blooms in South Australia **City of Port Lincoln**

About the City of Port Lincoln

The City of Port Lincoln is the largest regional city on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula and home to more than 14,000 residents. It is globally recognised as the Seafood Capital of Australia, reflecting its position as the base of one of the largest commercial fishing fleets in the southern hemisphere, with approximately 135 vessels operating out of the Port Lincoln Marina.

Port Lincoln is also a national hub for aquaculture, supporting tuna ranching, kingfish, mussels, abalone, marine scale fishery, prawns, sardines, and lobster. The Marina's service wharf underpins a broad spectrum of commercial fisheries and aquaculture operations.

Each year, approximately \$222 million in seafood and aquaculture products are exported from Port Lincoln — representing 52% of Eyre Peninsula's seafood exports and 46% of South Australia's total. The city's seafood industry is a critical economic driver, comparable in scale to Whyalla Steelworks in terms of direct employment.

Tourism, particularly marine-based and culinary tourism, is another cornerstone of Port Lincoln's economy. Local seafood heritage, marine wildlife, festivals such as Tunarama, and adventure tourism (shark cage diving, sea lion encounters, tuna toss, etc.) draw thousands of visitors annually.

Background – The Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB)

Since mid-March 2025, South Australia has been experiencing one of the most severe Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) on record, caused by *Karenia mikimotoi*.

- The bloom extended across 150–500km of coastline, from the Fleurieu Peninsula through Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent into the Adelaide Port River and Dolphin Sanctuary.
- It coincided with a marine heatwave (from September 2024), with sea surface temperatures up to 2.5°C above average, intensifying its scale and persistence.
- Mass mortality events affected over 400 marine species, including fish, dolphins, seals, penguins, seagrass, coral bleaching, and cuttlefish.

Local context: While no mass mortality events have been recorded within Port Lincoln's immediate waters, there has been widespread reputational and market impact across the Eyre Peninsula and beyond with many local businesses reporting a direct impact.

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Impacts on Port Lincoln and the Seafood Sector

The HAB crisis has had profound environmental, social, and economic impacts across South Australia, with Port Lincoln disproportionately affected as the seafood capital through:

- **Disrupted fisheries and aquaculture:** Closures of shellfish harvesting areas (Boston Bay, Bickers Island, Proper Bay) caused loss of production time and uncertainty.
- **Tourism downturn:** Visitor cancellations and reduced confidence in marine-based tourism experiences.
- **Public perception impacts:** Incorrect but widespread consumer concern about seafood safety, diminishing domestic and international market confidence.
- **Financial strain:** Increased monitoring and testing costs for industry and government; additional workforce pressures.
- **Mental health pressures:** Evidence shows significant stress among fishers, aquaculture workers, and tourism operators, compounded by uncertainty and income loss.

Government Response

The City of Port Lincoln acknowledges and welcomes the joint State and Commonwealth \$28 million funding package for science, communications, industry support, resilience, and clean-up, including:

- \$8.5m Coastal Monitoring Network (real-time sensors, satellite, modelling)
- \$2m Local testing laboratory for HAB toxins
- \$3m Rapid fish-stock and ecosystem assessment
- Community forums, helplines, and a dedicated Taskforce
- Waiving of fisheries licence fees
- Citizen science and industry coordination initiatives

It is noted that the further \$6.25 million, including \$4 million in grants for councils to assist communities and other funding for targeted scientific support, enhancements to CSIRO's AquaWatch program, and new research is also strongly supported and appreciated.

While these measures are critical, they remain initial steps and must be expanded into long-term strategies to secure industry resilience, protect ecosystems, and safeguard community wellbeing.

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Considerations for current support measures (noting State involvement)

The State Government response, including in particular the South Australian Tourism Commission Voucher programme and continued positive messaging is valued and supported and should continue (potentially with Commonwealth support).

The HAB may continue to impact for at least the next 6 to 12 months, therefore a longer-term approach is required over summer and potentially the subsequent 2026 summer season (December 2026 onward).

It is important also to understand current and future relief measures need to be extended for areas as the HAB expands, for example the Spencer Gulf and in particular the area around Port Lincoln. The financial impacts of the HAB are likely to expand in coming months and therefore any relief programme needs to consider this and needs to be continuing not with strict cut offs for financial or other support (i.e. the census date for financial impact measurements needs to reflect the expanding nature of the HAB and the later impact in certain areas).

Further, it is important to understand that the financial impact on the aquaculture industry may be delayed due to structural issues, such as the seasonal nature of certain fisheries, other factors, such as many fisheries retain and freeze stock to sell later, so the HAB may take months to be seen in sales reductions as stock from the previous season may still be being sold. I.e. Fishers may have stopped catching and may still be obtaining revenue through selling frozen stock caught last season. Other factors, such as increased costs due to additional travel time to unaffected waters may also need to be considered, gross sales may not be reduced but net profit may be impacted due to increased costs of catching.

It is also important to understand that the Lower Eyre Peninsula has a predominantly summer tourism season and therefore the impact on tourism is yet to be fully determined and additional market support over the summer period and ongoing is critical.

Impact on tourism and the economy

The HAB needs to be seen in the context of other prevailing conditions within the Lower Eyre Peninsula, including a reduction in tourism and a continuing and prolonged drought. Tourism, Cereal Production and Aquaculture are three key industries on the Eyre Peninsula.

In respect of the tourism downturn, we draw your attention to the release of updated tourism data by the South Australian Tourism Commission (SATC) on 7 July 2025. This data reflects a marked downturn in visitation and expenditure across the Eyre Peninsula for the year ending December 2024 (Eyre Peninsula overnight visits down 22% and visitor spend down 17% against 2019 levels).

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In respect of the drought, it is noted that over coming months, the economy of the Eyre Peninsula is also likely to continue to be impacted by a period of prolonged drought across much of South Australia (noting the significant contribution that cereal production (in the order of 42.3% of GRP) accounts as part of gross regional product on the Lower Eyre Peninsula.

Therefore, the HAB affecting the broader aquaculture industry in the Lower Peninsula will have a more pronounced impact on the broader Eyre Peninsula economy as it is compounding on current challenges being experienced.

Delegation to Canberra

The City of Port Lincoln is working with Seafood Industry South Australia (SISA), scientists, tourism operators, and fellow local governments to form a united delegation to Canberra. This group will advocate for urgent, coordinated national action on the three (3) objectives listed below.

Key Objectives

Objective 1 – National Response & Market Confidence

Aim: To establish a national legislative and policy framework recognising *large-scale marine mortality events* — such as those caused by harmful algal blooms or severe marine heatwaves — as eligible for a coordinated national response.

Key components:

- Enable rapid access to coordinated federal support for affected industries, particularly tourism, fishing, and aquaculture.
- Provide funding to assist with environmental clean-up, restoration activities, and safe reopening of affected areas.
- Be paired with a national market-confidence and communications plan to protect seafood and tourism reputations, reassure consumers, and counter misinformation.
- Include a dedicated national marine information portal providing real-time, science-based updates on seafood safety, water quality, and tourism conditions.
- Fund rapid deployment of consumer-confidence campaigns led by trusted science and industry voices.

Objective 2 – Community Wellbeing & Resilience

Aim: To secure funding for the development and delivery of a Community Wellbeing and Resilience Framework to support social and mental health outcomes in communities affected by harmful algal blooms and other large-scale marine mortality events.

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The framework should recognise the significant psychological, social, cultural, and economic impacts these events can have on individuals, families, and communities — particularly those whose livelihoods and identities depend on healthy marine ecosystems — and provide:

- Embedded, locally delivered mental-health services.
- Peer support networks.
- Targeted workforce-retention initiatives.
- Long-term resilience planning for coastal communities.

Evidence indicates heightened mental-health impacts among fishers and tourism operators, compounded by income loss and uncertainty.

Objective 3 – Permanent Monitoring, Baselines & Testing

Aim: To secure sustained State–Commonwealth investment in permanent coastal and marine biological and ecological monitoring and baseline data collection — covering the Great Southern Reef and other key habitats — building on existing commitments and integrating with national observation networks.

This funding should:

- Support the establishment of **local, accredited biotoxin-testing capacity in South Australia** with publicly reported turnaround targets (e.g., <48 hours from sample receipt to result).
- Provide the ecological baselines needed to measure change, assess impacts of marine mortality events, and track recovery or restoration success.
- Be **modelled on the Great Barrier Reef Foundation funding arrangements**, ensuring it does not place additional financial burdens on affected industries or local governments.

Seafood Industry South Australia (SISA)

SISA has described the current HAB crisis as “of unprecedented scale” for the seafood industry. South Australia’s seafood sector contributes \$788m to gross state product (GSP) and employs more than 6,250 people, with Port Lincoln at the heart of this system. Council supports SISA’s call for:

- Short-term business continuity (fee relief, workforce retention, mental health services).
- Market confidence campaigns confirming seafood safety.
- Industry coordination and data-led monitoring.
- Long-term resilience planning including recovery programs, re-entry support, and research on adaptation strategies.

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Conclusion

The City of Port Lincoln emphasises that while local waters have not experienced mass mortality events, the HAB crisis has profoundly affected seafood markets, aquaculture operations, tourism confidence, and community wellbeing.

As South Australia's Seafood Capital, Port Lincoln seeks urgent, coordinated national recognition and investment to ensure the resilience of Australia's seafood sector, protect marine ecosystems, and safeguard the livelihoods and identity of our community.

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