The environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'Super trawlers' operating in Australia's Marine Jurisdiction

The Commonwealth Fisheries Association submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

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This is a joint submission between the Commonwealth Fisheries Association, South East Trawl Fishing Industry Association, Sanford Australia, Great Australian Bight Fishing Industry Association, Petuna Sealord Deepwater Fishing Pty Ltd, Australian Longline, Small Pelagic Fishery Industry Association, Austral Fisheries, and Northern Prawn Fishing Industry.

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Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications *"The environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'Super trawlers' operating in Australia's Marine Jurisdiction"*

The Commonwealth Fisheries Association (CFA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Terms of Reference from the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications inquiry into "The environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'Super trawlers' operating in Australia's Marine Jurisdiction".

The CFA is the peak body representing the collective rights, responsibilities and interest of a diverse commercial fishing industry in Commonwealth regulated fisheries. This submission is headed by the CFA but has the full support of regional association members and fishing companies including the South East Trawl Fishing Industry Association (SETFIA), the Great Australian Bight Fishing Industry Association (GABIA), Sanford Australia, Northern Prawn Fishing Industry, Austral Fisheries, Small Pelagic Fishing Industry Association, Petuna Sealord Deepwater Fishing, and Australian Longline.

Commonwealth wild harvest fisheries are among the best managed and environmentally sustainable fisheries in the world. CFA's members are committed to managing fisheries for Australia's food security, community well-being and healthy marine eco-systems. **As a general rule, fisheries managed by the Commonwealth occur in deeper, offshore waters; in grounds where suitable capacity fishing vessels are required due to distances from ports and the need for freezer capacity.**

Specifically addressing the Terms of Reference, CFA highlights the following updated information to be assessed in conjunction with the full CFA submission provided to the Senate Committee on 15 November 2015.

- AFMA operates under the FMA 1991 and EPBC Act requirements, which includes stock assessments, Fishery Independent Surveys, Ecological Risk Assessments, Bycatch and Discarding work plans, among other things. The Objectives of both Acts require Ecologically Sustainable Development, and setting of Total Allowable Catches (TAC's) and Total Allowable Effort (TAE) to best available science for target species. Many by-product species also have TACs and/or catch triggers, with the monitoring of bycatch data and programs are reviewed annually.

- In terms of protected species interactions, working in conjunction with Australia's leading fisheries scientists and fisheries management authorities, industry is continuously improving its record of minimising interactions with seals, dolphins and other protected mammals, turtles and sea birds. Methods for reducing interactions that have been developed and implemented in Australia are world renowned.

- The Australian Government has implemented a number of National Plans of Action, such as the National Recovery Plan for Threatened Albatrosses and Giant Petrels, and is a participating member of International Plans of Action for particular species, such as the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks. There are also specific long-term plans under the EPBC Act to address certain groups of protected species, for example the Threat Abatement Plan for Seabirds. Information on these and other specific arrangements is again readily available on AFMA's website and has been for many years.

- Furthermore, all Commonwealth fishing operations that wish to export product must first be accredited under the EPBC Act. Part of this accreditation is the requirement to monitor, mitigate and report any interactions with protected species. Accreditations are subject to regular re-assessment and often include requirements to undertake specific actions to reduce their effects on protected species.

- Industry is driving their own voluntary measures to reduce their interactions with protected marine species, including for those fisheries that use freezer fishing vessels.

- Freezer vessels operating in the winter blue grenadier fishery have been able to significantly reduce seal and seabird interactions by closing the net as it descends using an acoustically operated release device which opens the net at an optimal depth (i.e depth that is not frequented by seals) in addition to using a remotely operated grid that closes on the trawl on haul. Smaller trawl vessels (freshers) cannot use this technology given its cost and the deck space required to handle a grid. This technology is only possible on larger vessels.

- Acoustic devices have also been developed to mitigate the interactions with seals and other marine mammals and trialled commercial with positive results. These vessels all operate a nil offal discharge policy.

- The winter spawning blue grenadier fishery has also received independent certification by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). This assessment has been achieved with a long history of the fishery using freezer boats.

- Seabirds are attracted to fishing vessels by the presence of offal and at times their frenzied feeding behaviour means they come into contact with the cables used to tow nets (warps) and potentially injured or killed. The danger that trawlers pose to seabirds is due to the warps not the size of the vessel. Australia's southern trawl fisheries have recognised this threat and led the world in reducing interactions with seabirds and seals. New technology being rolled out across southern Commonwealth trawl fisheries that will see seabird interactions drop by more than 90%.

- The Northern Prawn Fishery Industry uses trawlers that utilise on board processing and freezing capability. The fishery is highly regarded for its sustainability credentials, including reduction in bycatch of approximately 50% since 1997. NPF Industry recently committed to further reduce bycatch in the NPF by another 30% over the next three years. The fishery has from time to time fitted its trawl nets with cameras to better understand the dynamics of the trawl as it fishes. The NPF's processing/freezer boat fleet was one of the first Australian fisheries to achieve MSC certification, seen by many as the gold standard in independent sustainability benchmarks.

- The Geelong Star, operating the Small Pelagic Fishery is a mid-water trawler which means there is limited impact on the sea floor. Recent CSIRO research study shows that trawlers in general are interacting with 6 per cent of the sea floor.

- The Geelong Star is legally operating in the fishery, compliant with the EPBC Act and the FM Act. It has a relatively low by catch rate and efforts have been made to reduce their interactions with marine mammals. The Geelong Star is one of the most heavily monitored vessel in the Commonwealth fleet, requiring a Vessel Management Plan (VMP). The purpose of the VMP is to set out environmental management conditions that minimise interactions with seabirds and marine mammals and to reduce the risk of localised depletion; specify mandatory operational procedures that the concession holder, vessel master and crew are required to adhere to; specify a range of monitoring tools to evaluate the effectiveness of mitigation procedures and allow for continued improvements in physical mitigation methods through ongoing observation, information gathering and the review processes.

- More recently, a final report[1] funded by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation provided the following outcomes;

    - The technical workshop produced a synthesis of available data and highlighted key data gaps with respect to abundance, distribution and population structure of marine mammal species considered. The participants agreed that expert elicitation was not an appropriate method for estimating population abundance where empirical data was lacking.

    - The project identified that in order to use methods such as PBR to calculate limits to anthropogenic mortality to a given population, the key data required is a recent robust estimate of abundance and the spatial extent of that population.

    - In general there is good data available on the distribution, abundance and population structure of pinniped species (Australian sea lions, long-nosed fur seals and Australian fur seals). However, such data are lacking for dolphin species for much of the area considered.

    - For Australian sea lion PBR was calculated at the colony level based on the high degree of population structuring of the species across its range. PBR estimates ranged from 0 to 44 individuals.

    - PBR calculated for long-nosed fur seal ranged from 81 to 4,498 depending on the spatial management zone considered. For Australian fur seals estimated PBR for a single management zone ranged 2,623 to 4,721.

    - A PBR of 261 individuals was calculated for short-beaked common dolphins in management zone 3. This PBR was based on an abundance estimate obtained in a small part of the zone. PBR assumes that the abundance estimate is for the total population, this may not be the case, given the small area surveyed and recent studies of population sub-structure in the region.

[1] http://www.afma.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Vessel-Management-Plan1.5.pdf

- Three key data requirements are needed in order to manage potential impacts of anthropogenic removals on marine mammal populations. These are robust estimates of population abundance and range. An understanding of population structuring in a species and estimates of cumulative removal levels from all anthropogenic sources, including fisheries.

- The difficulty with defining fishing capacity by the size of freezers is it creates a misleading impression of what is happening during fishing operations, and focuses on the inputs used to catch fish rather than the outputs, which is more important in quota managed fisheries i.e how many fish can be harvested sustainably. Banning or removal of vessels that have on board freezers, would see the loss of Australian prawns, blue grenadier and many other fisheries that freezes their product out at sea. Freezing product at sea produces premium seafood, which Australians love to eat.

- The CFA recommends that with the review of large capacity fishing vessels known as 'super trawlers', the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications acknowledges that Australia has now banned 'super trawlers' in Australian waters. There are no 'super trawlers' operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction.

- The CFA also requests the Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications to be mindful of the long history of our members and Australian fisheries using various sizes of fishing vessels (under the 130m length) that have the ability to store, freeze and process fish.

- Fisheries are major contributors to the Australian domestic and export economies. Due to the geographical and operational challenges that many of these fisheries face, freezer boats are the only viable option in many fisheries to produce sustainable, premium quality seafood for domestic and international markets.

Yours Sincerely,

Anthony Ciconte
Chair, Commonwealth Fisheries Association