

26 October 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
PO BOX 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam

RE: SUPER TRAWLERS

This document forms Regional Development Australia Tasmania's submission to the Senate inquiry into the environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'supertrawlers' operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction, including the effect on the marine ecosystem, current research and scientific knowledge and the effectiveness of the current regulatory framework and compliance arrangements.

Background

Tasmania like all other states in Australia has a vibrant and sustainable fishing industry which relies on effective management of fishing quotas to ensure that the long term viability of fishing stocks remains for future generations.

Fishing quotas are allocated by the Australian Government as a means of ensuring that the harvesting of large scale fish stocks is managed so that depletion levels do not lead to long term reductions in fish stock levels.

The quota holders harvest these fish stocks annually according to the terms of the quota permit and must adhere to the conditions or risk penalties and the loss of the quota. This system works reasonably well throughout Australian waters with minimal breaches.

However in recent times the methodology adopted by some quota holders has brought into question the ability for them to exercise their rights under the quota system. Namely, the use of larger "factory" trawlers, which allows commercial fishers to remain at sea for longer periods of time processing their catch immediately instead of returning to port.



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Public scrutiny of harvesting fish stocks under quota

Numerous scientific data has been compiled that supports the use of large scale factory trawlers as an efficient means of harvesting fish stocks under quota. This data has been questioned and challenged by those opposing the use of these larger trawlers and there is concern that they do not necessarily offer significant contrary research but instead a more emotionally based series of viewpoints and opinions.

Subsequently, the Tasmanian Government has issued a ban on Super Trawlers (a fishing boat of at least 130 metres in length) in waters under their control.

This ongoing debate has the potential to threaten the methodologies of established commercial fishing operators who use smaller vessels to harvest their quota. Should this debate continue the opportunity exists for these smaller operators being drawn into the discussions, resulting in their sanctioned operations being scrutinised in a similar manner to the larger vessel operators.

What we do know

Processing at sea is efficient

The ability to freeze fish at sea preserves the quality immediately therefore maintaining the integrity of the catch long after the trawler has returned to port.

Larger scale vessels reduce cost

Using a larger scale vessel reduces the cost of harvest through economies of scale therefore lessening the need for multiple smaller vessels to catch the same size quota.

Regulation and Monitoring needs to evolve

Ongoing review of existing regulation that allows the optimisation of vessel size in conjunction with the latest scientific findings is vital to ensure long term sustainability of fish stocks and the ability for industry to derive an economic outcome. Monitoring of by catch and environmental impacts must be regularly improved and the findings transparent in order to counter opposition.



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Conclusion

The debate into the size of factory ships will continue until there is a mutually negotiated outcome that supports the science and research in conjunction with the opinions of interest groups.

Most concerning however, is the possibility for any type of trawler that has the ability to freeze fish stocks at sea being deemed inappropriate for use in Australian waters. This will not only reduce the Australian fishing industry's competitiveness internationally but also make the economic viability of catching fish (under quota) unviable.

Therefore an even handed factual assessment of the need for using a larger scale vessel should be considered by all parties. Measured considerations, with the backing of scientific research, data and acceptable risk mitigation strategies, is the only means of ensuring any ongoing debate is logical and factual.

Ultimately care must be taken to ensure that the evidence provided in respect of trawler size, environmental impacts and long term sustainability be treated fairly and with an open mind by all parties in an effort to derive an acceptable outcome.

Yours faithfully

Craig Perkins

Chief Executive Officer



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