



## BRIEFING PAPER

### Large Freezer Factory Trawlers in the Australian Small Pelagic Fishery

#### Background: The Story So Far

Australia's small pelagic fishery (SPF) is managed on behalf of the Australian Government by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA). The SPF extends from southern Queensland around to Western Australia, including Tasmania, and targets four species: Jack Mackerel (*Trachurus declivis*), Blue Mackerel (*Scomber australasicus*), Redbait (*Emmelichthys nitidus*) and Australian Sardine (*Sardinops sagax*). These species are an important part of the diet of a wide range of marine life, including dolphins and seals, seabirds and larger fish such as tuna.

Because small pelagic fish are an important source of food for many marine species, over fishing these species may have serious consequences for the marine environment and recreational fisheries. For example, tuna follow these fish inshore where they become accessible to recreational fishers and support important recreational fisheries.

There has been widespread and deep community concern about the introduction of super trawlers (large factory freezer trawlers) into this fishery since 2012, when Seafish tried to bring in the Margiris, a European owned factory freezer trawler. Public outrage resulted in the then Labor Government introducing a two year moratorium and three Government inquiries into the operation of that type of vessel. Although there has been no significant improvements in the underlying science, fisheries management strategies, or implementation of the recommendations from the Government Inquiries, industry brought in another European owned factory freezer trawler, the Geelong Star, at Easter in 2015 under a cloak of secrecy.

#### Huge Increase in Catch

The introduction of the factory freezer trawler Geelong Star means that the total catch for this fishery could be ten times greater than the last season. As a result, there will be no gradual increase in catch that might provide an opportunity to deal with problems as they occur. Instead, impacts on recreational fisheries and the environment may occur suddenly and without warning.

#### Big Trawler Equals Big Problems

The problems associated with the SPF are exacerbated by the introduction of large freezer factory trawler such as Geelong Star. With the capacity to carry around 1000 tonnes of fish, and the ability to stay at sea for extended periods, these vessels can do a lot of damage to fish stocks in any given area. The reason that Seafish want to use these vessels is that they are very efficient mechanisms for catching large amounts of fish. The current economic model for this fishery is based on a low value product and economies of scale become important. Many believe that the Tasmanian redbait fishery failed due to fishing pressure from a boat that had less than 20% of the carrying capacity of Geelong Star. Large vessels mean large impacts on fish stocks, the environment and recreational fisheries.

#### Economic Benefits Don't Add Up

The current industry position is that the SPF should be exploited to produce a low value/high volume commodity. The total gross value of the fishery appears to be somewhere between \$20 and \$30 million. Compared to other Australian fisheries, this is a small fishing industry. For example the Tasmanian rock lobster and abalone fisheries each generate several times that amount of money. In 2012, when industry and AFMA attempted to bring in the factory freezer vessel Margiris, it was publicly stated that the aim was to produce blocks of whole fish for export at US\$1/kg. That means that the cost of production (transport, wages and running the boat etc) would still have to come out of this income, greatly reducing the economic benefit to the Australia community, even if the

product is sold overseas. Potential economic returns to Australia are further reduced because the Margiris, and now the Geelong Star, are owned by overseas companies based in Europe. The fishing entitlements, or licences, are also largely owned by overseas interests. The foreign ownership of the vessel and fishing entitlements means that most of the financial benefits of owning and operating the Geelong Star leave Australia.

The social and employment benefits of having a factory freezer vessel operating in Australian waters are also very small. The total number of jobs associated with this fishery, including crew and related land-based jobs, is likely to be less than 55, including foreign nationals in skilled crew positions such as captain, engineers and deck officers.

### **Economic Risks Are High**

Impacts on the marine environment, recreational fisheries, and the recreational fishing industry and coastal communities are likely to occur. There has been no assessment of the impact of factory freezer trawlers in the SPF on recreational fisheries, however a simple comparison between the value of the recreational fishing industry of NSW and the Commonwealth Small Pelagic Fishery (which also includes Vic, Tas, SA and WA), demonstrates that an operation with a very low socio-economic value is threatening an industry with a very high socio-economic value, and putting it's entire future under threat by posing un-estimable risks to the marine ecosystems that support it.

The economic impacts of recreational fishing on NSW regions are as follows<sup>1</sup>:

#### **NSW RF expenditure survey-2012**

<b>Region</b>	<b>North Coast.</b>	<b>Sydney</b>	<b>South Coast.</b>	<b>Inland</b>	<b>All NSW</b>
Output (\$m)	734.65	1,002.86	395.22	353.81	3,420.35
Value added (\$m)	353.55	491.56	184.17	149.85	1,625.61
Household income (\$m)	168.75	288.88	87.60	73.50	877.28
Employment (no.)	3,320	3,944	1,808	1,539	14,254

### **Scientific Gaps in Stock Assessments**

Supporters of the Geelong Star and AFMA's management of the SPF suggest that fisheries management is "supported by the science". In fact, much of the information about fish stocks is very old and gaps in the science mean that concerns about sustainability and localised impacts of fishing can not be addressed.

The SPF is divided in to two management zones – east and west. Western stocks of the SPF have never been assessed using best-practice survey methods and only two of the four eastern stocks have had an assessment in the last 9 years. With such out of date research data, recreational fishing and conservation representatives on the fishery advisory groups recommended quotas of 500 tonnes for each species in each zone – a TAC of 4,000 tonnes. AFMA overrode that advice and approved a TAC of 34,950 tonnes to the SPF.

Repeated requests by stakeholders between 2000 and 2015 for more reliable stock assessments to increase the resilience of the science were ignored. Suggestions about future stock assessments from AFMA and industry are proposed at such long intervals that Australia's jack mackerel and redbait fisheries could fail before any warning of stock decline was even given.

<sup>1</sup> McIlgorm, A. and J. Pepperell (2013). Developing a cost effective state wide expenditure survey method to measure the economic contribution of the recreational fishing sector in NSW in 2012. A report to the NSW Recreational Fishing Trust, NSW Department of Primary Industries, November 2013. Produced by the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS), University of Wollongong,



### **AFMA Cannot Manage Localised Depletion**

There is no scientific information about movement of fish within stocks. This means that there is no way to determine how long it would take an area to recover from fishing and localised depletion of fish stocks may occur with serious consequences for the marine environment and recreational fisheries. Some recreational fishers believe that it has already occurred around Tasmania. CSIRO scientists acknowledge that their modelling does not operate at a scale that can assess localised impacts of fishing. AFMA has failed to develop a solution to this problem that is based on science, and concerns relating to recreational fisheries and the marine environment remain. While there is some good scientific information related to this fishery available, it does not address the main concerns of the environmental or recreational fishing sectors.

### **Dead Seals and Dolphins**

AFMA ignored warnings that its strategies to protect marine mammals were inadequate and untested, and that large factory freezer trawlers would kill dolphins and seals. As a result at least nine dolphins and twelve seals died on the first three trips made by the Geelong Star. This is a very high level of impact compared to other Australian fisheries and is unacceptable to the Australian public.

Protected marine mammals remain threatened by factory freezer trawler operations, especially with the resumption of night fishing, which makes it practically impossible to avoid marine mammals. Because there is no requirement to have underwater video monitoring of the excluder devices fitted to nets, we will not know if they are working to protect seals and dolphins, or simply dumping dead and injured animals into the ocean before the net is brought aboard where observation occurs. Lack of testing means that there is no way to know if the excluder devices actually work, and there is no commitment to have observer coverage beyond the first 10 trips. The animal welfare of drowned seals and dolphins is being ignored by AFMA.

There has been no formal assessment of population impacts on any species of dolphin, including no assessment of population or other impacts on the recently discovered species, the Burrunan dolphin (*Tursiops australis*). There is no requirement for photos or tissues samples that would be needed as a minimum to allow positive identifications of dolphin species to occur, or for the population of Burrunan dolphins to be protected. There has also been no assessment of impacts of the SPF on seal populations or behaviour.

### **Secrecy and Conflicts of Interest**

There is a high level of secrecy surrounding this fishery, with fishing operations closed to public scrutiny. We will not be told where or when the vessel has been operating, or what is being caught. Despite repeated written requests for information, we still do not even know exactly where or when the deaths of seals and dolphins occurred.

The management of the SPF has become controversial, however instead of addressing the causal problems, AFMA is attempting to remove all opportunities for public scrutiny. Issues include:

- The AFMA-appointed Chair of the SPFRAG resigned on 8 January 2015 because of her concerns about conflicts of interest. Documents obtained under Freedom of Information reveal that the Chair pointed out that one industry committee member was '*in a perpetual state of pecuniary conflict*' and '*it is not in AFMA's nor the fishery's best interests for him to continue to be involved in the RAG's advisory role and processes*'.
- The removal of the key advisory committee, the Small Pelagic Fisheries Resource Assessment Group (SPFRAG). The SPF is now the only significant AFMA managed fishery that does not have its own dedicated Resource Assessment Group. This significantly reduces input from the

recreational fishing and conservation sectors and does not have the support of these stakeholder groups.

- The South Australian Sardine Fishery has been established for many years, is subject to thorough scrutiny, regular stock assessments and management processes to minimise impacts on protected species, and is equitable in economic value to the entire Commonwealth SPF and supports around 170 local jobs. There has been ongoing concern from the SA Sardine industry that factory freezer trawlers in the SPF will impact on the health of the sardine fishery due to unintended bycatch of sardines, however AFMA have failed to address this concern and sardines have been caught and dumped since the Geelong Star has been operating.

### **Public Opposition**

Over 230,000 people have signed petitions to the Australian Government against the use of super trawlers and factory freezer trawlers since 2012. There have been over thirty seven thousand emails to Federal Members of Parliament and Ministers, and hundreds of phone calls, calling for the Coalition Government to stop the Geelong Star and all large freezer factory trawlers from fishing in the SPF. Hundreds of people have mobilised in at least 21 rallies, flotillas, convoys, and protests across Australia from Queensland to Western Australia.

The introduction of factory freezer trawlers into Australia's oceans has been one of the most widely unpopular decisions of this Federal Government for coastal communities and fishers. Opposition will continue to grow until marine mammals, the marine environment, recreational fisheries and coastal communities are protected from these destructive industrial fishing operations.

### **For More Information**

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### **The Stop the Trawler Alliance is a unique collaboration of fishing, conservation and tourism organisations. Members include:**

Australian Marine Conservation Society

Conservation Council of South Australia

Conservation Council of Western Australia

Dive Industry Association of Australia

Environment Tasmania

Environment Victoria

Fishers for Conservation

Game Fish Tasmania Sports Fishing Club

Greenpeace

Humane Society International

Nature Conservation Council of NSW

No Shark Cull

Northern Tasmanian Game Fishing Club

Ocean Planet Tasmania

Personalised Sea Charters

Pew Charitable Trusts

Sea Shepherd Conservation Society Australia

Sea Charter Boat Operators of Tasmania

Southern Gamefish Club Inc

St Helens Game Fishing Club

TasFish

Tasmanian Conservation Trust

Tasmanian Game Fishing Club

The Wilderness Society South Australia

Tuna Club of Tasmania

Victorian Marine Animal Defenders Conservation Society

Victorian National Parks Alliance