



Mr Graeme Bolton
Deputy Director-General Fisheries and Forestry
Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
GPO Box 46
BRISBANE QLD 4001

REF – FMS-22-002

Dear Mr Bolton

Submission regarding the east coast Spanish mackerel fishery - consultation on management action

The following submission is provided in the context of the Australian Public Service now operating in accordance with the federal government's caretaker conventions. The advice contained is considered to be consistent with views and information previously put forward by the Reef Authority.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (the Reef Authority) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on management action to rebuild the east coast Spanish mackerel stock to sustainable levels. The Reef Authority supports the rebuilding of the stock from its current depleted state, including protection of the key spawning region east of Lucinda (latitude band 19), which historically accounts for approximately half of the commercial harvest. The Reef Authority continues to support the implementation of the *Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy 2017-2027* (the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy), including the setting of sustainable catch limits consistent with attaining 60 per cent unfished biomass targets for fish stocks, and all other measures to "protect the Great Barrier Reef by ensuring fisheries are managed in a sustainable way within the World Heritage Area".

The Authority values the positive working relationship with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, and the value brought by the Spanish mackerel fishery working group. The Authority looks forward to continued consultation and collaboration to support best practice fisheries management in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (Marine Park). Such cooperation is consistent with the Great Barrier Reef Intergovernmental Agreement, which upholds both the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments' strong commitment to the protection of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

The Reef Authority recognises fishing is a long-established and important activity in the multi-use Marine Park and World Heritage Area and is committed to ensuring fishing activities are sustainable. The Great Barrier Reef ecosystem is facing increasing and cumulative pressures and so it is necessary to adapt our respective management approaches to mitigate the effects of these pressures. Extraction from fish spawning aggregations is a high risk activity (as identified in the *Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report* in 2009, 2014, and most recently in 2019) and the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries have identified specific concerns about Spanish mackerel stocks. Fish spawning aggregations are recognised as a natural phenomenon that contribute to the Reef's Outstanding Universal Value. Spanish mackerel school to form the largest and most predictable spawning aggregations of fish on the Great Barrier Reef and there is evidence these aggregations have decreased in number and size. The extirpation of historically important spawning aggregations from reefs east of Cairns, as well as a reduction in size and frequency of aggregations in the Lucinda region, is of particular concern.

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The Reef Authority recognises the statistical robustness of the 2021 stock assessment for Spanish mackerel and fully supports the validity of the assessment, including the estimated 2020 biomass at between 14 and 27 per cent of unfished levels, and most probably at 17 per cent. This level falls below the 20 per cent limit reference point identified in the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy as when fishing should cease. The Reef Authority also notes the evidence provided by numerous independent scientific studies highlighting historical declines, the increased contemporary risk posed by ongoing fishing of spawning aggregations, and the need for significant management change to address the stock decline. The Reef Authority supports the Queensland Government's commitment to addressing this challenge and agrees that doing nothing is not an option and would go against the fundamental principles of the *Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy*.

The Reef Authority recognises that, under the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy (and also consistent with Commonwealth Government policy and international best practice), depleted fish stock should be closed to fishing, but we also recognise the important social, economic and cultural considerations when implementing management action to rebuild the east coast Spanish mackerel stock to sustainable levels.

The Reef Authority supports fisheries management actions (including potential harvest reductions and seasonal closures) that will reduce fishing mortality and recover stocks to 40 per cent of unfished biomass (maximum sustainable yield as per the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy) in not more than 10 years. In this context, and as reflected in the communique from the working group, the Reef Authority recommends consideration be given to a 12 week closure in each the northern and southern region. Fishing closures of this duration would protect Spanish mackerel while they are moving and aggregating to spawn and during spawning in the north, and while they are otherwise susceptible to high fishing mortality in the south. The Reef Authority supports the general demarcation of the north – south boundary for the closures at 22°S. Alternatively, the boundary could be formed by the southern boundary of the Marine Park.

We look forward to working closely with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and members of the Spanish mackerel fishery working group on the future management of Spanish mackerel in the Great Barrier Reef, and to support both immediate and long-term efforts to rebuild stocks to the target of 60% unfished biomass level identified in the *Sustainable Fisheries Strategy*.

Please contact Dr Teena Browning, Director – Strategic Policy, via teena.browning@gbrmpa.gov.au or on 0459 271 052 should you wish to discuss the comments provided.

Yours sincerely



Margaret Johnson
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12 May 2022