

Concerns remain following fishery licence changes

CHARLOTTE MARTIN

The fee structure for South Australian Marine Scalefish Fishery (MSF) has been revised by the state government following industry consultation, but not all fishers are happy with the announced changes.

Primary Industries Minister Clare Scriven said last month the fee structure would move to 45 per cent attributed to a base fee, and 55 per cent attributed to quota unit fees.

A working group comprising representatives of the commercial fishing sector was tasked with developing a suitable license fee structure to ensure greater equity in the licence fees across participants.

To address an issue that was raised by industry regarding the differences between the gulfs in the cost per kilogram attributed to catch quota species, a change was made to move to the same cost per kilogram for all MSF quota species.

The state government said it would provide additional targeted financial assistance to licence holders so changes could take effect immediately, taking the total to \$1.722 million in support for licence holders over a three-year period.

Lucky Bay marine scale fisher Graham Harrowfield believed the new fee structure was the state government "kicking the can down the road" and that the issues fishery faced were complex.

"They're giving us \$1.72m in fee subsidy but that's just being given to the people that manage the fishery, the snapper relief fee doesn't come to me, that goes to the people that are being paid to manage the fishery," he said.

"[Minister Scriven] has a department that is inept and hasn't changed the way that it manages the fishers, even though it's changed the way it manages the fishery industry, after they've reduced the number of fishers massively; we've gone from 780 fishers down to about 195.

"This means for example the catch of King George whiting by the commercial sector has reduced from around 650 tonne pre-year 2000 to under 180 tonne statewide, so now the commercial sector is only taking around half of the determined recommended biological catch it has been allocated."

The way this quota system is, Mr Harrowfield believed the industry catch was being restricted to force the price up, but the reality was it exported very little of the product, with the marine scale fishery mainly selling locally at a price the community could not afford.

Mr Harrowfield said a royal commission into the marine scale fishing industry was required as the biggest threat to his livelihood as a fisherman was the mismanagement of the MSF industry.

"An example of the mismanagement is how I've been asking for 35 years what size fish snapper I should be catching and they can't give me an answer," he said.



Lucky Bay marine scale fisher Graham Harrowfield said the management of the industry needed a royal commission. (Charlotte Martin: 452110_01)

"They still can't give me an answer today why the snapper industry collapsed - was it the managers, the compliance, the science, what was it?"

"They're telling us all these reforms are a great success, but I've seen the ramifications in the industry, families and fishers falling apart because they can't sell their quota."

A Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (PIRSA) spokesperson said South Australian Research and Development Institute's scientific stock assessment reports showed declining numbers over the past several years.

"A number of contributing factors are believed to have contributed to the decline of snapper stocks in South Australian waters including - an extended period of low natural stock replenishment of juvenile snapper to populations in key areas, particularly Spencer Gulf (thought to be driven by environmental factors including temperature, salinity or food availability which have not been conducive for snapper larvae survival)," they said.

The spokesperson said a level of exploitation on snapper stocks was too high and at the same time juvenile replenishment had been low, essentially resulting in too much fish taken out and not enough fish recruiting back in.

"High number of commercial fishing licences [prompted] the need for major reforms and re-

structure of the Marine Scalefish Fishery and a growing cumulative impact on stocks from rising recreational catch levels," they added.

"Following the release of the 2022 Snapper Stock Assessment Report the Marine Scalefish Fishery Management Advisory Committee recommended that the total snapper closure continue in the West Coast and Spencer Gulf fishing zones and the Gulf St. Vincent and Kangaroo Island fishing zones.

"The government of South Australia accepted this recommendation and extended the snapper to 30 June 2026 by regulatory amendments."

PIRSA said future management arrangements would be informed by the next snapper stock assessment to be delivered in November 2025.

The organisation would work with and advise each eligible licence holder of their respective annual fee offset for 2024-25.

The state government said under the adjusted annual fee structure for 2024-25 for marine scale fishers no licence holders would be required to pay higher fees.

Mr Harrowfield said it was a fair move for fishers in both Spencer Gulf and Gulf St Vincent to be paying the same base fee.

"It is good, it is better," he said.

Reports that rock lobster fishers would have a 50 per cent reduction in base fees did not land

well with Mr Harrowfield.

"Everyone should be paying the same base fee, it's been the same problem since 2001 when the rock lobster fishery went to quota but still retained access to marine scale species," he said.

"The fundamental failure here is when they reformed the licensed MSF fishers they reduced the number of paying customers by over 100 licences; the cost to manage the fishery should have reduced accordingly but it has not, it has increased because they've employed more people."

Minister Scriven said the importance of the iconic MSF to South Australia should not be underestimated.

"In 2022-23, the MSF caught 2142 tonnes of seafood for a largely local and domestic market, contributed \$41m to gross state product and supported 339 full-time equivalent jobs, with many of those in regional communities," she said.

"I thank the sector representatives who formed the working group, in particular the MFA (Marine Fishers Association) and SAPFA (South Australian Professional Fishers Association) who have advocated for this industry-led outcome."

Ben Barnes of the SAPFA said it thanked the government for further consultation on the proposed fee structure and found the new structure "fairer and more equitable than the previous proposal".



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