

# Chair's Summary

## Barramundi Fishery Management Advisory Committee

### Meeting #6

**Independent Chair:** Mr Ian Cartwright

**Participating Members:** Mr Rob Fish (commercial fishing), Mr Bo Carne (proxy for Mr Brenton Cardona, Traditional Harvest), Dr Rachel Groom (environmental science/conservation),

**Permanent Observer:** Mr Daniel Capps (NTSC),

**Observers:** Dr Jackie Gould (CDU), Mr Cameron Berryman, Mr Jaime Damaso (NLC)

**DITT Staff:** Mr Will Bowman (DITT), Dr Brien Roberts (DITT), Mr Blake Taylor (DITT), Ms Sarah Drescher (DITT).

**Apologies:** Mr David Ciaravolo (recreational fishing), Mr Brenton Cardona (Aboriginal traditional marine harvest), Mr Kane Dysart (proxy NTGFA), Mr Daniel Keyes (Aboriginal traditional marine harvest), Dr Peter Kyne (environmental science/conservation), Mr Murray Knyvett (Aboriginal traditional marine harvest), Ms Joanne Rudd (permanent observer, AFANT).

#### **PRELIMINARY BUSINESS**

The sixth and final meeting of the Northern Territory Barramundi Fishery Management Advisory Committee (the committee) was held on Tuesday 16th July 2024, at the NT Fisheries Building, Berrimah, Darwin. The primary objectives for meeting were to: review and report on BFMAC achievements; consider the social and economic assessment of the barramundi fishery; consider the findings of the review of the draft ecological risk assessment; and provide advice to the Minister to support the next steps in the development of a management framework for the Barramundi Fishery.

Concern was expressed at the reduced attendance noting the responsibilities of members, the facility for the use of proxy nominations and the significance of the final meeting of the BFMAC.

#### **GENERAL BUSINESS**

##### **Fishery update – industry**

Industry reported that the recent announcements regarding the gillnet fishery have had a devastating impact on the commercial sector with a loss of investor confidence, reduction in commercial activity and loss of employment. This instability has also severely impacted plans for Aboriginal Sea Company (ASC) investments and associated efforts to explore opportunities for Indigenous engagement in the fishery. Aboriginal businesses have been impacted by a drop in sales for fishing supplies and an inability to meet the demand for wild-caught Barramundi and King Threadfin from the recently purchased (by ASC) Darwin Fish Market. There are also flow-on impacts to other support industries, restaurants and consumers.

##### **Fishery update – status of stocks**

Stock assessments suggest that populations of target species across the fishery are the highest as they have been in the last 60 years. The recently published SAFS report has

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classified barramundi (and king threadfin) as sustainable. While this report was informed by the 2019 stock assessment, commercial fishing pressure has since decreased, and favourable environmental conditions have supported good recruitment. These factors infer that the stocks of target species are likely to be above 2019 levels, when stock estimates were 88% of virgin biomass for barramundi and 98% for king threadfin.

## **Fishery update – threatened and endangered species (TEPS)**

Reported TEPS interactions and mortality have decreased and no trigger or limit reference points in the TEPS Strategy have been reached, leading to cautious optimism by the Department that the strategy is working as intended. Contributing factors to this reduction may include: the implementation of individual Approved Operator TEPS Mitigation Plans that have educated skippers and driven changes to fishing practices, closed areas and a shift in fishing activity including less intertidal and more low tide shots, and TEPS workshops (run by the Department) to train operators in best-practice TEPS handling and releasing techniques. The Department noted that there is no current evidence of misreporting and that the decline in reported TEPS interactions, and in particular mortalities, is greater than would be expected from the decline in effort alone. The Department noted that there is a need for further validation in respect of TEPS interactions, and efforts to achieve this are ongoing. Development work in the use of electronic monitoring (EM) cameras suitable for small boats has continued apace, with nation-leading approaches being trialled with the support of industry. Initial camera footage has provided confidence in the fit-for-purpose of the EM prototype for the verification of TEPS interactions and the selectivity of gillnets. Observer coverage is also providing additional verification.

## **Fishery update – Traditional Owner concerns**

It was noted that there have been anecdotal claims of localised depletion and reduced Indigenous catch caused by the commercial sector reported by Traditional Owners, which is a matter of concern. The Department noted that commercial catch rates have remained stable across several decades (even within areas of relatively concentrated fishing effort), suggesting that catchment-scale depletion is not occurring. Better estimates of Indigenous catch rates and subsistence fishing are required to inform Harvest Strategy development. The Committee recommended that the ongoing review of the management framework for the fishery, including a review of the ERA and the development of a fishery-wide harvest strategy must include consideration of potential localised depletions and associated impacts on Indigenous fishing.

## **Social and economic assessment**

Consultant BDO Econsearch provided an update on progress with a social and economic assessment, which had been commissioned as part of the process to develop new management arrangements for the barramundi fishery. A series of consultative workshops with stakeholder groups (recreational, commercial and charter) have been held, and consultations with Traditional Owners are planned. The Committee drew several issues to the attention of the consultant, including the challenges of factoring in the value of traditional and/or customary fishing, the use and availability of primary data held at Charles Darwin University and the absence of methods for capturing consumer satisfaction in the context of the commercial sector. CDU noted the challenges in quantifying the contribution of the fishery to Aboriginal Territorians in economic terms, given its more multidimensional value, and significant care needs to be taken to ensure the value of the barramundi to the

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Traditional sector is appropriately considered, especially given the methodological challenges identified by the consultant. The final report should be available in October and will be accessible to the public. Some concern was expressed over the lack of clarity as to how his assessment will be used to inform the allocation process.

## **Ecological Risk Assessment of the NT Barramundi Fishery**

The Department delivered a verbal update on the draft Ecological Risk Assessment of the NT Barramundi Fishery and an independent peer review of that assessment. The reviewer drew attention to a number of factors that the risk analysis did not appear to take into account, including reduced fishery impacts on the environment through a reduction in commercial fishing (65% reduction in effort over the last 10 years), that 14 licences now operate in more than a thousand km of coast, and the existence of commercial closures and a four-month closed season.

Disappointment and a level of discomfort were expressed by members as a result of the ERA being found to have not followed the agreed process. It was noted that while shortcomings in the process had been identified, particularly with respect to the inconsistent application of risk ratings, the ERA had not exposed the fishery to any significant environmental risk.

In relation to the management of the fishery, the Department has accepted the findings of the review and is considering the next steps, which include a technical review of the ERA guidelines. The Department is working with the author (Fletcher) on this. This work should address the associated concern that the ERA was not sufficiently clear on how the risk ratings had been arrived at. The Committee made two recommendations in relation to the ERA: i) That as an urgent priority, there be a re-assessment of the TEP species within the draft ERA through an external expert review and ii) that the review of the TEPS strategy and associated risk assessment takes account of the risks of local depletion, including 'hot spots' of TEPS distribution and fishing activity. It was also recommended the results of the external review, including the risk levels, be reviewed by an expert panel.

## **Next steps**

As stated by the Senior Executive of Fisheries, the Committee noted that BFMAC had delivered outputs in accordance with the strategy proposed at meeting #4, as amended during implementation. The NT Fishery Resource Sharing Framework will be used to undertake the sectoral allocation process, with the BDO assessment feeding into the resource-sharing discussions as a line of evidence. The next steps will be informed by the priorities of the next term of Government. It was noted that the current interim Commercial Barramundi Fishery Harvest Strategy was developed, taking into account consideration of other sectors, particularly in relation to the target reference point. The TEPS strategy was developed alongside the harvest strategy process. As originally intended, the interim harvest strategy will be superseded by the Barramundi Fishery Harvest Strategy upon the completion of resource sharing discussions and subsequent allocation.

## **Process improvement**

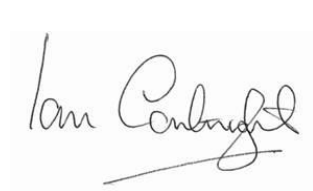
The use of misinformation campaigns and their impact on Ministerial decision processes was raised. It was reiterated that the Code of Conduct for MAC members applies and that all members need to be mindful of their responsibilities. Concerns regarding potential breaches of the Code of Conduct by members was drawn to the attention of the Chair and advice put forward that those concerns have been raised with the Department. An additional issue

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related to attendance and the responsibility of members to either be available to attend meetings or nominate proxies.

## **Concluding remarks**

The Chair thanked members for their valuable input into what was a challenging but valuable process, noting that this was the last meeting of the MAC in this phase of the development of a revised management framework for the Barramundi fishery.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ian Cartwright". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Ian Cartwright  
Chair, BFMAC  
31 July 2024