



Australian Government
Department of the Environment

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The Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
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The Committee Secretariat

Inquiry into opportunities for expanding the aquaculture industry in Northern Australia

The Department of the Environment is the federal department responsible for implementing the Australian Government's policies and programmes to protect and conserve the environment. It administers the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act), the Australian Government's key piece of environmental legislation.

The Department recognises that aquaculture is a significant part of the economy, particularly in regional areas, requiring effective and efficient regulation to ensure its sustainability. The industry is diverse and each project has different potential environmental impacts with varying degrees of significance. Aquaculture developments are primarily regulated under relevant state and territory legislation.

The Department does carry out some regulatory and policy implementation activities, including under the EPBC Act. Those of relevance to the aquaculture industry include: the assessment and approval of projects likely to have a significant impact on nationally protected matters; the management of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area; export of species; and water quality standards. Additional activities are undertaken by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), which is an Environment Portfolio Agency.

Assessment and Approval of Aquaculture Projects

Projects require approval under the EPBC Act if they are likely to have a significant impact on matters of national environmental significance protected under the EPBC Act. These matters include world and national heritage properties, wetlands of international importance, nationally threatened species and ecological communities, migratory species and Commonwealth land and marine areas.

There have been 31 aquaculture projects from Northern Australia that have been referred to the Department since the commencement of the EPBC Act. Of these referrals, 19 did not require assessment and approval under the EPBC Act as they were determined not likely to have a significant impact on any matters protected by the EPBC Act. As such, these actions were able to proceed, subject to any relevant state or local government requirements.

Of the remaining 12 projects which did require approval under the EPBC Act, seven projects were withdrawn by the proponent or lapsed. The remaining five proposals were approved with conditions:

- York Island Sponge Farm, Torres Straits (Qld). Approved 2009
- Expansion of Existing Prawn Aquaculture Facility (Qld). Approved 2004
- Alva Beach Prawn Aquaculture Expansion (Qld). Approved 2003
- Prawn Farm Lot 310 on NR6952, Little Moorsby Creek (Qld). Approved 2002, and
- Guthalungra Aquaculture Facility (Qld). Approved 2010.

Regulatory reform of the EPBC Act

The Australian Government has committed to reducing regulatory costs for business through its one stop shop policy, which reforms its environmental assessment and approval role, including for aquaculture proposals. This policy is being implemented through bilateral agreements between the Australian Government and each state and territory.

Complementing this, the Department is developing and implementing policies in relation to approval conditions that will further reduce duplication with State and Territory processes and improve the efficiency of environmental approval processes.

The one stop shop will provide more certainty for investors with a simpler, transparent and more predictable national regulatory system and is expected to result in regulatory savings to businesses of over \$426 million a year. More information is available on the Department's website at: www.environment.gov.au/epbc/one-stop-shop.

Great Barrier Reef

The World-Heritage listed Great Barrier Reef is a national and international icon and the industries it supports, primarily tourism, have been valued at more than \$5 billion a year. Aquaculture proposals in the Reef region are principally assessed through the EPBC Act and Queensland law. Should any development be proposed within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975*, which is administered by Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, would also apply. Any application that requires approval under both the EPBC and the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act* is dealt with through a single Australian Government administrative process.

The 'Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan' addresses key threats to the Reef and aims to build its resilience and ensure the protection and conservation of its outstanding universal value for generations to come. A primary focus for the Plan is improving the quality of catchment runoff and reducing the impact of sediment, nutrients and pesticides on the health and resilience of the Reef. The Plan will build on investment by governments over many years in water quality improvement programmes that have already achieved significant progress in reducing agricultural run-off.

The Long-Term Sustainability Plan includes the following targets:

- Over successive decades, the quality of water in or entering the Reef from all sources (including aquaculture, but also urban waste and stormwater sources) will have no detrimental impact on the health and resilience of the Reef.
- By 2020, Reef-wide and locally relevant water quality targets will be in place for urban, industrial, aquaculture and port activities and monitoring will show a stable or improving trend.

While the expansion of the aquaculture industry within the catchment areas of the Reef would bring economic and social benefits, any future development must be ecologically sustainable.

Export of species

The export of Australian native specimens is also regulated by the EPBC Act, particularly when specimens are listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or are listed as threatened under the EPBC Act.

All products derived from aquaculture operations that are licensed by the states and territories, other than CITES species or species listed as threatened under the EPBC Act, are exempted from requiring an EPBC Act export permit. Species relevant to northern aquaculture include barramundi, tiger prawns and banana prawns, mud crabs and sea cucumbers.

Species listed under CITES always require a CITES export permit. This is because the primary aim of CITES is to ensure that international trade in wild flora and fauna is legal, sustainable and traceable and does not threaten species' survival. Issuing CITES permits facilitates trade in CITES listed specimens between Australian businesses and other CITES Parties.

Any export of non-exempted species must be from approved wildlife trade operations or approved aquaculture programmes. For example, in recent years operations involving collection of giant clams as broodstock for aquaculture activities have been approved as wildlife trade operations in the north of Australia. Where an operation has been declared a wildlife trade operation or approved aquaculture programme, export permits can then be issued for non-exempted species.

Water quality standards

The primary responsibility for water quality management lies with state and territory governments. State and territory governments establish their own guidelines and regulations for managing the quality and supply of water that is fit for purpose. The Australian Government is actively engaged with all states and territories to improve water quality in our waterways, particularly through the National Water Quality Management Strategy. This is the principal policy that provides guidance on the environmental suitability of waste discharges to the receiving environment. This policy applies in all states and territories and is the minimum standard that is applied under assessment bilateral agreements with state and territories. The policy can be viewed at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/water/policy-programs/nwqms/index.html>.

The Primary Industries Chapter (section 9.4) of the *Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality*, provides material relating to 'Aquaculture and Human Consumers of Aquatic Foods'. This guideline deals with influent water quality only, as it is generally agreed that good quality water is the most important input for aquaculture and thus a key element in the success of all phases of culture operations, including hatchery, nursery, grow-out and holding or transport of live product to market. Effluent water from aquaculture activities is covered by the overarching Fresh and Marine Water Quality Guidelines.

The Aquaculture and Human Consumers of Aquatic Foods guidelines provide the basis for aquaculture management decisions, such as environmental planning and management, environmental assessment and monitoring requirements, appropriate environmental zoning and legislation, appropriate species and suitable site selection, site capacity, farm design criteria, stocking densities, feeding activity and production schedules. Also included are recommended water quality parameters under four main categories: physico-chemical stressors, inorganic toxicants (heavy metals and others), organic toxicants (pesticides, detergents, petrochemicals) and pathogens and biological contaminants. This chapter can be viewed at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/resources/e080174c-b267-455e-a8db-d3f79e3b2142/files/nwqms-guidelines-4-vol3.pdf>.

Concluding comments

The Department plays a limited role in regulatory activities affecting the aquaculture industry, as this is largely the responsibility of state and territory governments. The Department supports the development of an ecologically sustainable aquaculture industry, operative within the framework of the EPBC Act.

The Department is eager to remain engaged and to assist the Committee in its inquiry into opportunities for expanding the aquaculture industry in Northern Australia.

Yours sincerely

Gordon de Brouwer
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