

SENATE SUBMISSION

THE FISHERIES QUOTA SYSTEM

Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport.

Committee Secretary

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My name is Brian Stanley Bolding, born 15-4-1955.

I would like to pay my respect to the traditional owners the Gunai Kurnai, elders past, present and future generations, whose land covers the land and waters of Easter Bass Strait.

I first began fishing in Bass Strait during the summer of 1973-4, dropping out of university to go full time at the end of 1974, primarily in the Southern Shark Fishery (SSF). Initially crewing on shark boats, targeting gummy and school shark.

I began running a shark boat in 1978, and bought my first boat (wooden, 33 feet) in 1981 fitting it out to operate as a shark gillnet vessel and trawl. In 1989 I bought a steel ex scallop vessel (53 feet) and converted to shark, danish seine and inshore trawl.

Parallel to my career the Australian Fisheries Service (AFS), and later Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) began to attempt to manage the Australian Fishery resource.

AFS constructed an input, management regime for the Southern Shark and South East Trawl (SET).

Most shark boats had transitioned from long line hooks towards mono filament shark mesh, 6 inch (150mm) between nets, from the early 1970s onwards. Net depth increased from 12 meshes deep to 20 in the 1980s. Shark nets are set, anchored to the bottom like a fence. Input controls, were the principal tool, to reduce catches.

Many years (decades) of fishing industry engagement began with fishers. Bureaucratic divide and rule policies such as A and B licenses, lines drawn on maps, intricacies of State government borders (MOUs), zones, policies, kept fishers in a state of flux often against each other as much as against the imposition of Commonwealth and State controls for decades.

The change in Commonwealth policy to turn AFS into a statutory authority, AFMA, heralded a new chapter in fishery management.

Output controls (quota) became the preferred objective of AFMA. Fisheries policy from Europe (EU) began to be enacted in Australia.

From my fisherman, perspective, the most lamentable facet of the creation of AFMA was that the Federal Minister (of both ilk) could stand back and not be accountable claiming the statutory authority was at arm length from politics. A grand absolution of authority and ministerial accountability, that continues today.

The cozy, bureaucratic world of Canberra has led to large turn over of management staff, with AFMA lacking continuity. The old bureaucratic side step!

This has allowed the vested interests, lobbyists, to game the present quota system, accrue monopolistic control of pools of quota holdings in most south east fisheries. The economic rationalists always wanted, a few large players to achieve their efficiency policies.

I often point out that fisheries quota management is a few years ahead of the Murray Darling Basin Scheme. Indeed, they have had the same chair of the boards.

First rule of introducing quota management.

Initially allocate two or three times the available resource.

Allow non fishers (farmers) to acquire and trade quota.

Cut the available resource allocations over years.

Have an opaque trading system, that allows brokers and large interests to acquire ever more quota, disenfranchising fishers.

Once a critical mass of resource ownership is reached, have control of the market

The net result, fishers are at a disadvantage.

Today large players dictate access to quota, and whom and where it is sold.

Why do I say this?

Two of the prime aims and objectives of the Commonwealth was the aim of Ecological Sustainable Development and Economic efficiency. The latter has under the Economic Rationalist models popularized from the 1980s onwards and has driven the agenda of AFMA management policy.

For fishers such as I who have, had the privilege of taking wild resources, and cared about the sustainability of those resources, were prepared to engage in the development of fisheries management plans.

Encouraged to engage, fishers formed fishing organizations, put forward submissions, participated on structural fishery plans, etc, over many years (decades). The Ecologically Sustainable Development of SS and SET have been a disaster. I served on various committees and restructure programs, at economic cost, due to lost sea time.

All the quota species are in serious decline. The benthic destruction of the sea floor, particularly over the continental shelf, has been substantial. The technological revolution (GPS, etc) in all areas of maritime electronics, has catapulted the ability of fishers to expand and target fishing grounds coupled with ever bigger boats. When I began fishing, most small fishing boats had a compass, radio and a paper sounder, radar was expensive and not common.

This economic rationalist model was and still is AFMA doctrine. Their claims of ESD are mute.

I as a fisher, along with many others recognized the logic of reigning in the exponential effort being directed at the resource through too much fishing effort.

An example of a species, School shark, once abundant throughout Bass Strait were already in sharp decline in the mid to late 1970s, through over exploitation and government rules on size of fish to be landed.

Any fisher who caught school shark in the 1970s, remember the government (State?) management of policy response, to a human/ industrial mercury poisoning event in Minamata bay Japan, in fish contaminated with high mercury levels.

School shark having mercury, government policy set a maximum landed trunk size for school shark. Anything over illegal. This led to shark fishers throwing huge numbers of large school shark overboard mostly dead (40 years old), to satisfy knee jerk government policy due to school shark mercury content.

Under AFMA management, Gemfish caught in gillnets in the late 1980s-1990s had to be discarded in a similar situation.

Therefore, as fishers we were keen to see sustainable management of the resource. Contrary to bureaucratic economic dogma, many fishers became fishers because they liked it, not purely because they were determined to accrue wealth.

Smaller vessels, weather constrained, have been superseded by all weather operation, multiple crews etc.

The shift from AFS to AFMA, brought a new management tool, output controls (quota) and entailed a shifting of the input controls (shark net length), units of capacity already in place within the SS and SET. Many fishers did not want quotas, some wanted quota, some based on catch history, some wanted the cake divided by the units of capacity implanted by AFS.

In the end AFMA used catch history, as the main determinant to allocate quota, so those who exploited the most received the largest stock of wealth. Firstly, in the SET, and by the end of the 1990s quota came in the SS, plus a maximum net length input control.

John Howards government spent hundreds of millions of dollars, on an industry restructure, in the mid 2006-7, buying out licenses and boats. I exited the SS fishery. I sold my vessel about 7 years ago.

For the last 20 years my wife and I ran a successful floating seafood café and fish shop in lakes Entrance selling last December.

So, I have kept fairly up to date on how the SS and SET fisheries are faring. By all accounts the resources are thinner than ever.

The lobbying of large corporate quota holders that now control the bulk of SET and SS quota allocations, along with scallops, crayfish are able to influence management policy. Fishers are muscled out by money and brokers, who control the industry.

AFMA's management of the SS fishery, has now lifted input controls on gillnet length, against the wishes of many in the industry. Amazing what a lobby can achieve running an economic efficiency argument.

The fact that many more sharks are thrown over board because of lice damage, are too long in the water, because big boats with long net lengths cannot retrieve their gear in a timely manner when large schools of fish are encountered, causing more waste. I shake my head and ask where is the sustainable development.

For a period (late 1990s, early 2000s) AFMA ran a 'quota board' website that enabled fishers to buy and sell, lease online. For some reason this was discontinued, disenfranchising fishers, ability to access the market. Large corporate interests have cleaned up.

When I exited Commonwealth fisheries, and cleaned out my office I filled my large car trailer with 30 or more years of submissions, AFS/AFMA correspondence etc, crowned to the brim.

Has all that Commonwealth management, achieved Ecological Sustainable Development? NO.

Has Economic Efficiency achieved a marriage with Ecological Sustainable Development? NO.

One of the big flaws in management, is that Science too, is beholden to short term programs, grants and study are geared toward development. Science bite their tongues to gain grants.

I could go on and on, but let me, be clear, fisheries management by the Commonwealth and most States, generally has been a catastrophic failure.

Owner operator fishers bearing, ever increasing cost of operation, levies of management, have to tax resources ever harder, to pay higher costs. Most ports in Victoria have few if any commercial boats left. As the large players buy up quota it is often caught somewhere else.

The next generation of fishers (not many) are priced out, and consigned to work for corporate interests.

I ask this committee to look at the initial quota allocation total tonnages, for the SET and SS industries of all quota species when quota was first allocated. Compare that to present day allocations. It is clear that the resources are in trouble.

The environmental destruction, of natural resources during my lifetime both on land and sea is obvious, to those who want to acknowledge. The destruction of South East Australia's forests by logging and wood chipping and fire, feral pests and plants, rivers denied water has all had an effect upon coastal fisheries. Combine that with the goal of bigger GDP, and economic policies of the Commonwealth has caused the decline of our land water resources.

I could go on and on, but I am too disillusioned with AFMA (and State) fishing management, to place more time into this submission. I am willing to front your committee to expand these thoughts.

Yours sincerely

Brian Bolding.

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