



20 November 2015

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**RE: The environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'supertrawlers' operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction.**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into the environmental, social and economic impacts of large-capacity fishing vessels commonly known as 'supertrawlers' operating in Australia's marine jurisdiction.

The Northern Territory Seafood Council is the peak representative body for the wild catch, aquaculture and trader/processor seafood sectors in the Northern Territory, with the exception of the Commonwealth-managed Northern Prawn Fishery.

NT Seafood Council's vision is for a profitable, sustainable seafood industry supporting the economic growth of the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory is home to a seafood industry providing:

- Regional employment;
- Export income;
- Cost effective monitoring of the marine environment;
- Economic diversification and resilience for regional communities ;
- Healthy, high quality and sustainably sourced food;
- Consumers with the pleasure of freshly harvested, premium quality and tasty seafood;
- Contributions to the NT tourism industry through the provision of iconic species such as mud crab, barramundi and tropical snappers; and
- Contributions to Australia's future food security.

The NT Seafood Council's position on the Terms of Reference referred to this Inquiry is that current fisheries management and environmental regulations governing fishing vessels in Australia already provide appropriate checks and balances, irrespective of the size of the vessel. Our concern is that any vessel with freezing and processing at sea capabilities has the potential of being viewed as the next 'supertrawler' if decisions are made based on popular campaigns and emotive opinions rather than science.

Fisheries management in Australia is achieved though limiting the amount of effort or the level of catch taken from a stock, based on the best available science and takes into account environmental fluctuations or other impacts. In quota-managed fisheries, the size of the vessel is irrelevant with respect to being a management tool. It becomes highly relevant

when considering efficiency, safety, product quality and the most efficient use of marine resources.

### **Vessel efficiency, safety, product quality and most efficient use of marine resources**

With a fishing area of around 500,000 square kilometres, containing only one main port and subject to a tropical climate, the vast majority of fisheries operating in northern waters have no alternative but to process and freeze at sea.

Processing at sea results in the best quality product, reduces the risk of food safety issues and ensures maximum sustainable use of the resource by reducing waste due to spoilage. Processing at sea also enables waste product to be returned to the environment from which it came – becoming a part of the food chain at sea rather than disposed of on land.

Larger scale vessels are more efficient through economies of scale, are able to access areas further offshore (taking pressure off high-use and high-conflict inshore areas), provide better facilities for crew, allow for better coverage by fisheries observer programmes and provide a higher degree of safety in an area subject to cyclones.

Fisheries development in Northern Territory has seen a progression from numerous small vessels accessing areas close to Darwin, moving to more efficient, better-equipped larger vessels working further afield as the fishery develops. Traditionally, in the industry, the definition of a 'large boat' is 'any boat bigger than mine'. The same definition could be applied to a 'supertrawler'.

Imposing an arbitrary definition on what is a 'large scale' fishing vessel based on a particular vessel size, and in response to public opinion, runs the risk of stifling investment and reducing opportunities for efficient, sustainable and safe fisheries development. As long as vessels are subject to the same world-class Australian fisheries management and environmental regulations, while being given support for continued improvement in efficiency and sustainability, size should not be a factor.

There is a precedent in which fisheries management practices which constrain vessel size have been called into question from a work health and safety perspective – in the 1990's, WA WorkSafe called into question the 'propriety of regulatory arrangements that effectively constrained trawler size and engine power for the purpose of controlling the exploitation of fish stocks.'<sup>1</sup> This was following two major incidents at sea involving fishing vessels – the capsizing of the *Saint Maddalena* in 1992 (five fatalities) and the sinking of two fishing vessels during Cyclone Bobby in 1995 (seven fatalities).

Legal advice at the time concluded that 'the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994* did not apply to the Minister for Fisheries or the Fisheries Department in the making of management plans, regulations or issuing advice.' It did, however, state that the Fisheries Department should consider important and relevant work health and safety concerns when making or amending legislation and management plans.

### **NT Fisheries assessed as being ecologically sustainable for export, based on the EPBC Act**

The following NT fisheries which currently process and freeze their catch at sea have been assessed by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment as being ecologically sustainable for export, under Australian guidelines based on the Environment Protections and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act):

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<sup>1</sup> The Impact of Occupational Safety and Health on the Management of Western Australian Fisheries (1997). Fisheries Management Report NO. 1. Department of Fisheries WA.

- Demersal
- Offshore Net and Line
- Spanish Mackerel
- Timor Reef
- Trepang

These assessments demonstrate that the fisheries are managed in a manner that does not lead to overfishing, and that the fishing operations and gears have minimal impact on the structure, productivity, function and biological diversity of the ecosystem. Each fishery is required to be re-assessed by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment after a pre-determined time and after meeting certain requirements and improvements identified in the previous assessment – including reducing their effects on protected species.

This results in a continual improvement in environmental responsibility and has led to some innovative and industry-led initiatives in reducing interactions with protected species, such as the industry-designed bycatch reduction device now used on all NT fish trawlers.

### **Fisheries management and compliance measures already in place**

In addition to the requirements for improvement afforded by maintaining export approval under the EPBC Act, all NT fisheries operate under highly regulated NT fisheries management legislation, with compliance overseen by NT Water Police and the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (for those fisheries managed by quota).

Vessel observer programmes, Vessel Monitoring Systems, logbook reporting and fisheries research all ensure that the requirements of fisheries legislation is being met and information is collected in a timely manner provide the basis on which management decisions are made.

Each NT fishery is covered by an industry-developed Environmental Management System identifying risks, control measures and actions as relating to fishery operations, gear, crew, potential for interactions with protected species and external risks impacting on the fishery.

Codes of Practice for each fishery cover work health and safety, food handling, waste disposal and pollution.

Fisheries management and environmental regulations governing fishing vessels in the NT, as with all of Australia, are in line with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and provide a strong level of certainty that Australia fish stocks are not fished at an unsustainable level. It is clearly unreasonable to compare the use of large capacity fishing vessels operating in Australia under stringent management and compliance conditions with those operating in jurisdictions with little or no management and compliance.

Yours faithfully

Rob Fish  
Chairman