



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, RESOURCES AND RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Management of Commonwealth fisheries

CANBERRA

Wednesday, 4 December 1996

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PRIMARY INDUSTRIES, RESOURCES
AND RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Members

Mrs Bailey (Chair)
Mr Adams (Deputy Chair)

Mr Andren	Mr Fitzgibbon
Mr Bob Baldwin	Mrs Gash
Mr Broadbent	Mr Leo McLeay
Mr Causley	Mr Nairn
Mr Cobb	Mrs Stone
Mr Crean	Mr Wakelin

Matters arising from Audit Report No. 32 1995-96 Commonwealth Fisheries Management: Australian Fisheries Management Authority.

WITNESSES

**HARRISON, Mr John, National Executive Director, Recfish Australia, Australian Recreational
and Sport Fishing Confederation, PO Box 854, Dickson, Australian Capital Territory
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The committee met at 10.35 a.m.

Mrs Bailey took the chair.

CHAIR—I declare open this seventh public hearing of the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Primary Industries, Resources and Rural and Regional Affairs into the management of Commonwealth fisheries. Earlier this year a report by the Auditor-General on the management of Commonwealth fisheries was presented to the parliament. The report was then referred to the committee by the House of Representatives.

Our task now is to review the audit report and to inquire into the matters raised by the auditors. We will report back to the House with recommendations for any government action that may be necessary to redress either the problems identified in the audit report or any problems that the committee itself may discover.

We come to this inquiry with open minds about the auditors findings. The evidence we are taking at these hearings and the written submissions that have been made to us will be important contributions to our review of the issues. The committee appreciates the contributions it has received from the public, the fishing industry and from government agencies.

Today we will hear from the national peak body representing the interests of recreational fishers, Recfish Australia. Before proceeding, I must say that committee proceedings are recognised as proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect that proceedings in the House of Representatives demand. Witnesses are protected by parliamentary privilege in respect of the evidence they give before the committee. Witnesses will not be asked to take an oath or to make an affirmation. However, they are reminded that false evidence given to a parliamentary committee may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should witnesses at any stage wish to give evidence in private they may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to the request.

[10.37 a.m.]

HARRISON, Mr John, National Executive Director, Recfish Australia, Australian Recreational and Sport Fishing Confederation, PO Box 854, Dickson, Australian Capital Territory 2602

CHAIR—I welcome the representative of Recfish Australia. We have received a submission from you and have authorised its publication. Do you wish to propose any changes to your submission?

Mr Harrison—No, there are no changes I wish to make.

CHAIR—Before we begin our questioning, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Harrison—Yes, thank you. There are several points that I would like to reinforce which we addressed in our original submission. The first is the reference to the national policy on recreational fishing, which I hope the committee has seen and has a copy of. If not, I would be quite happy to leave one with them. It clearly states in principle 3 that the government in its stewardship role must encourage and assist the community to be involved in all aspects of fisheries management. I would like to draw that to the attention of the committee.

The second point that I would like to briefly touch on is that of our concerns about the offshore constitutional settlement and the lack of finalisation of that and the impact that we believe that is having on the management of the billfish and tuna species in Australian waters. We would like to see that finalised as a matter of urgency. At the same time as those finalisations are completed, there are some issues concerning lack of legislation in relation to the recreational and sport fishing sector. In particular, I refer to the tuna and billfish fishery. We would like to see those legislation changes made as a matter of urgency so that our particular sector of the fishing industry can be catered for in the management plans.

The third point is that we were advised there was \$3 million saved by AFMA through prudent management, and we pat them on the back for that. But there has been some debate concerning the insufficient amount of surveillance particularly regarding billfish and marlin being taken by the commercial sector. We see it as rather ironic that there has been supposedly a lack of money for improved surveillance but \$3 million has been handed back to the government. We think that could have been used to improve or to increase the surveillance.

The fourth point that I would like to touch on briefly relates to the production or the development of a management plan. Our position is that we would like to see the Commonwealth, in consultation with the states, the territories and Recfish Australia, produce a management plan for the tuna and billfish species and then the Commonwealth provide the necessary funding to have that plan executed through a subcontract arrangement of some description to the states and the territories.

Recently the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties announced a recommendation concerning marlin which was very pleasing as far as we were concerned. That recommendation was that all Japanese vessels were to cut free marlin, dead or alive, without removal from the water. We would like to see this committee make the same recommendation to cover all commercial fishing vessels in the AFZ. Other than that, that is

probably a reinforcement of some of the issues that we have mentioned in our submission.

CHAIR—Thank you. As you know, AFMA has no management responsibilities for the activities of recreational fishers. Do you believe there is a need for legislative changes to bring the management of recreational fishing that takes place in Commonwealth waters under AFMA's control?

Mr Harrison—Most assuredly. I cannot see how you could possibly manage your resource without taking into account all of those people that have an impact on or have a need to access those resources. So the short answer is yes, there should be legislative changes to include the recreational and sport fishing sector, and the charter sector into that management plan.

Mr FITZGIBBON—Mr Harrison, could you give us your estimate of the proportion of the recreational catch in terms of the total catch?

Mr Harrison—I do not have that information.

Mr FITZGIBBON—I am not looking for an exact figure. Can you give me your view on what proportion the recreational fish might be?

Mr CAUSLEY—There is some work being done in New South Wales about that, but it is limited. There was some research done on the Richmond River about the amateur catch as compared to the professional catch, but it is limited.

Mr Harrison—And in Commonwealth waters I think you are trying to compare two different areas. You are comparing part of the industry that takes and kills catch for a commercial gain versus the other part of the industry that takes and, in the majority of cases, releases the fish. There are very few fish that are kept for trophy value these days.

Mr ADAMS—What percentage of fish are tagged and let go?

Mr Harrison—There are some indications of around 90 to 95 per cent.

Mr ADAMS—What do recreational fishermen spend per year? What is the industry worth in recreational terms in the buying of equipment and that sort of thing?

Mr Harrison—If you are talking Australia wide, the only national survey that has been completed was done in 1984. That put an estimate of \$2.2 billion in 1984.

CHAIR—Does that include vessels, tackle and everything?

Mr Harrison—That is their expenditure. It did not include things such as accommodation and purchase of fuel. So if you convert that to today's dollars, it is somewhere in the order of \$3 to \$3.5 billion.

Mr ADAMS—I know that Recfish has lost its funding. How much funding was it receiving?

Mr Harrison—About \$77,000 a year.

Mr ADAMS—What was the rationale given for eliminating the funding?

Mr Harrison—That we are not a sport, and we are a minority sport. There were about three or four reasons, but they are the two principal ones.

Mr ADAMS—But there is \$2.2 billion spent in the industry of recreational fishing.

Mr Harrison—Yes, and our estimates of somewhere between \$500 and \$600 million into Commonwealth revenue through fuel tax, sales tax and import duties.

CHAIR—Can you provide us with a breakdown of how much of that recreational fishing actually takes place in Commonwealth waters, because a lot of recreational fishing takes place inland. Do you have any figures that give us a breakdown?

Mr Harrison—No. If you look at organised competitions, the Game Fishing Association of Australia organises about eight per cent of the known tournaments within Australia. Primarily, they chase pelagic species of fish. So if you extrapolate that, you might get a very rough indication of what takes place in Commonwealth waters. To my knowledge, there has been no research done on that at all as to what the percentage of it is in Commonwealth based waters and what it is in state based waters.

Mr NAIRN—I am at a bit of a loss in regard to your submission relating to TACs. I do not understand how it pulls together with your overall responsibilities and interests. Can you enlighten me as to why you are making submissions about TACs? You give an example of a south-east fishery and an example of silver trevally and the TAC as opposed to the catch. There are a lot more complications than you have in there. Silver trevally is accepted as a predominant by-catch species. Depending on quotas that are available in that area, it has a great effect on it. I cannot quite grasp where you are coming from. Can you help me?

Mr Harrison—I might add before answering the question that it was a joint effort by three or four people to put this submission together. What we are saying is that, if you take that example in isolation—and I picked the species of the silver trevally for that purpose—and look at the TAC versus the catch, you start to question why you have such a huge variation between the TAC and the actual catch.

We are questioning the reasons for having such a high TAC when the catch history shows that it is very low. Is there a reason for that low catch history? Is it because the species is under threat or is it because of other elements? Is it because it is a low quality eating table fish, or are there a host of other examples? We are saying that you have a large room to build onto a catch. If the catch is going down, why should the TAC go up? Our concern is that there is a lot of latitude being built into the TAC that may be used in detriment to the fish species. I hope that clarifies things.

Mr NAIRN—It is really only relevant when you look at it in the bigger picture of what quotas are available. Is this species caught fairly predominantly by recreational fishermen?

Mr Harrison—It is a species that is chased by recreational anglers.

Mr NAIRN—Maybe they are catching so much that the commercial guys cannot catch it.

Mr Harrison—That is possible, although highly unlikely I would suggest. We are just making a comment on the TAC versus the catch record. If you look at that particular example, you have two years where the TAC is at 500 tonnes, the catch goes down but the next year the TAC goes up. Our question is why. Why should a TAC go up when catch rates are going down?

Mrs STONE—I have some concern about the way we define recreational fishing because there are really two categories, are there not? There is the operation that runs a tourist fishing activity, where people are paid to go out to tag and catch fish. Then there are the others who go for their own enjoyment and are not involved in any commercial related activity. Would you agree that there are those two different sorts of activity?

Mr Harrison—Yes, there are definitely those that offer charter services or guides that provide you with a boat for a fee to go out and catch fish versus those that use their own boat or their own resources to go out and catch fish. So there is a commercial interest in the charter side of things, but I must make it clear to the committee that I am not representing the charter industry.

Mrs STONE—That is my concern. Who is representing the charter industry? To me, they get bound up together and there is quite a substantial industry in Australia, especially in northern Australia in the charter fishing area. But you are saying that you are not representing them today.

Mr Harrison—No. My understanding is that there is a Cairns professional charter fishing association. I think there are one or two other charter boat associations that have been formed. It would probably be best to talk to them about their own issues concerning Commonwealth fisheries.

CHAIR—We have actually received separate submissions from them.

Mrs STONE—You mentioned before that you believe that Japanese fishers should be putting back marlin, dead or alive, if they catch them. You are not concerned with the fact that that would not necessarily mean that they were registered or logged in terms of how many fish they were catching? Are you concerned about the by-catch that your fisher people pick up and is not registered in terms of the biostocks evaluation and auditing?

Mr Harrison—That would be a concern, but you have to balance that as to the benefits of releasing those fish that are alive and have some chance of survival. You have to weigh up which is better from the recreational and sport fishing perspective, and that is to release those fish that have some chance of surviving and forgo the opportunity to have a catch record. It is a matter of what is best, and in our particular case the opinion of all those involved in our sector of the industry is to let them go.

Mrs STONE—Do you believe most of them survive when you let them go?

Mr Harrison—I do not think there has been too much scientific research that has pinpointed whether that is the case. There has certainly been quite a number of fish that have been tagged and released that have been recaptured. There is ample evidence to say that those fish survive after being caught and tagged. Whether they survive after being caught on a long line, I am not in a position to say either way. I do not know.

Mrs STONE—Because we have had other evidence registering concern about not being able to register legally the by-catch.

CHAIR—We are going to be following up that matter in future hearings. Mr Harrison, you raised an issue in your submission about the number of loopholes and the processing of illegal catch. Would you like to elaborate for this committee on ways in which you think surveillance and compliance are being ignored?

Mr Harrison—The loophole that I specifically mentioned was within the ACT, which is very evident when you walk into any of the fish retail outlets in the ACT. You can often find undersized fish. I made mention that it is not one fish in a particular tray of fish; it is usually the entire tray that is undersized. That problem I believe stems from the fact that the ACT does not have any legislation covering marine fisheries because they have not got any marine fisheries. Therefore, undersized fish can be processed or sold within the ACT because there are no rules or laws to say that they cannot. I have asked this committee to recommend that that particular loophole be closed so that undersized fish cannot be processed or shipped through the ACT.

Mr ADAMS—We can talk about the price that they sell the fish for in the ACT also.

Mr ANDREN—I arrived a little late, but I understand that you have given an idea of the economic value of the industry to be \$2.2 billion.

Mr Harrison—In 1984 dollars.

Mr ANDREN—So it would be significantly more now.

Mr Harrison—We say somewhere around \$3.5 billion.

Mr ANDREN—Do you feel it is important to do a follow-up survey to reinforce your argument?

Mr Harrison—It is absolutely essential.

Mr ANDREN—In some informal discussions with people from your organisation, there was a value given by which each fish generates in a lifetime. Can you put that on the record? It was suggested that a fish caught and recaptured could generate so many dollars in tourism dollars in a lifetime.

Mr Harrison—I think last week there was a brief article on the *7.30 Report*. Senator Bill O’Chee mentioned the commercial value of a marlin to be \$700, whereas the value to the recreational or charter sector of the industry was of the order of \$55,000 or \$60,000 in what it could generate in being able to be

recaught. That is an indicative figure. I do not know where Senator O'Chee got his figures, but it seems to me that the difference between the two is quite substantial. Considering that 95 per cent of billfish are released and can be recaught, that in itself generates more incentive for people to go back and fish. Charter fishing is fairly expensive in the northern part of Australia and generates a lot of dollars.

Mr ANDREN—It has also been suggested that the billfish are being targeted by commercial operators and that a protective wall goes up around the boat when it arrives back in port. Your observers cannot begin to find out what is going on. Is that still the situation?

Mr Harrison—I do not know. I have not been involved in it. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that that is the case, but I have nothing concrete to support that or otherwise. That is what we are being told. The media is also telling us that there are blue and black marlin being landed in increasing numbers by the commercial sector. Again, I have no evidence to support that.

Mr ANDREN—What market would they find for those?

Mr Harrison—I do not know. If you listen to most of the people in the commercial area, they say it is pretty much of a worthless species when comparing it. So, obviously, there must be a market somewhere. But I have no expertise in that area.

Mr CAUSLEY—I will take you up on one of your comments where you said that professional people caught fish for commercial gain. I put it to you that professional fishermen catch fish so that we can eat them.

Mr Harrison—Yes, I would totally agree. I am probably one of their keenest supporters.

Mr CAUSLEY—I think it is true, from memory, that we probably import about 60 per cent of our fish needs.

Mr Harrison—I do not know.

Mr CAUSLEY—I think it is around about that figure. Going back to surveillance, you mentioned that \$3 million had been handed back by AFMA and you thought it could be put into surveillance. Do you have any ideas about how this could operate?

Mr Harrison—It is my understanding that AFMA outsources their surveillance. One of the problems just raised a minute ago was the question: what fish are being landed under the gentleman's agreement concerning blue and black marlin? Is that gentleman's agreement being broken? Could the surveillance be improved so that that could be monitored more closely?

I think you would find that the recreational and sports sector of the industry would be pleased to see greater surveillance regarding the landing of blue and black marlin. If the money were injected into that, you would get a lot of people who would be perhaps, let us say, a lot happier than they are at the moment.

Mr CAUSLEY—The cockatoo system is very good in the fishing industry. They have their mobile phones and, if you have identified inspectors, they usually are pretty ineffective as people know where they are and where they are travelling to. Would you think that probably flying squads are the best way to do that?

Mr Harrison—I have no expertise in that area, and I would be loath to make a recommendation to the committee as to how they best introduce improved surveillance areas. I know that we see surveillance as an area which could be improved. We see it as being an area where there is quite obviously a lack of dollars. Yet you have \$3 million being handed back on a plate which we believe could be better used for surveillance. How that is done is up to AFMA and the people who know best.

Mr CAUSLEY—I know that trying to have a paper trail is a bit of a pain. I think perhaps it is a better way to try to police the outlets rather than the fishers; that seems to be an easier way of doing it. But you have to have a paper trail to do it.

Mr Harrison—The best way to stop it would be to ban the commercial landing of blue and black marlin in the AFZ.

Mr NAIRN—You advocate that AFMA take over management of recreational fishing. Do you have an extent of management that you think is required? It is going to cost, and who is going to pay? Are the recreational fishers going to pay for licensing, management, surveillance, compliance, research, and all those things that the commercial sector does? What sort of level of management are you talking about?

Mr Harrison—I think there are two points to your question. Firstly, we have asked for AFMA to manage the recreational component of the tuna and the billfish fishery; that is not being done at the moment.

Mr NAIRN—Just those two.

Mr Harrison—They are the two main Commonwealth fisheries that the recreational and sports sector are involved in. To put together a management plan of any description—as I indicated earlier on—that does not include all players to me seems ridiculous. How can you manage something when you are not taking into account all the people who have an influence or impact on that fishery?

The second part is: how will it be paid for? I would respond to that by saying that we are already contributing \$500 million or \$600 million dollars to the Commonwealth. So I think we are paying substantially enough already.

Mr ANDREN—That contribution is through the sales tax, is it?

Mr Harrison—Sales tax, fuel tax, import duties, and that sort of thing.

Mr NAIRN—The commercial sector also pay all those, but then they also pay to have the fishery managed. If you want to be a player in it, surely you have to have an equal role; it works on both sides of the ledger.

Mr Harrison—I think you would probably find that there would be a mixed reaction to a licence, a fee some of description. That would take a little bit of political will to introduce.

Mr NAIRN—I agree.

Mr Harrison—But I think you would find that those who are prepared to pay \$1,000 or more a day to charter a boat to go and catch a marlin would not be at all afraid of the idea of paying a \$20 or \$50 licence fee as well.

Mr ANDREN—Particularly if those peak concerns of yours that you summarised at the end of your submission were addressed—your MAC representation, and so on. Then it would be a much more saleable proposition, would not it?

Mr Harrison—Yes, it certainly would. That contribution, I think, would be easily and gladly handed over.

Mr CAUSLEY—The recreational fishery is represented in state bodies, isn't it? There is a recreational fisher on the management committee, isn't there?

Mr Harrison—Yes. There is a variety of councils within all of the states and territories that have input to the particular state fisheries. In New South Wales the Advisory Council on Recreational Fishing I think is one. There is the Queensland version, which is called Sunfish, which is a council that provides input to the government on policies, and what have you. So, yes, they are in all of the states. You will see that they are all members of Recfish Australia, so we do have access to getting information to those people.

CHAIR—Given that there are a number of bodies, I am interested to read in your submission about your proposal for the Fishing Industry Policy Council. Do you not think that this is just going to be another layer on top of bodies that are already there?

Mr Harrison—It does have the possibility of being that. Perhaps I will give a little bit of background from my understanding of it. When AFMA was first formed back in 1992, or whenever it was, the organisation that I work for lobbied hard for a position to be made available on the board of AFMA for the recreational and sport fishing sector. They were told at that stage, 'No, you can't have a position; however, you can have a position on the Fishing Industry Policy Council, which will give direct access, if you like, to the minister of the day.'

Now our biggest concern is that the FIPC is still to be taken off the shelf, and still the recreational and sport fishing sector does not have a say in the direct management of the Commonwealth fisheries. That is one of the calls we have made in our submission: that a position be made on the board of AFMA for a representative that has specialist skills and knowledge in the recreational and sports sector.

Whether the FIPC will make any difference and add yet another layer, I do not know. I have had some feedback about some other industry policy councils which would indicate that they are less than effective. But I have not had any first-hand experience, though. We are saying that it is still very difficult for

our views to be put across, either through the FIPC or the AFMA board, et cetera, because we do not have people in those positions.

Mrs STONE—With your membership, do you have any data collection to indicate what sort of fishing they are doing, whether they are just using hand-held equipment, nets, or whatever? Are you able to provide that sort of data?

Mr Harrison—That can be pretty much provided if you look at the various rules and regulations around Australia. For example, in Tasmania recreational fishers are allowed to use some form of restricted nets; in other states, they are not. The majority of people involved in the Commonwealth fishery will be using game fishing tackle: rods and reels.

Mrs STONE—At the moment is there any requirement of your membership that they do any sort of monitoring or logging of the number of fish they tag or catch and take home to eat, and so on?

Mr Harrison—We have no rules that govern that, and you would probably need to understand the structure of our organisation to have an appreciation of that. We are an umbrella group and, under that umbrella, there are six national fishing disciplines and the eight state and territory members. As an example, the Game Fishing Association of Australia make up their own rules regarding tag and release and record of catches, et cetera. That day-to-day stuff is left to those particular national organisations to run; they are left to keep their own house in order.

But that sort of information would be pretty much available, if you were looking for it, from the Game Fishing Association of Australia. They would be able identify how many fish are caught in their tournaments and what percentage are tagged and released.

Mrs STONE—One of our concerns, of course, in all of this is how to better manage the Commonwealth fisheries, which means finding out what species are being caught, where, by whom and by what methods. Given that recreational fishers, as you say, are a very important component part of all of that, both in the volume of fish caught, and so on, would you suggest that there is a way or that it is an appropriate thing for your umbrella organisation to do to help develop a code of auditing the fishing that is done, methods of tagging, and so on?

Mr Harrison—Yes, I think that could be done without too much difficulty. You would not capture all of the information because you would have a lot of people who are not involved in any of our members' tournaments. They go out, like everybody does, and fish for the day. Then you also have the charter industry; I am sure that they could provide that sort of information as well. So it would give you a picture but not necessarily a complete picture.

However, it would be available and it may be well worth the while to be included in some kind of a survey on the economic value that this particular component of the industry has in relation to the rest of the industry—that is, which is the best method, which method best maximises economic efficiency. Is it through the recreational and sports sector for the marlin, or it is through the commercial sector? Our argument would be that it would be through the recreational and sports sector because of that ability to recapture fish.

CHAIR—How many of your members would have computers on board which could facilitate electronic data collection?

Mr Harrison—I have no idea. I would think it would be a very small number.

CHAIR—I think the committee has just about exhausted the questions that we have of you. Is there any issue that we have not asked you about that you would like to mention to us?

Mr Harrison—I think we have briefly touched on whether there is the need for another national survey. I would say: overwhelmingly, yes. There are plans in the pipeline to do one. But 1984 was a long time ago. If this committee could see to perhaps putting forward a strong recommendation that there be another national survey expedited, we would appreciate that.

Mr ANDREN—That is, an economic survey.

Mr Harrison—Yes, participation, demographics and a whole host of things which could be asked within that. Apart from that—and I think I touched on this a moment ago—what is the best utilisation of this resource? In particular, I am talking about the marlin and the billfish species. That question really needs to be answered.

There is an urgent need, I believe, for a survey or some economic analysis of what is best for this fishery, and what is best for Australia regarding this fishery. That is why we have asked for the recommendations from the treaties committee to be mirrored, if you like, by this committee, and that legislation changes be made to include the recreational and sports sector component in the management, because you cannot manage any natural resource if you do not take account of all the people involved in it; it is impossible. Apart from that, I have nothing else.

Mr CAUSLEY—Just one point of clarification: we are dealing with the Commonwealth fishery here. The figure that you have mentioned of \$3½ billion is over the whole recreation industry, isn't it?

Mr Harrison—That is nationwide.

Mr CAUSLEY—Whether it is inshore or offshore.

Mr Harrison—Inshore, marine, estuary, offshore; it is inclusive, nationwide.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming before us this morning, Mr Harrison.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Andren):

That, pursuant to the power conferred by paragraph (o) of standing order 28B, this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.11 a.m.