

NSW TOTAL ALLOWABLE FISHING COMMITTEE

OCEAN TRAWL FISHERY

- PRAWNS

DETERMINATION FOR THE 2026/27 FISHING PERIOD

19 March 2026

Executive Summary

Preamble

The New South Wales (NSW) Total Allowable Fishing Committee (TAFC) has statutory responsibilities set out in Part 2A of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* (the Act) to determine the Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) or Total Allowable Commercial Effort (TACE) by NSW fishers holding the relevant endorsement in some commercial fisheries. Various fishing regulations under the Act also contain provisions requiring the making of fishery determinations.

The TAFC is an independent statutory body established under Schedule 2 of the Act. In making a determination on catch or effort in a commercial fishery, the TAFC must consider the ecological, economic and social issues associated with each fishery and make determinations that 'on balance' pursue the objectives of the Act.

The TAFC is not subject to the control or direction of the Minister as to any determination made. However, the Minister may direct the TAFC on the procedures to be followed and the matters to be taken into account in making a fishing determination.

This Determination is for the Ocean Trawl (OT) prawn fishery.

An on-line conference was held with interested shareholders on 25 February 2026 and representatives from the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development (DPIRD). Stock status reports on Eastern School Prawns and Eastern King Prawns¹ were presented by DPIRD.

Management recommendations & supporting actions

The TAFC provides the following recommendations to the Minister, Department of Regional NSW (Fisheries) and the Ocean Trawl prawn fishing industry towards improving the management of the fishery:

1. DPIRD work with stakeholders to identify target biomass levels (or proxy catch rates) for the fishery
2. Maintain the current effort limit, but investigate alternative management options to considerably reduce the latent effort in the fishery.
3. Update stock assessments of both prawn species in 2026/27.

¹ Helidoniotis, F. and Taylor, M.D. 2023. NSW Stock Status Summary 2022/23 – Eastern King Prawn (*Melicertus plebejus*). NSW Department of Primary Industries, Fisheries. 21 pp.

Taylor, M.D. and Helidoniotis, F. 2023. NSW stock status summary 2022/23 – Eastern School Prawn (*Metapenaeus macleayi*). NSW Department of Primary Industries - Fisheries: 12 pp.

Determination

The Total Allowable Fishing Committee, pursuant to Part 2A of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, determines that the commercial catch of Eastern King and School prawns in the Ocean Trawl Fishery should be controlled and allocated through the following measure:

1. A TACE for prawns during the period 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2027 of a maximum 487,800 standardised hull units.

COMBINED SPECIES	EFFORT LIMIT (standardised hull units)
Eastern School Prawn (<i>Metapenaeus macleayi</i>) Eastern King Prawn (<i>Melicertus plebejus</i>)	487,800

Introduction

The Ocean Trawl (OT) Fishery is a share management fishery and access is limited to shareholders, or their nominated fishers, who hold sufficient shares to satisfy the minimum shareholding levels established in the Plan².

A range of input and output controls regulate the fishery. Boat capacity restrictions are enacted through a combination of boat specific restrictions set out in the Plan or on fishing boat licences. The maximum boat length applying to the OT Fishery is 20 metres, unless the boat historically operated in the fishery and was issued an exemption in 2007.

Effort quota management commenced for the Ocean Trawl – inshore prawn and offshore prawn sectors of the OT Fishery on 1 May 2019. The total allowable commercial effort (TACE) is determined for each new fishing period between 1 May and 30 April the following year. A share of the TACE is allocated, as quota, to holders of Ocean Trawl prawn effort quota shares in proportion to the number of shares they hold. The first TACE determination was made for the fishing period 1 May 2019 to 30 April 2020 and was set at 542,000 standardised hull unit (SHU) days. This was maintained at this level for five fishing periods during the management transitional arrangements, then reduced to 487,800 SHU days in 2024.

Prawn counts were introduced in the Ocean Trawl, Estuary Prawn Trawl and Estuary General fisheries to minimise the harvesting of prawns at times and in areas where prawns are below optimum size. The following prawn count limits apply to all waters of the OT Fishery:

- for Eastern King Prawns (*Melicertus plebejus*) - a maximum prawn count of 125 per 0.5 kilogram (includes mixed species catches consisting of greater than 10% Eastern king prawns by number of individuals), and
- for all other prawn species - a maximum prawn count of 180 per 0.5 kilogram.

Other management restrictions in the OT Fishery include trawl net restrictions, areas closed to trawling and several estuary and marine protected areas.

Biological considerations

Eastern King Prawn

Eastern King Prawn constitute a shared stock along the eastern Australian coast between Queensland and NSW. Post-larvae recruit to estuarine nursery grounds along the Australian coast where they reside until adolescence, after which they emigrate and commence northward spawning migrations. Spawning usually occurs in offshore areas with the East Australian Current dispersing larvae southward. Recruitment and year-class strength are affected by estuarine conditions and rainfall patterns, resulting in variable recruitment for this short-lived (3 years maximum age) species.

² Osterloh, I (2026) Ocean Trawl Fishery Management Report: DPIRD 26/21309

The stock is fished by Queensland and New South Wales with more than 70% of the recent annual commercial ocean catch taken by Queensland (2,247t in 2024-25) and the rest by New South Wales. In NSW, Eastern King Prawn are mainly fished in the Ocean Trawl Fishery and the Estuary General Fishery. Catches have generally declined since the 1980s with the closure of several estuarine nurseries to protect juveniles, and an overall effort decline.

Annual catches prior to 2004 were as high as 900 t. From then to 2022 however, they averaged about 565 t. In the fishing seasons since 2022, catches have risen again to 807 t and 955 t. A stock assessment has not been conducted since 2022/23 and abundance data such as catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) is not currently available. It is not clear therefore, whether increased catches over the past two fishing periods are the result of increased stock abundance, or represents an additional risk to the stock.

Eastern School Prawn

Eastern School Prawn occur throughout eastern and south-eastern Australia, being most abundant in NSW waters, but also abundant in Queensland at latitudes south of Moreton Bay. The species resides in estuaries for the early stages of its life but generally moves to the mouths of estuaries as maturity occurs, where spawning occurs. Recruitment and year-class strength are therefore affected by estuarine conditions and rainfall patterns.

Eastern School Prawn are harvested from estuarine and inshore ocean regions across much of their range. Most of the catch is taken in NSW with only minor harvests in Queensland and Victoria. Within NSW, fishing occurs in the Ocean Trawl Fishery, the Estuary Prawn Trawl Fishery and the Estuary General Fishery. Harvest in NSW has been highly variable since the 1980s, which is consistent with the substantial influence of environmental and climatic conditions (especially rainfall).

From 1998 – 2023, 31% of the catch was taken in the Estuary General Fishery, 51% in the Estuary Prawn Trawl Fishery and only 18% in the Ocean Trawl Fishery. In 2023 the total NSW Eastern School Prawn harvest was 564 t, with harvest dominated by the Estuary Prawn Trawl Fishery and the Ocean Trawl Fishery. Less than 50 t were landed in the past two fishing periods.

A stock assessment conducted in 2023 indicated relatively stable CPUE in the Estuary Prawn Trawl Fishery and the Ocean Trawl Fishery, and a stock status above B_{MSY} at about $0.6B_0$. An updated CPUE analysis is not currently available.

Ocean Trawl Prawn Effort

Ocean Trawl Prawn effort over the past six years has been less than 250,000 standardised hull units, or about 50% of the total allowable effort. Since 2021, prawn effort in the fishery has increased slightly. Ocean trawl catches of Eastern King Prawn have concomitantly risen, but Eastern School Prawn have declined.

Conclusions

For fast growing species, there is concern that the previous assessments in 2023 do not accurately reflect the stock status, and in the absence of current information on abundance from CPUE analysis, there is increasing uncertainty over the status of both stocks. The Ocean Trawl fishery however, represents a relatively small part of the effort used to take the EK species in Queensland and the Estuary Prawn trawl.

Current effort limits are not constraining the fleet and there are likely considerations needed in the distribution of licenses and endorsements. The Committee recommends:

- maintaining the current effort limit, but investigate alternative management options to considerably reduce the latent effort in the fishery; and
- update stock assessments of both species in 2026/27.

Fishery Management considerations

The Ocean Trawl (OT) Fishery is a share managed, multi-species fishery that fishes using otter trawl and Danish seine trawl nets. The fishery is made up of four different endorsement types that differ by area fished, gear type and catch composition. The OT Fishery is managed using a suite of input and output controls, including limited entry, controls on fishing gear, and temporal and spatial closures. Minimum Legal Size (MLS) limits, TACCs and ITQs apply to several finfish species taken in the OT Fishery. A total allowable commercial effort (TACE) quota applies to fishers operating in the OT Fishery under inshore prawn and offshore prawn endorsements. Inshore and offshore prawn endorsements primarily target EKP and ESP, however substantive amounts of Eastern School Whiting, Cuttlefish, Octopus (Hammer), Balmain Bug and Stout Whiting are also caught.

Recreational fishers are subject to a 10-litre bag limit per person for prawns. Interactions between recreational fishers and the OT Fishery are presumed to be relatively low, although some interactions may occur when trawlers target inshore species such as ESP. The National Recreational and Indigenous Fishing Survey in 2001 estimated an average of 32 t of prawn caught each recreational prawn fishing season. That survey does not provide reliable information on the species composition of the recreational prawn catch

DPIRD uses a risk-based approach to fisheries enforcement activities that uses State-wide and fishery specific risk analysis. Compliance strategies employed include intelligence gathering and analysis, education, targeted patrols, and covert and overt operations. Reports to the TAFC focus on matters relevant to TACC/TACE/ITQ managed fisheries, with quota evasion the major risk of concern. Trawlers in the OTF are also known to catch large quantities of Eastern rock lobster and unlawful retention is known to occur, presenting a high risk of IUU product entering the black market. Non-compliance issues in the fishery are not likely to compromise the effectiveness of the TACE.

Currently, vessels in the OT Fishery are not required to carry either a vessel monitoring system (VMS) or AIS, which reduces the ability to detect a number of

quota evasion risks, including transshipment at sea, landing catch without declaring it, or reporting catch from areas where no TACC/TACE applies. The lack of verifiable spatial data is also a risk for the stock assessment, with industry logbooks the only significant source of this information. DPIRD has advised that a small number of vessels are currently trialing VMS units, with use of VMS expected to increase due to an impending requirement by Parks Australia that all commercial fishing vessels transiting or conducting fishing activities in Australian Marine Parks carry an operating VMS.

EK prawn catches and effort saw historic highs in 2002/03 – 2004/05, followed by a decline through to 2009/10 and have remained relatively stable since. The last full stock assessment indicated biomass levels around 60% of unfished levels. Catches of ESP are highly variable, driven by the substantial influence of environmental conditions on abundance and fisher behaviour. The Biosecurity Control Order for the Clarence, Evans, and Richmond River areas restricts the movement of uncooked prawns in that region for the control of white spot virus. This had an influence on reducing targeting of ES prawn in that region. The sale of uncooked ESP (including to the bait market) in that region was common prior to the Order being in place.

DPIRD scientists and industry participants in the fishery have observed that environmental fluctuations including extreme rainfall and La Nina events have an effect on catch rates and species condition. Increasing variability and extreme rainfall effects (because of climate change) may therefore contribute to increased variability in stock biomass and catch rates in the fishery. DPIRD should monitor these conditions and the effect of a changing climate on prawn stocks and catch rates to inform future management.

Conclusions

The current TACE was first determined in 2019 as a “transitional TACE” based on principles and methodology used for calculating Interim Total Commercial Access Levels (ITCALs). At the time there was a recognition that more robust TACEs would be developed over time, once the TACE and ITQ framework was more established, as demonstrated in the use of terminology such as “transitional” and “interim”. To minimise disruption in the initial implementation, the ITCAL was set at the time at twice recent effort levels (average effort in the three years 2009/10-2011/12) plus 10%. Since 2019/20, usage of the TACE has fluctuated between 33-42%. This level of effort is currently maintaining the biomass and catch rates at sustainable levels. However, the TACE allows for a significant increase in effort, which would erode the stocks and catch rates to levels that may compromise the sustainability and economic viability of the fishery.

While it is unlikely that there will be a sudden increase in effort in the short term, changes in the market, crew availability and weather conditions can all effect targeting behaviour and effort levels in the fishery. Removing the latent effort in the fishery should be a management priority to allow the TACE to function as an effective effort control.

The prawn trawl fishery does not currently have a harvest strategy or target

reference point to inform the development of an effective TACE. The TAFC again recommends:

- that DPIRD work with stakeholders to identify target biomass levels (or proxy catch rates) for the fishery.

Economic considerations

As mentioned in previous sections, over the past two fishing periods, the TACE has been underutilized, with only 51.2% utilization for 2024/25 and 36.9% for 2025/26 (as of 11 February 2026) indicating significant latent effort in the fishery.

However, the risk of latent effort being activated over the next year due to increased price is considered low. Over the past two years, the trend in real price for EK prawns has been steady for extra large green prawns (which make up 40% of sales to SFM from the OPT) and has been slowly increasing for large green prawns (20% of sales from OPT) (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Barring any unforeseen circumstances, prices are expected to remain steady over the next fishing period, due to competition from wild and farmed domestic and imported product.

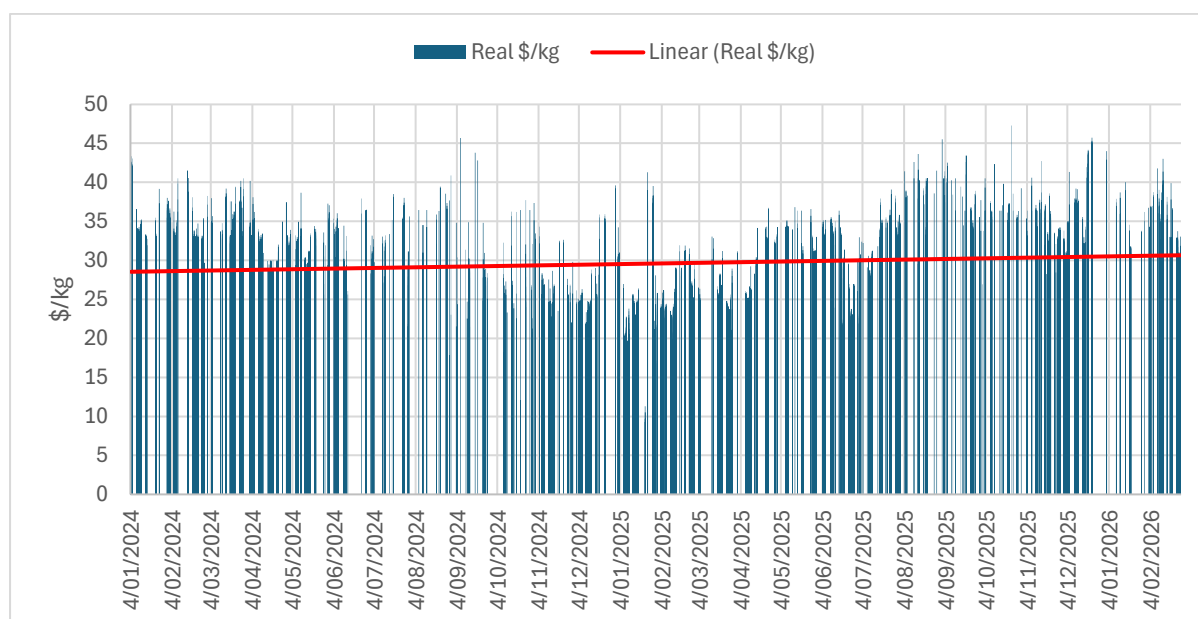


Figure 1: Real price (January 2026) of green Extra Large Eastern King Prawns.
Source: SFM

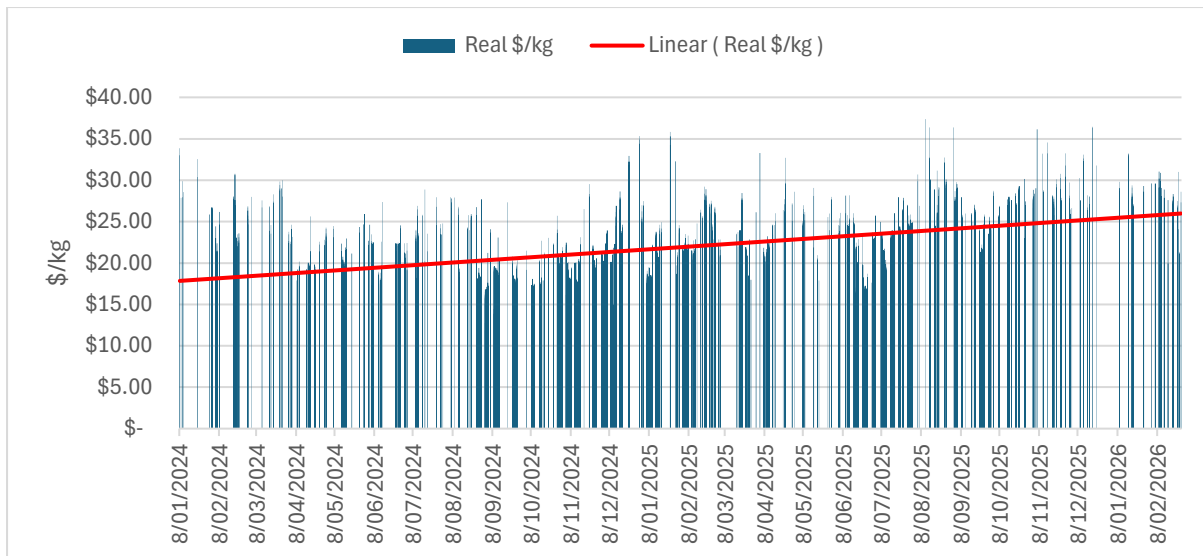


Figure 2: Real price (January 2026) of green Large Eastern King Prawns. Source: SFM

At the individual Fishing Business (FB) level, apart from one business, all FBs have fished at below their holdings in 2024/25. The number of share transfers over this period and 2025/26 are similar to the previous two fishing periods.

Given the uncertainty in the data and assessments discussed in previous sections, there is no compelling economic evidence to change the current TACE for the next fishing period.

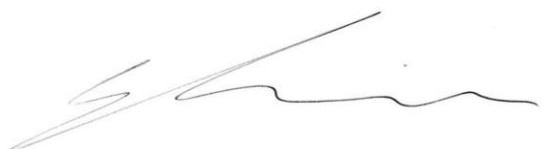
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Signed (for and on behalf of the TAFC)



William Zacharin
Chair, TAFC

19 March 2026

Rich Little – Scientific member

Daryl McPhee – Deputy Fisheries Management member

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