

NSW TOTAL ALLOWABLE FISHING COMMITTEE

OCEAN HAULING FISHERY

- EASTERN SEA GARFISH

DETERMINATION FOR THE 2025/26 FISHING PERIOD

12 May 2025

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.

There is no formal harvest strategy for this fishery.

This determination is for Eastern Sea Garfish in the Ocean Hauling Fishery for the fishing period 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026.

Management recommendations & supporting actions

The TAFC provides the following recommendations to the Minister, NSW DPIRD Fisheries and the fishing industry towards improving the management of the fishery:

1. The TAFC recommends that DPIRD develop an integrated catch-at-age assessment, to better integrate the multiple CPUE indices and age-composition data.

Determination

The Total Allowable Fishing Committee, pursuant to Part 2A of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, determines that the total allowable commercial catch of Eastern Sea Garfish in the Ocean Hauling Fishery should be controlled and allocated through the following measure:

1. A TACC for Eastern Sea Garfish during the fishing period 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026 of **45.5 tonnes**.

Introduction

The Ocean Hauling (OH) Fishery targets approximately 20 finfish species using commercial hauling and purse seine nets from sea beaches and in ocean waters within three nautical miles of the NSW coast.

The OH Fishery is divided geographically into seven regions. Not all NSW ocean beaches and ocean waters are open to the OH Fishery, Schedules 1 - 3 of the *Fisheries Management (Ocean Hauling share Management Plan) Regulation 2006* (the Plan) list waters permanently closed, beaches closed on a seasonal basis and other restrictions on areas of operation of the OH Fishery.

Fishing gear used in the OH Fishery consists of a range of hauling nets and purse seine nets used to target finfish. The OH Fishery is categorised into a number of endorsement types that determine the areas and types of fishing gear that may be used. The OH Fishery is managed by a combination of both input and output controls including limited entry, TACC for major target species, boat capacity restrictions, net restrictions and temporal and spatial closures.

Transitional TACC determinations were used to assist the fishery to transition to quota management. For each new fishing period commencing 1 July 2024, the Plan requires the TAFC make a TACC determination for Eastern Sea Garfish in the OH Fishery.

The TAFC met with DPIRD Fisheries and shareholders on-line on 3 April 2025 to discuss fishery biology, catch and associated management issues concerning the Eastern Sea Garfish. DPIRD Fisheries presented a stock assessment on the fishery.¹

Biological considerations

Distribution and stock structure

Eastern Sea Garfish *Hyporhamphus australis* (ESG) is endemic to Australia, distributed from Moreton Bay in Queensland to Eden in NSW, including Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. Over this range they are considered to be a single biological stock based on genetic evidence². In NSW, ESG are assessed and managed as the east coast biological stock.

¹ Stewart, J (2025). NSW Stock Status Summary 2024/25 – Eastern Sea Garfish (*Hyporhamphus australis*). NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Fisheries. 14 pp

² Riley, I.J., DiBattista, J.D., Stewart, J., Schilling, H.T. and Suthers, I.M. 2023. Using integrative taxonomy to distinguish cryptic halfbeak species and interpret distribution patterns, fisheries landings, and speciation. *Marine and Freshwater Research*, 74(2), pp.125-143.

Fishery catch and effort

The commercial fishery for ESG in NSW is part of the Ocean Hauling Fishery and uses garfish hauling nets to target garfish, currently mainly from boats, although the nets have previously been used from shore. Catch records are available from 1984/85. Total reported landings increased from less than ~100 tonnes in the early 1980s to a peak of 280 tonnes in 1992/93³. Landings declined rapidly to ~55 tonnes by 2004/05 and averaged ~42 tonnes(t) over 2004 - 2021. Landings have averaged ~28 t per year over the recent five years to 2023/24.

ESG is also caught in the Estuary General Fishery, with the proportion of landings by the Estuary General Fishery ranging from ~3% to ~33% since 1998, averaging 13% over the period and currently making up ~6% of total catch. Most of the catch is taken by the Ocean Hauling Fishery, with about 50% of landings reported from ocean zone 5 and the rest from the south-coast of NSW. In 2017/18, the ocean hauling component of the fishery transitioned to quota management, with an ITCAL of 45.5 t per year. Recent landings have averaged around 60% of this TACC.

Ocean Haul reported fishing effort declined rapidly from ~990 days fished in 2004/05 to 229 days in 2010/11 and has since continued to decline slowly to 83 days in 2021/22 and 74 days in 2022/23, the lowest effort level since 2005. Reported effort has since increased to just over 120 days in 2023/24.

Stock assessment and stock status

The ESG stock was last assessed in 2024 using an update of the age-structured stochastic population model previously applied, with data from 2004/05 to 2022/23. Assessment results indicate that estimated biomass and recruitment of ESG have increased considerably since the stock was assessed as being overfished during the early 2000s. The model estimated biomass in 2020/21 was approximately 192 t and spawning stock biomass has been relatively stable at between 97 t and 130 t since 2013/14, estimated at approximately 97 t in 2022/23².

The assessment was not updated in 2025 and recent status is inferred using indicators, particularly updated standardized CPUE. Standardised catch rates based on aggregated monthly data for ocean boat-based garfish hauling have increased steadily since 1998 to a historically high level in 2023/24, close to the highest level seen in 2009-10. Standardised catch rates based on daily logbook data show a stable trend (using catch per day) or a recent increase since 2017 (using catch per shot)⁴. Estimated fishing mortality rate (F) decreased rapidly from over 1.5 in 2004/05 to below the value of natural mortality ($M = 0.62$) by 2009/10, continuing to decline to remain below half M since 2016/17.

The NSW Eastern Sea Garfish stock is classified as **Sustainable** under the Status of Australian Fish Stocks (SAFS) framework and the updated indicators support this

³ Stewart, J. 2024. Stock assessment of Eastern Sea Garfish (*Hyporhamphus australis*) using data to 2022/23. NSW Department of Primary Industries. Fisheries NSW. - Fisheries: 35 pp.

⁴ Stewart, J. 2025. NSW Stock Status Summary 2024/25 – Eastern Sea Garfish (*Hyporhamphus australis*). NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Fisheries. 14 pp.

classification. All indications are that overfishing is not occurring and that the stock is well above the historically depleted levels, probably near target level.

The current TACC level of 45.5 t is consistent with current stock status and estimates of TACC using alternative harvest control rule approaches and catches have remained below this TACC since it was implemented. Steady increases suggest that some TACC increase could be considered. However, high uncertainty around recent CPUE estimates suggest that this TACC level should be maintained until the increase in stock status is confirmed by an updated assessment.

Recommendations

- The current TACC of 45.5 tonnes should be maintained.
- DPIRD should develop an integrated catch-at-age assessment, to better integrate the multiple CPUE indices and age-composition data.

Economic considerations

The ESG makes an important economic contribution to several fishing businesses and contributes to fresh seafood available in NSW, with DPIRD estimating that 99.5% of product caught is destined for NSW markets. There is little information available to disaggregate the economics of the ESG catch from the overall NSW OH Fishery, which is substantially larger in geographic area, the number of operators and the volume of fish caught, than the eastern sea garfish sub-sector. However, the price per kg was assessed in 2019/20 at \$9.24/kg from surveys of commercial fishers. An updated survey which will allow for an updated price estimate is being undertaken in 2025, but results were not available at the time of preparing this determination. The low catch of eastern sea garfish this season relative to the TACC is likely due to availability of fish, weather and fisher behaviour, rather than any economic drivers across the fishery.

From the information provided to the TAFC, there are no outstanding economic issues in the fishery, which are within the remit of the TAFC, that will be affected by the TACC remaining at the same level as the previous fishing season.

Fishery management considerations

Eastern Sea Garfish (ESG) are managed as part of the NSW Ocean Hauling (OH) Fishery, a multi-species, multi-gear fishery that spans the NSW coast. The Ocean Hauling Fishery is managed through a range of input and output controls, including a number of spatial closures and ESG can only be taken by Garfish net (hauling) endorsement holders. OH fishery garfish endorsement holders are prohibited from fishing for ESG on weekends and public holidays, a historical mechanism to reduce interactions between the recreational and commercial fisheries. However, conflict between sectors is no longer considered a major issue and DPIRD is in the process of removing these closures as a Business Efficiency Measure.

The OH fishery takes approximately 90% of the ESG in NSW, with a small amount also taken in the Estuary General Fishery and there are no commercial catches of ESG taken outside NSW.

ESG in NSW waters have significantly increased in biomass and catch rates since the population was considered overfished in the early 2000s. Annual effort in terms of days fished has decreased from over 800 days in the early 2000s, to a historical low of 79 days in 2021/22, and has since been followed by an increase to 120 days in 2023/24. Since the introduction of quota and a TACC in 2018/19, approximately 50% of landings have typically occurred in ocean zone 5 in central NSW, with the remaining landings occurring in south-coast NSW. The distribution of quota holders and fishing effort in recent years means that large areas of the stocks range are unfished.

The highest commercial catch recorded since the ITCAL of 45.5 t was introduced in 2017/18 was 44.06 t in 2018/19. Since this time, catches have declined to an average of approximately 28 t per year, with the first year over 30 t occurring in 2023/24.

Catches of ESG in the OH fishery during the 2024/25 season, to the end of March, have been very low. However, ESG availability is affected by environmental conditions, with catch rates influenced by fisher behaviour and weather, and the fishery is seasonal with most landings typically occurring between December and May on the south coast and March and June on the north coast.

Recreational fishing of ESG is managed through a combination of controls, including a daily bag and possession limit of 20. Garfish can be taken under the statewide Aboriginal Cultural Fishing Interim Access Arrangement, where the ESG limit is 40. ESG can also be taken under the Aboriginal Cultural Fishing Local Management Plans currently being trialled in the Tweed and Hastings areas, and there are five active Aboriginal cultural fishing authorities (permits) for the 2024/25 fishing session that allow for the take of ESG. There are no reliable estimates of the recreational or Aboriginal harvest of ESG, however catches in these sectors are likely to be low.

The compliance risks in the fishery are rated low, with the main issue being delayed catch reporting. DPIRD is currently rolling out catch reporting reforms, including a move to online reporting for all fisheries, to increase the accuracy and timeliness of reports. These changes will benefit compliance efforts, assist in addressing the issue of late reporting, and importantly will help improve the quality of data for future stock assessments.

The NSW ESG population is showing positive signs of recovery from the low biomass levels seen in the early 2000s, when it was considered overfished. However, the current assessment does not provide an insight into where the depletion levels of the stock may be with regards to a target level. As such, the recommendation is to retain the TACC at 45.5 tonnes.

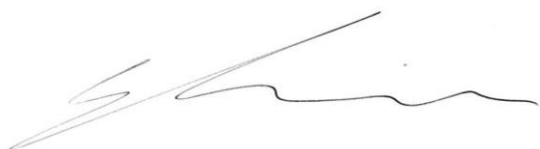
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1. A TACC for Eastern Sea Garfish during the period 1 July 2025 to 30 June 2026 of **45.5 tonnes**.

Species	Catch Limit (tonnes)
Eastern Sea Garfish (<i>Hyporhamphus australis</i>)	45.5

Signed (for and on behalf of the TAFC)



William Zacharin
Chair, TAFC

12 May 2025

Alice McDonald – Fisheries Manager member

Andrew Penney – Deputy Scientific member

Daryl McPhee – Natural Resource Economic member