

**Commercial Fishing NSW Advisory Council
Mulloway Recovery Program Working Group
23 January 2018
Outcomes**

Members

- Darren Reynolds - Chair, Senior Fisheries Manager, NSW DPI Fisheries
- Geoff Blackburn – Commercial fisher and CommFish NSW member
- Scott Massey – Commercial fisher and CommFish NSW member
- Stephen Reed – Commercial fisher
- Darren Mayer – Commercial fisher
- Troy Billin – Commercial fisher
- John Hewitt – Commercial fisher

Invitees

- John Stewart - Senior Research Scientist, NSW DPI Fisheries
- Brad Mackay - Executive Officer CommFish NSW, NSW DPI Fisheries

1 Member welcome and introductions

The Chair opened the Working Group (WG) meeting and welcomed attendees.

It was noted that the role of the WG was to provide recommendations on how the commercial sector can assist mulloway recovery within NSW.

The Chair noted that the meshing net sector was well represented by fishers from across the state and that the meeting was a good opportunity for fishers to provide their advice to the Minister for Primary Industries via CommFish NSW.

2 Science and Research presentation and discussion

Dr John Stewart presented updated data on the Mulloway Recovery Program. It was noted that the program is not achieving an objective of reducing the mortality of juvenile mulloway.

The WG discussed that commercial landings alone are not an indication of the abundance of mulloway and many environmental, economic, social and legislative factors influence the amount of fish caught by fishers through time. Factors influencing the landings of mulloway through time have included closure of areas to commercial fishing, changes to the size limit, restrictions on the use of meshing nets, climatic variation and fishers retiring from the industry or shifting effort to other species.

WG comments included:

- The recovery program could benefit from having measurable indicators that are used to gauge the success of the program and a trigger point identifying when the stock is recovered.

- Work should continue on improving habitat, reducing barriers to fish migration and other environmental issues to assist the recovery of the mullockay stock.
- There have been many changes to the structure and operations of the commercial industry (e.g. recreational fishing havens and marine parks) through time that would impact landings of mullockay and the data that has been collected during of the recovery program.
- Given that some fishers do not use fishing cooperatives some of the mullockay catch may not be captured by the monitoring program.
- The 10 fish possession limit of fish below 70cm is likely to have changed some fishing operations.
- Favourable environmental conditions have likely contributed to the recent increased landings and vice versa.
- The stock seems to be improving and more needs to be done to reduce fishing mortality.
- Fishers have the opportunity to assist the recovery of the stock now to provide benefit into the future and to assist to reduce future impacts to operators.
- Acknowledgement that the meshing net sector of the Estuary General fishery has undergone huge change recently and now has its total effort capped under an effort quota (days) regime.
- Fishers have had to adjust their fishing operations under the new regime where their total effort is now limited.
- Irrespective of the fishery, there is always going to be interaction with juvenile mullockay and sometimes that interaction is unavoidable.
- Mullockay interactions are highly variable and are dependent upon a range of unpredictable factors.
- There could be improvements in data collection that would contribute to improving knowledge and informing decisions around stock recovery.
- The WG acknowledged how complex the issue is with mullockay given the interaction that all fishing gears in all fisheries have with the species at various size ranges.

3 Discussion on how to assist mullockay recovery

The WG discussed various aspects of mullockay fisheries, including fishing operations, management arrangements, research methodology, catch and effort data collection and post-harvest issues.

Opinions and discussion among the WG members was wide and varied. Potential options for change were not unanimously agreed upon among the WG. The following issues were discussed:

1. Meshing net fishing operations and net configurations

- The differences between meshing and setting of nets were noted.
- Potential impacts and whether there would be any benefits associated with changing the rules around the setting of meshing nets were discussed.
- There was concern among the WG of the likely massive impact to industry of any proposal to remove overnight set netting while it was uncertain as to what the benefit to the mullockay stock would be.
- The WG considered the utility of restrictions on the depth (i.e. number of meshes) or hanging ratio of meshing nets. Given that the Government has committed to removing red tape the WG

questioned whether it would be of any benefit to add more restrictive controls that may not assist mullock recovery.

2. Meshing net registrations

- The WG considered the costs and benefits of removing the requirement to register all meshing nets. This included the flexibility for fishers to use meshing nets with a larger mesh size rather than having to use nets with a smaller mesh size that capture more juvenile mullock.
- The issue of a potential shift in effort to target larger mullock was raised. The WG reiterated that the fishery was now limited by the number of days that are available to fish.

3. Size limit

- The WG considered the costs and benefits of the 10 fish possession limit including compliance and enforcement issues.
- The WG discussed the complexities associated with having different size limits for different sectors and fishing methods.
- The implementation of various larger size limits for meshing net fishers (rather than the 45 cm size associated with the 10 fish possession limit) and maximum size limits were discussed.

4. Quota

- The WG considered the utility of various types of quota systems (e.g. competitive total allowable catch, individual transferable quota and limits on the number of individual fish) that could be applied including the use of tags to assist monitoring the catch.
- The complexity of quota allocation between and among fisheries was discussed.

5. Mortality associated with fisheries other than the Estuary General fishery

- The WG discussed and considered the impact on mullock of commercial net and line fishing outside of the Estuary General fishery.
- The Ocean Hauling, Ocean Trap & Line, Estuary Prawn Trawl and Ocean Trawl fisheries were discussed.
- It was noted how important it is to continue to work on the reduction of mullock bycatch reduction in trawl fisheries, particularly during high rainfall events.

4 Recommendations

The WG provided the following suite of recommendations. It was noted that some of the recommendations were not unanimously agreed upon and that any changes to rules should be able to be adjusted in the future in response to updated information.

1. Remove the requirement to register a meshing net.

2. Remove the meshing net by product limit of 10 fish between 45 and 70 cm.

3. Implement a size limit of 60 cm for meshing net operations only or apply the 70 cm size limit to all fishers.

4. Ensure more is done to minimise the bycatch of mullock in estuarine and ocean trawl fisheries.

- 5. Implement a system whereby commercially caught mullockway can be differentiated from other mullockway at the point of landing.**
- 6. Improve the collection of catch and effort information, including the number of individuals retained and discarded from fishing operations.**
- 7. Investigate meshing net configurations, technologies and deployments that assist to minimise interaction of the fishery with juvenile mullockway.**

5 Meeting close

The Chair thanked all attendees for their valuable contribution to the meeting.