

NSW TOTAL ALLOWABLE FISHING COMMITTEE

OCEAN TRAWL FISHERY

- EASTERN SCHOOL WHITING
- STOUT WHITING
- SILVER TREVALLY

DETERMINATION FOR THE 2025/26 and 2026/27 FISHING PERIODS

17 March 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. For determinations relating to the Ocean Trawl Fishery, the TAFC is required to make recommendations compatible with the adopted NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy.

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 Fishery for the period 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 and 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2027 (excluding Silver Trevally).

Management recommendations & supporting actions

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

1. Catch reporting systems should continue to be improved to get better estimates of whiting species composition in catches.
2. NSW DPIRD engage with the Commonwealth on catch sharing arrangements for ESW, to prevent future TACCs across the two jurisdictions combining to allow catches that exceed the RBC for this stock.
3. NSW DPIRD continue to engage with QLD on catch sharing arrangements and complementary management of SW.
4. NSW DPIRD work closely with other jurisdictions, including Victoria, to seek catch sharing arrangements, or complementary management to minimise fishing mortality of ST across all fisheries.
5. NSW DPIRD is strongly encouraged to reduce the recreational possession limit for ST in line with reductions made for other depleted species.

Determination

The Total Allowable Fishing Committee, pursuant to Part 2A of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, determines that the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) of Eastern School Whiting, Stout Whiting and Silver Trevally in the Ocean Trawl Fishery should be controlled and allocated through the following measures:

1. A TACC for Trawl Whiting (ESW & SW) during the fishing periods 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 and 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2027 of **1,980 tonnes**; and
2. A TACC for Silver Trevally during the fishing period 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 of **12.0 tonnes**.

Introduction

The NSW Ocean Trawl Fishery (OT Fishery) is a share management, multi-method, multispecies fishery with a gross value of production of around \$22.7 million for 2020/21 (NSW DPIRD 2025). The OT Fishery is described in Schedule 1 of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994* (the FM Act) as:

- a) the use of an otter trawl net (prawns) to take fish from any of the following waters:
 - (i) inshore waters (not more than 3 nautical miles from the natural coast line),
 - (ii) offshore waters (more than 3 nautical miles from natural coast line) and north of a line drawn due east from Barrenjoey Headland,
 - (iii) the waters of Coffs Harbour;
- b) the use of an otter trawl net (fish) to take fish from ocean waters (east of the natural coast line) that are north of a line drawn due east from Barrenjoey Headland and south of a line drawn due east from Smoky Cape (other than any waters in which use of an otter trawl net (fish) is prohibited under the regulations); and
- c) the use of a Danish seine trawl net (fish) to take fish from ocean waters that are north of a line drawn due east from Barrenjoey Headland.

North of Barrenjoey Headland (Sydney) the OT Fishery extends to the 4,000-metre depth contour, approximately 60 to 80 nautical miles offshore. South of Barrenjoey Headland the OT Fishery extends seaward to three nautical miles offshore.

The OT Fishery is subject to many spatial and temporal closures within these waters. Schedule 2 of the *Fisheries Management (Ocean Trawl Share Management Plan) Regulation 2006* details waters closed to ocean trawling.

The OT Fishery is a share managed fishery. Access to the OT Fishery is limited to shareholders, or their nominated fishers, who hold sufficient shares to satisfy the minimum shareholding levels established for each share class in the Plan. Minimum shareholdings apply to all 'access' share classes in the OT Fishery and are used to determine if a shareholder (or their nominated fisher) is eligible for an endorsement authorising a particular commercial fishing activity in respect of that share class. A summary of the 'access' share classes and associated minimum shareholding is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Minimum shareholdings and numbers of endorsements

Access share class	Minimum shareholding	No. of endorsements
OT – inshore prawn	50	111
OT – offshore prawn	50	103
OT – deepwater prawn	25	15
OT – fish northern zone	50	29

NSW DPIRD (2025). Ocean Trawl Fishery Management Report – Total Allowable Catch Determinations 2025/2026: Eastern School Whiting, Stout Whiting, Silver Trevally. Report to the TAF Committee. NSW Department of Primary Industries, Fisheries NSW, 42 pp.

The TAFC was directed to make a determination in relation to three of the finfish species taken in this fishery – Trawl Whiting (Eastern School Whiting and Stout Whiting) and Silver Trevally. A video conference meeting was held with scientists and managers from NSW DPIRD (Fisheries) and industry shareholders on 12 February 2025. A number of scientific assessment reports and a management status update report on the fishery were received prior to the meeting.

Biological considerations

Eastern School Whiting and Stout Whiting

These two species are fished in the NSW northern trawl fisheries north of Barrenjoey Point under a single Whiting basket quota. There is also a southern trawl fishery for Eastern School Whiting (*Sillago flindersi*, ESW) that is not covered by the quota.

Stock boundaries

The ESW stock is shared with Commonwealth, Victorian, Tasmanian and South Australian fisheries to the south, although predominantly fished by New South Wales and the Commonwealth. A cross-jurisdictional research project with funding from the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC) was undertaken to clarify the stock structure and movement patterns of Eastern School Whiting across the species' distribution using modern molecular methods, otolith chemistry and morphological and life-history analyses. Results indicate that the species comprises a single biological stock along the Australian southeast coast, with some isolation by distance at the extremities, for South Australian and Tasmanian populations¹. Assessment of the stock status of Eastern School Whiting is therefore conducted at the biological stock level – South-eastern Australia.

Stout Whiting (*Sillago robusta*, SW) Stout Whiting is a subtropical species that occurs along the west and east coasts of Australia in ocean waters to a depth of 70 m with genetic evidence that the west and east coast populations are separate sub-species or species, with the east coast SW stock being shared with the Queensland Finfish (SW) Trawl Fishery. Genetic evidence indicates a single east coast stock and stock status of SW is therefore conducted at the biological stock level – Eastern Australia.

Catches

Eastern School Whiting

Over the period 1998 – 2022 total NSW reported landings of ESW by all gears have fluctuated between about 500 t (in 2014) and 1,230 t (in 2019), averaging ~870 t per year². After decreasing to a recent low of 507 t in 2021, combined sector catches increased to 904 t in 2023, the most recent complete reporting year. The bulk of the NSW ESW catch has historically been taken in the northern Ocean Prawn Trawl (OPT) and Northern Fish Trawl (NFT) sectors, which took an average 85% of the NSW ESW catch over 1998 – 2019. These northern catches are subject to the NSW Trawl Whiting quota. Since 2019 the proportion of the ESW catch taken in the Southern Fish Trawl and Other sectors, which are not subject to the Trawl Whiting TACC, has increased to 37%, taking 334 t of the total 904 t in 2023.

¹ Hall, K.C. (in prep) An updated understanding of Eastern School Whiting stock structure and improved stock assessment for cross-jurisdictional management. FRDC Project 2019-030.

² Hall, K.C. (2025) NSW Stock assessment report 2024/25 – Eastern School Whiting and Stout Whiting (*Sillago flindersi* and *Sillago robusta*). NSW Department of Primary Industries, Coffs Harbour, 67 pp.

In recent years, ESW catches by both NSW and the Commonwealth have been below TACCs for these fisheries, particularly for the Commonwealth. Over the seasons 2021-22 to 2023-24, the NSW NFT fishery has caught, on average, about 73% of the 1,066 t seasonal TACC. In 2023-24, the Commonwealth SESSF fishery only caught 28% of the ESW 914 t TACC for that fishery. This has potentially important implications for application of the current harvest control rules (HCRs) for the NSW and Commonwealth fisheries, and for potential risks associated with applying those rules in the absence of a sharing arrangement between these fisheries.

Stout Whiting

Combined Queensland and NSW reported landings of SW increased from ~600 t in 1991 to a peak of 2,436 t in 1994, with Queensland taking over 95% of the catch. Combined catches decreased to ~740 t in 2000 before increasing again to average ~1,320 t over 2004-2010, with the NSW catch proportion increasing to 26% over that period. Over 2015-2022 (the most recent period of complete catch reporting) combined catches slowly increased, averaging 1,237 t over the period. The NSW catch of SW averaged 223 t per year over 2015-2022.

Stock assessment

Eastern School Whiting

The main assessment for ESW is an integrated statistical catch-at-age assessment conducted by the CSIRO under contract to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA). Stock assessments were conducted for the Commonwealth component of the fishery in 2004 (with limited data), 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2017, with a partial (catch and CPUE only) update in 2019. State catch data have been included in most of the recent assessments, with substantial NSW data (catch, length data, CPUE) included in the 2017 assessment. The most recent assessment was conducted in 2020³, substantially updating the 2017 assessment. The 2020 assessment included all available data for the NSW fishery, including discard information and separate NSW fleets. The 2020 assessment was effectively a joint Commonwealth / NSW assessment and the integration of all data for NSW resulted in a more reliable assessment, with reduced uncertainty in most of the assessment results.

In terms of the recently adopted *NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy* (NSW DPIRD 2022), in interim assessment years when a quantitative stock assessment for Eastern School Whiting is not available, the TACC is only to be modified if there is a substantial change in a weighted average of standardised catch rates. Since the most recent full stock assessment was completed, catch rates for the NSW prawn trawl fleet have remained relatively stable, while those of the fish trawl fleet increased by over 50%. Overall, there was a recent weighted average 31.6% increase in the CPUE indices of NSW Ocean Trawl Fishery sectors that target trawl whiting. Recent catch rates in the two main Commonwealth sectors show opposing

³ Day J, Hall K, Bessell-Browne P and Sporcic M (2020) School Whiting (*Sillago flindersi*) stock assessment based on data up to 2019. CSIRO report to AFMA, December 2020, 154 pp.

trends. Danish seine catch rates declined over the past five years to 50% below the long-term average, whereas the trawl sector catch rates increased rapidly over the last two years. Overall, there was a weighted average decrease of 14.4% in Commonwealth School Whiting CPUE indices.

Stout Whiting

There was no stock assessment update for SW in 2024, so this is a non-assessment year for SW in terms of the NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy. The most recent update of the Queensland quantitative stock assessment was done in 2021 using a Stock Synthesis integrated age-structure model. Size and age data were not available for SW from NSW waters at the time of that stock assessment, so information from the Queensland commercial fleet was applied to the NSW fleet. Results estimated the SW spawning stock biomass to be at 42% of unfished biomass in 2020, having increased from 20–30% in the early 2000s, and that biomass was at the level required to provide maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for the entire biological stock⁴.

SW catch rates in the NSW OPT fleet increased over 2010-2020 to well above the long-term average and decreased over the last three years to just below the long-term average. Annual standardised catch rates for the Queensland Stout Whiting Fishery increased by over 50% between 2019 and 2021 to reach the highest CPUE levels on record. Catch rates in the northern zones (between Fraser Island the Sunshine Coast) showed the greatest increase, while those in the southern zones were already well above the long-term average and remained steady at those high levels (Sumpter 2022). These CPUE trends indicate a likely increase in the SW stock to near target levels, as well as an apparent northwards shift in the biomass distribution.

It is concerning that the actual catches of SW, when mixed with ESW, are poorly known, as a result of catches being reported as mixed whiting. The SW catches are estimated by applying proportions from earlier studies and observer programs, but there are possible indications of an increase in the proportion of SW in catches in some areas. Reporting systems should continue to be improved to get better estimates of whiting species composition in catches.

Stock status

Eastern School Whiting

Substantial progress has been made in developing a joint Commonwealth – NSW stock assessment in Stock Synthesis, including checking and agreement on historical catch and discard estimate series and inclusion of NSW length and age data. This joint assessment was updated in 2024 using a base case model that included all fleets for the Commonwealth, NSW and Victoria. The updated six-fleet model estimated the spawning stock biomass to be at 48% of unfished biomass in

⁴ Wortmann, J., and K. C. Hall. 2021. Stock assessment of stout whiting (*Sillago robusta*) in eastern Australia. Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Brisbane, Queensland.

2024, increasing to 54% of unfished biomass in 2025, assuming average recruitment and similar catches in 2024 as in 2023⁵.

Sensitivity analyses indicated that the assessment results were sensitive to some of the fixed parameters, particularly M, with estimates of spawning stock biomass ranging between 42% and 66%. However, the base-case model was accepted as the basis for providing management advice. This assessment under-estimates the steady increase in standardised CPUE indices for the Commonwealth and New South Wales southern trawl fleets since 2019, providing confidence that the assessment is not over-estimating biomass as indicated by CPUE indices. Recruitment is estimated to have fluctuated without trend around the long-term average, as is known to occur with this short-lived species, and there are no indications of persistent reduced recruitment.

Applying the 20:35:48 harvest control rule included in the Commonwealth and NSW harvest strategies results in a projected RBC for the whole stock of 3,086 t for 2025 and 2,961 t for 2026 with a two-year average of 3,023 t, and long-term yield of 2,830 t, assuming future average recruitment. Given that this is a short-lived species that can exhibit substantial inter-annual fluctuations in recruitment in response to environmental factors, it was recommended that a two-year multi-year TACC (MYTAC) be applied for 2025-26 and 2026-27, using the two-year average RBC of 3,023 t for those two seasons. Model projections were also used to estimate the two-year average discards over 2025-26 and 2026-27, estimated at 592 t per season.

Stout Whiting

Increases in Queensland CPUE indices indicate that the shared SW stock has continued to increase to above the 42% of unfished biomass estimated in 2020. However, there is no updated assessment available so updated recommended biological catches (RBCs) are not available. RBCs from the 2021 assessment are no longer valid as they were generated assuming rebuilding to a target of 60% of unfished biomass, whereas the target for SW for Queensland and NSW has now been set at 48% of unfished biomass.

In terms of the NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy (HS) published in 2022, decision rules stipulate that *“in years when a quantitative stock assessment ... is not available, the TACC is only modified if there is a substantial change in a weighted average of standardised catch rates”*. The SW component of the TACC used for the basis in setting the 2024-25 TAC was 217 tonnes. NSW CPUE has remained relatively constant since 2021-22 and so it is recommended that this level be retained as the SW component to be added to the determined TAC for northern ESW, to arrive at a basket Trawl Whiting TACC for the northern fisheries.

⁵ Burch, P, Hall, K, and Bessell-Browne, P. (2024). School whiting (*Sillago flindersi*) stock assessment based on data up to 2023. December 2024, CSIRO Environment and NSW DPIRD Fisheries, Australia.

Application of the NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Control Rule

The TAFC is required to provide advice consistent with, and guided by, the *NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy* which stipulates that, in years when a quantitative stock assessment is available for Eastern School Whiting, multi-year TACs are set based on average RBCs projected by the most recent assessment for each species, according to the decision rules:

- Average projected RBCs over 3 to 5 years (as basis for multi-year 'preliminary TACC');
- Deduct discards; and
- Deduct catches by other jurisdictions/fisheries/sectors.

Given the assessment-based advice for a two-year RBC, and the lack of guidance in the HS on how to calculate the discards and other jurisdiction catches to subtract from the preliminary TACC, the Committee sought advice from NSW DPIRD on these matters. The following guidance was received:

- The recommendation for a two-year MYTAC based on the assessment results, and applied to the Commonwealth fleet, should apply for the NSW fleet as well.
- This requires that projected two-year average discards, as calculated by the assessment, be seasonally decremented from the two-year average RBC. A two-year average RBC was recommended, rather than any longer, in view of the short lifespan and high recruitment variability of this species.
- Other sector (Commonwealth and other state) catches to be deducted from the RBC should be calculated as the weighted average over the preceding four complete data years, 2020 – 2023, as is usually applied for the Commonwealth. Reported catches should be weighted 0.125, 0.25, 0.5, 1 from earliest to latest.
- The SFT ESW catch to be deducted from the RBC should be similarly calculated as the weighted average over the preceding four years.
- As required by the HS in a non-assessment year, the SW catch to be added to the basket TACC should only be modified if there is a substantial change in a weighted average of standardised catch rates.

These assessment outcomes and decision rules were applied as follows:

2 yr average ESW RBC	Minus Projected discards	Minus Commonwealth and Other State weighted average catch	Minus SFT ESW weighted average ESW catch	Plus, SW TACC component	Resulting Trawl Whiting North basket TACC
3,023 t	592 t	421 t	247 t	217 t	1,980 t

It should be noted that, under conditions of under-catch of the current TACCs, application of the above process to determine TACCs for both the Commonwealth and NSW fleets will result in combined TACCs potentially exceeding the RBC. Given that current TACCs are under-fished, combined catches are unlikely to exceed the

RBC, but this is a potential risk. Efforts should be made to negotiate a formal sharing arrangement between the Commonwealth and NSW to mitigate this risk.

Recommendations

- A combined Trawl Whiting species multi-year TACC of 1,980 t per season should be set for the NSW Northern trawl fisheries for next two fishing periods: 2025-26 and 2026-27.
- Reporting systems should continue to be improved to get better estimates of whiting species composition in catches.

Silver Trevally

Silver Trevally (*Pseudocaranx georgianus*, ST) are moderately long-lived and slow growing, attaining a maximum age of at least 25 years, although maturing at a relatively early age of 2–4 years at 18 – 24 cm fork length. The species has a relatively contiguous distribution from northern NSW to Western Australia. A recently completed investigation of stock structure indicated a single genetic stock of Silver Trevally on the east coast⁶ extending across NSW, Victoria, the Commonwealth offshore of NSW and Victoria, and Tasmania. Tag-recapture studies have found limited movement within NSW, indicating restricted post-settlement movement of ST after settlement, so there is potential for finer-scale population structure and for localised depletion of settled adults.

Historically the stock has mainly been fished by NSW commercial and recreational sectors, with lesser and more recent catches by the Commonwealth southeast trawl fishery and Victoria commercial and recreational fisheries. Over 1945-2023, the NSW fishery sectors caught 58% of the total landed catch, followed by Victoria (13%), Commonwealth (9%) and estimated NSW/Victoria recreational catch (20%). Over the recent decade 2014-2023, these proportions changed to NSW 40%, Victoria 18%, Commonwealth 29% and recreational 13%.

Total annual ST catches by all fisheries declined steadily from a peak of 1,782 t in 1989-90 to average less than 100 t since 2019-20. In NSW, ST are caught in the Estuary General (EG), Ocean Hauling (OH), Ocean Trap and Line (OTL), Southern Fish Trawl (SFT), Ocean Prawn Trawl (OPT) and Ocean Fish Trawl – north (OFT-N) sectors. Reported catches by these sectors peaked at 444 t in 2003-04 but have average of 40 t per season since 2018-19. Overall catch proportions by sector since 1997-98 are OFT (north and south) 62%, OTL 24%, EG 11% and OH 3%. Only the OPT and OFT-N operating north of Barrenjoey are subject to the TACC.

OFT-N catches declined rapidly from more than 200 t in 2006 to 8.6 t in 2022 following introduction of a 30 cm minimum legal length (MLL). Large adult fish have virtually disappeared from the fishery and it is estimated that the northern OFT is

⁶ Stewart, J., Fowler, A., Chick, R., Smoothey, A., Hughes, J., Huveneers, C., Reis-Santos, P., Gillanders, B. M., Van Eck, R., Green, C., Tracey, S., Krueck, N., Drew, M., Fairclough, D. V., Corrie, D., Sandoval-Castillo, J., Lam, Z. H. T., Möller, L. M., and Beheregaray, L. B. 2024. Identifying biological stocks of silver trevally and ocean jackets for assessment and management. Final Report to the FRDC, Project No 2021-009. New South Wales

discarding 16% - 38% of the total ST catch by weight, largely due to them being under the MLL. The estimated proportion of fish in commercial catches larger than 30cm decreased from around 70% in 1993 and 1994 (onboard observers), to 40% in 1997 (onboard observers), 14% in 2008 (fish market sampling) and 6% in 2019-20 (fish market sampling) (A. Fowler NSW DPIRD *pers comm*). There are now few large mature ST in the OFT commercial landed catches.

Stock assessment and stock status

Prior to the joint Commonwealth/NSW assessment in 2023, separate assessments were conducted by NSW and the Commonwealth, using separate standardised CPUE indices of abundance. Due to differences in recent CPUE trends for the NSW and Commonwealth fisheries, the conclusion these assessments differed, with the NSW assessment concluding that the NSW component of the stock was depleted below a 20% B_0 limit reference level, whereas the Commonwealth component of the stock was not considered to be depleted and was between the Commonwealth limit and target reference levels. The 2023 integrated catch-at-age joint assessment⁷ determined that the stock had been depleted to below a 20% B_0 limit level by 2005, with signs of slow rebuilding from 2019 onwards. Depending on the value of natural mortality (M) used in the assessment the stock was assessed to be slightly above or slightly below the 20% B_0 limit level in 2023.

Current stock status for ST is based on an update of the 2023 joint assessment using the same integrated age-structured population dynamics model, with the same model structure and parameter inputs, but extending the catch and effort data by one year⁸. This updated assessment continues to show slow rebuilding of the stock, estimating that fishing mortality (catch) has been below the level required to allow for continued rebuilding, and stock status has been slowly improving since 2019. The updated assessment base case estimates that stock status has been increasing since the lowest estimated level of about 10.7% of unfished biomass B_0 in 2005 to an estimated 21.2% of B_0 in 2024. There remains high uncertainty around this estimate of current depletion and so the east coast ST stock is currently assessed as 'Recovering'.

Given that ST remains near a 20% B_0 limit level, advice is to maintain catches by all sectors at current levels across all fisheries to try and ensure that the observed rebuilding continues at the projected rates. To ensure that rebuilding continues as projected, the current NSW OTF TACC of 12 tonnes should be maintained.

Efforts to try and collect representative length composition data for retained and discarded ST should continue, including by means of a cooperative sampling program with industry, to improve the ability of the integrated assessment to evaluate year-class strengths, stock status and rate of rebuilding.

⁷ Burch, P., Fowler, A., Liggins, G., Sporcic, M., Dowling, N., Chick, R., Tuck, G. 2023. A joint Commonwealth and NSW assessment of Silver Trevally (*Pseudocaranx georgianus*). Prepared for the Australian Fisheries Management Authority. 83 pp.

⁸ Fowler, A. and Liggins, G. 2025. Assessment Report 2024/25 – Silver Trevally (*Pseudocaranx georgianus*). Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development

Economic considerations

Eastern School Whiting

Over the period 2016/17 to 2020/21 the real price of ESW has steadily increased, as recorded by the Sydney Fish Market. Since then, it has fallen (Figure 1) although reasons are not clear, but could be the result of general weakening demand for seafood due to inflationary pressures on household incomes. The contribution of total fishery GVP of ESW was estimated to be around \$1.9 m in 2020/21 (BDO, 2023). The real price of stout whiting has been steadily increasing up until 2022/23.

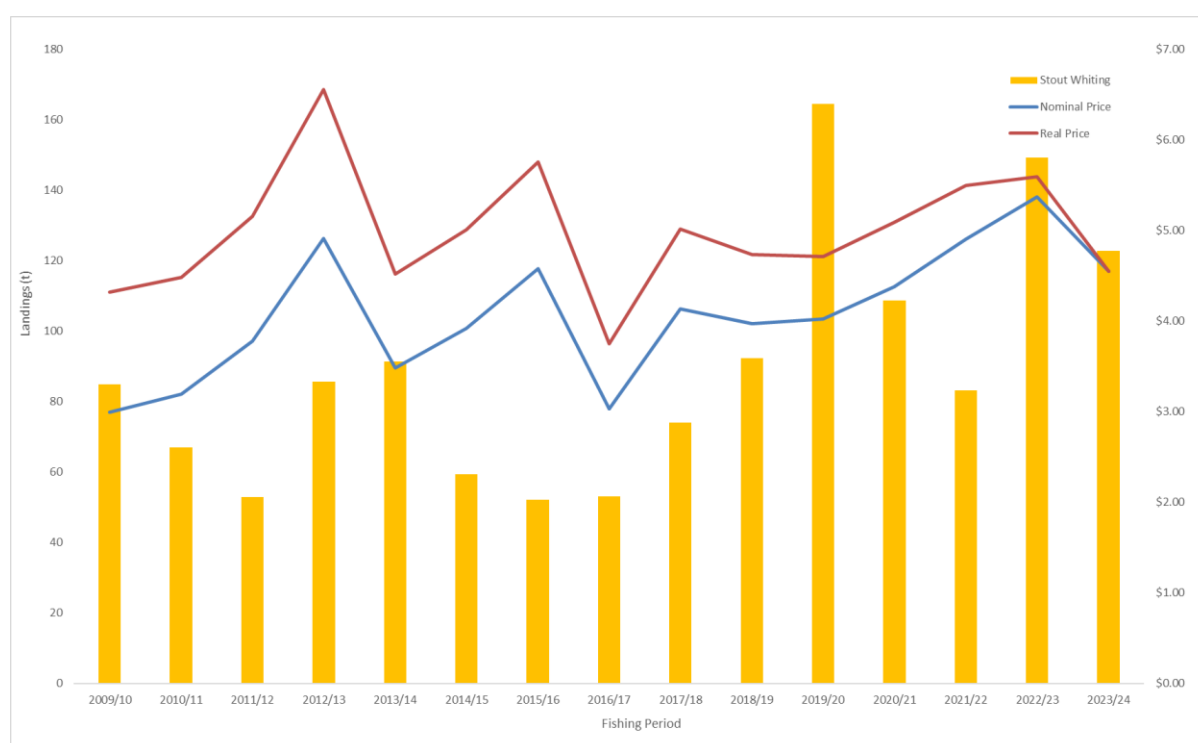


Figure 1: Catches and Sydney Fish Market price for Eastern School Whiting 2009/10-2023/4 (NSW DPIRD; SFM)

The majority of landings of both species are exported, processed and then returned to Australia for sale in wholesale and retail domestic markets.

Quota shares are allocated for “Trawl Whiting” which includes both ESW and SW. The five Fishing Businesses (FBs) with the largest Trawl Whiting quota allocation (46 % of the TACC) have reported landing 9 % of their quota allocation this fishing year, as of 1 January 2025. Landings by another 58 fishing businesses have accounted for 39% of the TAC over the same period.

The TACC was under-caught by 12% and 11% in 2019-20 and 2020-21 fishing seasons respectively, but this difference has increased to above 20% over the last three fishing seasons. As the TACC is not constraining, this implies that some quota is available to lease, noting that some fishers have suggested there is difficulty in accessing quota by those that require more.

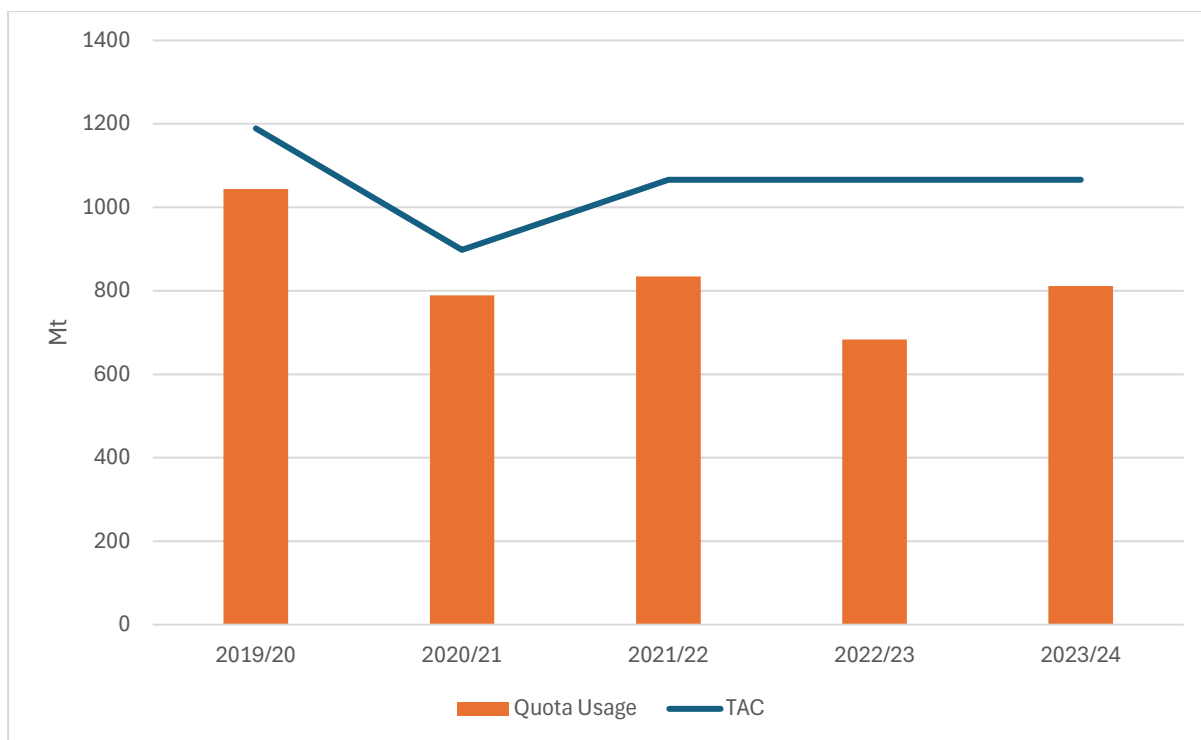


Figure 2: Trawl Whiting Quota Usage vs TACC

Fishery management considerations

The Ocean Trawl (OT) Fishery is a share managed, multi-species fishery that uses otter trawl and Danish seine trawl nets. The fishery is made up of four different endorsement types that differ by area fished, gear type used and catch composition.

There is a harvest strategy for Trawl Whiting, which informs the TACC determinations for Eastern School Whiting and Stout Whiting, both of which are taken in the OT Fishery. There is no harvest strategy for Silver Trevally.

A number of species in the OT Fishery, including Silver Trevally (ST), are important recreational species in NSW. Recreational catches are managed using bag or boat limits and minimum size limits.

DPIRD Fisheries uses a risk-based approach to enforcement activities that uses Statewide 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/ITQ managed fisheries, with quota evasion the major risk of concern. A particular risk is the potential for fishers endorsed in both the OT Fishery and the Southern Fish Trawl to avoid quota reporting by operating in both fisheries during the one trip. Although there are a number of FBs that have failed to submit catch returns (logbooks) and reports of undersized landings, for the purposes of the stock assessments the level of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing is considered low and would not substantially influence assessment outcomes.

The TAFC welcomes the recent catch reporting reforms introduced by DPIRD Fisheries, including the move to online reporting for all fisheries, to increase the

accuracy and timeliness of reports. These changes will benefit compliance efforts, and importantly will help improve the quality of data for future stock assessments. DPIRD Fisheries is also currently implementing a program of industry workshops to build understanding of the current rules among operators, in an effort to address some of the compliance issues occurring in the fishery.

Currently, vessels in the OT Fishery are not required to carry either vessel monitoring system (VMS) or AIS, which contributes to a number of quota evasion risks, including transshipment at sea, landing fish without declaring them or reporting catch from areas where no TACC 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 Fisheries advises that consultations are currently occurring with industry on the implementation of VMS across the fishery noting that it is already required for all commercial fishing vessels transiting or conducting fishing activities in Australian Marine Parks.

Trawl Whiting

Trawl whiting is managed using a basket TACC of Eastern School Whiting (ESW) and Stout Whiting (SW), with ESW being the major contributor, typically comprising 79% of the whiting catch. Stout Whiting and Eastern School Whiting are significant by product for ocean prawn fishers, but are a main target species in the fish trawl sector. Compared to fisheries targeting single species, the economic interactions of multi-species, multi-fleet and mixed-catch fisheries are complex, and can impact fishing behaviour, catch and effort in different ways.

The updated stock assessment for ESW suggests the biomass is at 48% of initial biomass, which equates to the target reference point in the NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy. There is no updated stock assessment available for SW this year, with the most recent estimate indicating a biomass of 42% of virgin biomass. The rebuilding of these two species from lower biomass levels in the early 2000s is likely to have been influenced by the introduction of catch quota controls in other jurisdictions in the 1990s and the further limiting of catches in NSW as a result of the basket TACC introduced in 2019.

The application of the Harvest Strategy to these two species, describes how this translates to a TACC recommendation of an annual TACC of 1,980 t for the fishing seasons 2025-26 and 2026-27. Given that ESW, the species contributing most of the catch, has now recovered from lower levels to reach the target reference point, and there are indications of continued recovery, an increase in the TACC is warranted.

Both of these species are caught in other jurisdictions and other NSW fisheries. Significant catches of ESW are taken in the Commonwealth Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark Fishery (SESSF) and a lesser, but still substantive amount, is caught in the NSW Southern Fish Trawl Fishery. The Commonwealth SESSF also has a harvest strategy that is used to determine that fishery's TACC for ESW. While DPIRD Fisheries has reported some engagement with the Commonwealth on the management of this fishery, no catch sharing arrangement has been agreed for this stock, and as a result of the applications of the two separate jurisdictions' harvest

strategies it is possible (as is the case this year) that the combined TACs for NSW and the Commonwealth result in an amount above the RBC for the stock.

Recently both the NSW and Commonwealth TACCs have been significantly undercaught, suggesting that actual catches are unlikely to go above the RBC, however the risk of greater utilisation of the TACCs and combined catches higher than the RBC remains.

The SW stock is also caught in other jurisdictions and NSW fisheries, with 80% of catches typically landed in QLD and large amounts of discards are also recorded in QLD. Recent changes in QLD harvest strategy approach brings the target reference point into alignment with the NSW Trawl Whiting Harvest Strategy, however there is no catch sharing arrangement agreed between NSW and QLD for SW.

Recommendations

- The TAFC recommends that NSW DPIRD engage with the Commonwealth on catch sharing arrangements for ESW, to prevent future TACCs across the two jurisdictions combining to allow catches that exceed the RBC for this stock.
- The TAFC recommends that NSW DPIRD continue to engage with QLD on catch sharing arrangements and complementary management of SW.

Silver Trevally (ST)

ST are caught in a number of fisheries in NSW and in other jurisdictions, by both commercial and recreational fishers. Annual catches across all jurisdictions have reduced from historical highs of over 1,500 t in the 1990s, to around 100 t since 2020, with NSW catches also declining during this period. Historically the trawl fisheries have taken majority of ST landings in NSW commercial fisheries, with most of the trawl catches coming from the SFT, however annual catches of ST in the SFT have reduced to less than 4 tonnes in recent years. Over the past 5 years, ST catches in the OT Fishery (north) have fluctuated between 4 to 20 t, and the Estuary General and Ocean Trap and Line Fishery have also had annual catches of between 9 and 14 t. ST is only subject to quota management and TACCs in the OT Fishery. Efforts being taken in the OT Fishery to enable recovery of the stock should be done in the context of minimising overall fishing mortality of ST across all fisheries.

Recreational catch represents a significant proportion of total catches, with the most recent Recreational Fishing Research Survey estimating 14 t of ST caught in NSW waters in 2021/22, including charter catches, a decline from the 100 t of ST catches estimated in 2000/01.

Results of the recent joint stock assessment indicate that the ST stock is recovering, with the base case indicating the biomass is just above the Limit Reference Point (20% B₀) with further increases forecasted. Noting the uncertainty, NSW DPIRD has assessed the stock status to be “Recovering”, which according to the NSW DPIRD Fisheries Harvest Strategy Policy, requires decision rules to enable the stock to recover. Although a formal Harvest Strategy has not yet been developed for Silver

Trevally, management should be consistent with the policy intent, therefore the TACC and associated management should support recovery of the stock.

The TAFC determined a TACC of 12 t in 2023/24, a reduction from the TACC of 20 tonne in 2021/22 and 2022/23, due to the urgent need to minimise fishing mortality and allow for recovery of the stock. Although there are some indications of rebuilding in the stock assessment, the stock has been at or below the Limit Reference Point for a number of years, and given the uncertainty regarding harvest and discards in other fisheries, any increase in the TACC would be premature and compromise rebuilding at this time.

As noted in previous determination reports, species with similar biology to ST are known to be negatively affected by rising water temperatures due to climate change. Given south east Australian waters are a warming hotspot, it's possible that the effects of climate change are contributing to the depleted stock status and are compromising the recovery of the stock.

The Commonwealth has identified ST as 'overfished' and with the Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark Fishery Resource Assessment Group is recommending a TACC of 25 tonnes, to allow for bycatch in the South East Scalefish and Shark Fishery. Although the Victorian commercial catches have stayed relatively stable, given the decline in catches elsewhere, they now represent a substantial proportion of the total catches (42% in 2022/23). Significant catches are also being taken in recreational fisheries in both NSW and Victoria.

Recommendations

- NSW DPIRD to work closely with other jurisdictions, including Victoria, to seek catch sharing arrangements, or complementary management to minimise fishing mortality of ST across all fisheries.
- NSW DPIRD is strongly encouraged to reduce the recreational possession limit for ST in line with reductions made for other depleted species.

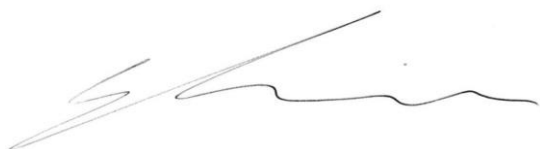
Determination

The Total Allowable Fishing Committee, pursuant to Part 2A of the *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, determines that the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) of Eastern School Whiting, Stout Whiting and Silver Trevally in the Ocean Trawl Fishery should be controlled and allocated through the following measures:

1. A TACC for Trawl Whiting (ESW & SW) during the fishing periods 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 and 1 May 2026 to 30 April 2027 of **1,980 tonnes**; and
2. A TACC for Silver Trevally during the period 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 of **12.0 tonnes**.

Species	Catch Limit (tonnes)
Trawl Whiting (ESW & SW) 2025-2026 2026-2027	1,980
Silver Trevally 2025-2026 (only)	12.0

Signed (for and on behalf of the TAFC)



William Zacharin
Chair, TAFC

17 March 2025

Members of the TAFC

Alice McDonald
Andrew Penney
Sevaly Sen