

1st Meeting of the NSW Lobster Harvest Strategy Working Group

Sydney, 24-25 February 2021

CHAIR'S SUMMARY BY IAN CARTWRIGHT

I was pleased to welcome members of the NSW Lobster Harvest Strategy Working Group, including industry members, recreational and Aboriginal fishing representatives, DPI staff and independent experts to the group's inaugural meeting. This group is new, but it builds on many years of effective cooperation between industry, researchers and managers, which has turned the fishery around from a very poor state into one of NSW's fisheries management success stories.

The NSW Lobster Industry Working Group has worked well over the years with a clear sense of purpose, recognising the important role that good science, industry support and management action has played in rebuilding the rock lobster stock. The process of setting the rock lobster Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) has employed many of the aspects of a harvest strategy, including a comprehensive monitoring program and risk-based decision-making based on a suite of fishery indicators and a stock assessment. This has resulted in a larger and more robust (to climate and other changes) rock lobster stock that has brought benefits to all sectors. While the commercial sector has seen higher catches and catch rates, increasing abundance in inshore waters has improved fishing opportunities for the recreational and aboriginal sectors.

Now we have an opportunity to formalise a harvest strategy that will collaboratively and definitively identify objectives and management targets for the stock into the future, and a defined process to adjust catches and other measures in response to changes in the stock. The harvest strategy will help to ensure that the stock remains healthy and provides optimal fishing opportunities for all users of the resource.

The harvest strategy will incorporate recreational and Aboriginal fishing objectives and management measures towards achieving those objectives, though perhaps not in as much detail as for the commercial sector at first. With current information, a first version of the harvest strategy could commit to maintaining a healthy stock biomass at a level that supports quality recreational fishing opportunities and recognises the importance of appropriate access to the resource for Aboriginal communities.

This first meeting considered the draft NSW Fisheries Harvest Strategy Policy & Guidelines, a range of scientific and fisheries management information and discussed how to deal with existing harvest and management arrangements, including the Lobster Fishery Management Strategy and Share Management Plan. The working group will exercise care to ensure that the harvest strategy is informed, but not unduly constrained by, these existing arrangements. An additional and significant issue will be to determine how the harvest strategy 'decision rule' and resulting catch aligns with the TACC determination process followed by the Total Allowable Fishing Committee.

The group considered draft objectives for the fishery, previously developed by the NSW Lobster Industry Working Group, reviewing and revising them to arrive at those in Attachment A. These will be discussed and reviewed as necessary, noting that any draft harvest strategy will also go out for public consultation.

Target and limit reference points are the key benchmarks connecting stock status to decisions on harvest. A target reference point based on a healthy and robust level of spawning biomass is preferred. A stock at this level will provide for good economic returns, stock sustainability and acceptable risk, while supporting recreational and cultural access to fishing opportunities. Currently

the spawning stock is around this level, and the exploitable stock is at about 50% of its unfished density, both of which bodes well for the future of the fishery. A limit reference point of 20% of unfished spawning biomass was recommended, at which point a stock rebuilding plan would be implemented. If biomass fell to 15%, fishing should cease to support rapid recovery. It is very unlikely that the stock would fall to either of these levels, given the current stock health, the TAF TACC setting process and implementation of an effective harvest strategy.

The working group is working on a continuous harvest control rule that will result in direct responses to changes in stock status. The rule will provide for an increased harvest if the stock biomass exceeds the target, and a reduced harvest as the stock biomass falls, acting in all instances to seek to return the stock to the target level. The harvest control rules will set definitive commercial TACs, and, in time, apply broader measures to guide changes to respond to non-commercial harvest.

The working group recognised that it will be necessary to test the draft strategy using a process of management strategy evaluation, using the lobster assessment model. It was also considered important to consider rules around maximum and minimum changes to TACs to reduce volatility, and 'break out' rules to guide decisions where observations might not meet expected stock performance.

The meeting progressed well ahead of schedule, with all participants working constructively and cooperatively on key issues and harvest strategy components. There was clear recognition of the need to take account of all sectors, their aspirations and objectives. A draft harvest strategy document will be prepared and discussed at our next meeting in Sydney on 14-15 April 2021.

Attachment A: Draft Goal, Strategic and Operational Objectives for NSW Lobster Harvest Strategy

Goal

To maintain a robust, sustainable eastern rock lobster stock biomass to support a profitable commercial lobster fishery, ongoing social, cultural and economic benefits for Aboriginal and recreational stakeholders, and benefits to the community.

Strategic objectives

1. Optimise utilisation of the lobster resource within ecologically sustainable limits
2. Manage exploitation of the stock such that recruitment to the stock is not severely compromised
3. Promote the profitability of the commercial fishery over the long term.
4. Promote quality recreational fishing opportunities for recreational fishers
5. Promote the recognition and continuation of Cultural fishing opportunities for Aboriginal fishers

Operational objectives

1. To maintain the spawning biomass of the eastern rock lobster stock at a target biomass of 1.2BspMSY
2. To ensure spawning biomass remains above 20% of the unfished (virgin) level, this being the level below which recruitment to the stock may be severely compromised
3. To improve the estimation and accounting for recreational and Aboriginal harvest in determining a Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) for the commercial fishery
4. To review the harvest strategy within 5 years of operation
5. To implement a targeted rebuilding strategy and develop a revised harvest strategy if spawning biomass decreases to or below 20% of the unfished (virgin) level