

Blue Mackerel (*Scomber australasicus*)

Assessment Authors and Year

Stewart, J. 2024. NSW Stock Status Summary 2023/24 – Blue Mackerel (*Scomber australasicus*). NSW Department of Primary Industries, Fisheries. 11 pp.

Stock Status

Current stock status	On the basis of the evidence contained within this assessment, Blue Mackerel are currently assessed as sustainable .
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Stock structure & distribution

Blue Mackerel occur in sub-tropical and temperate waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. They inhabit inshore and continental shelf waters off all states of Australia except the Northern Territory. The stock structure of Blue Mackerel is uncertain, with genetic analysis of samples from southern Queensland, Western Australia and New Zealand indicating population subdivision with differences detected between Western Australia and Queensland, and between Western Australia and New Zealand, but not between Queensland and New Zealand (Schmarr et al., 2007). Blue Mackerel off southern Australia is currently considered to be comprised of two biological stocks: the Western stock that extends from western Tasmania to southern Western Australia and the Eastern stock, which occurs to the east of Bass Strait. The Commonwealth Small Pelagic Fishery (SPF) manages and assesses Blue Mackerel along eastern Australia as a single east coast stock (Butler et al., 2023).

Scope of this assessment

This stock status summary details stock assessment results and relevant fisheries statistics to inform the setting of a Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for the New South Wales (NSW) Ocean Hauling Purse Seine (OHPS) Blue Mackerel quota fishery for the 2024/25 fishing season (May to April). Assessment of stock status for Blue Mackerel is principally from the Commonwealth SPF derived assessment that utilizes estimates of spawning biomass from periodic egg surveys using the Daily Egg Production Method (DEPM). Given that the DEPM-based assessment is for the entire eastern stock, the results are appropriate for application to the NSW component of the stock.

Biology

Blue Mackerel grow relatively quickly, reaching approximately 17-22 cm FL after one year, and have been estimated to attain 11 years of age and 44 cm fork length (FL) in Australian waters (Smart and Grammar, 2021, Stevens et al., 1984). Blue Mackerel attain substantially larger sizes in New Zealand waters where they have been aged to be more than 20 years old (Manning et al. 2006). Blue Mackerel mature at about 24-28 cm fork length (FL) and spawning is thought to occur during late winter and spring in outer continental shelf waters off northern NSW and southern QLD. Eggs and larvae have been observed in high abundances in shelf waters with temperatures of 18 to 21°C (Neira and Keane 2008). Reproductive parameters for Blue Mackerel in Eastern Australia are not well understood. In southern Australian waters the length at 50% maturity for Blue Mackerel has been estimated at 23.65 cm FL for males, and 28.68 cm FL for females (Ward and Rogers, 2007).

Fishery statistics

Catch information

Commercial

Commonwealth landings of Blue Mackerel increased from 2016/17 when a midwater trawler started targeting a suite of small pelagic species in the east sub-area (Butler et al. 2023). Commonwealth landings have consequently exceeded state landings since that time. The total catch (state and Commonwealth, excluding Victorian catches, which were confidential) for 2021/22 was 10,215 t, comprising 10,051 t from the Commonwealth (Fig. 1), 163 t from New South Wales, and 1 t from Tasmania. In 2022/23, Commonwealth catch decreased slightly to 9,638 t (Fig. 1). NSW state commercial catches (including Blue Mackerel caught under permit) during the 2022/23 fishing season (May to April) were reported through logbooks to be 206 t. However, landings from NSW estimated from quota usage (rather than official logbook data) during the 2022/23 season were approximately 400 t (comprising 324 t from ocean hauling, 11 t from Commonwealth tuna boats under permit, 11 t from Ocean Trap and Line fishing and a recreational catch of roughly 50 t (NSWDPI Unpublished)). Total harvests during 2022/23 were therefore likely more than 10,000 t and remaining at historically high levels.

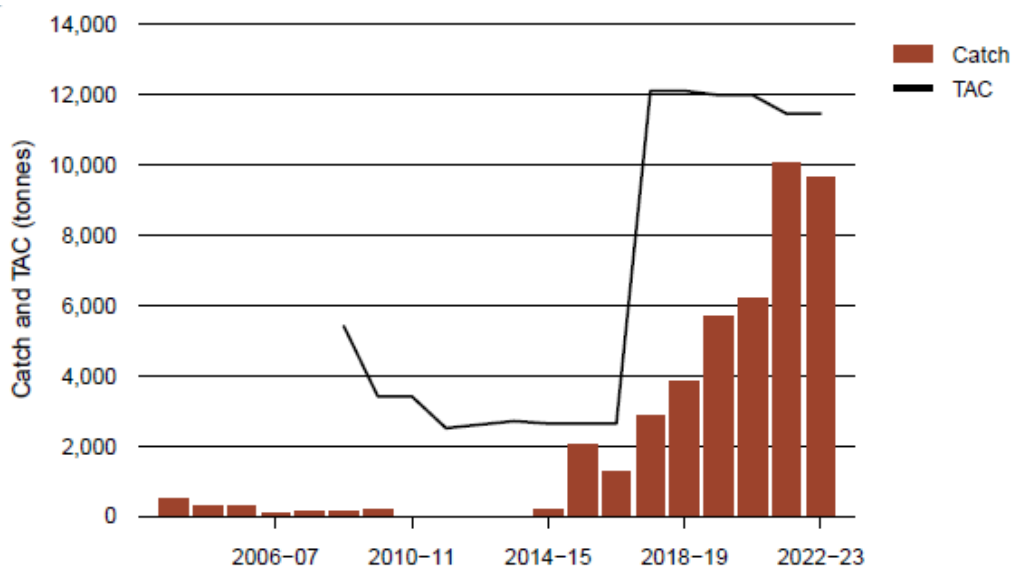


Figure 1. Commonwealth eastern Blue Mackerel catch and allocated Total Allowable Catch (TAC) from the 2003/04 fishing season to the 2022/23 fishing season (from Butler et al. 2023).

Recreational & Charter boat

Blue Mackerel are very important to recreational and charter fishers, and the recreational harvest is significant. The most recent published surveys of recreational harvest in NSW by 1 and 3 year licence holders and housemates were done during 2017/18 and 2019/20. These estimated the Blue Mackerel harvest at approximately 41 t and 51 t respectively (Murphy et al., 2020, NSW DPI Unpublished data). Conversions to scale these estimates to approximate statewide recreational harvests resulted in 74 t and 92 t during the respective surveys. Approximately 20% of Blue Mackerel in recreational catches were estimated to have been released during 2017/18 and during 2019/20, with unknown survival (Murphy et al., 2020, Murphy et al., 2022).

Indigenous

There is no information available on the Aboriginal catch of Blue Mackerel in NSW waters.

Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported

The level of Illegal Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fishing is unknown.

Fishing effort information

Days fished in the NSW purse seine fishery when Blue Mackerel were landed remained relatively stable between 2009/10 and 2017/18, fluctuating between approximately 400 and 600 days per year. Days of effort increased to be between around 650 to 850 between 2017/18 and 2019/20, but declined to approximately 500 during 2020/21 and then to 286 and 321 during 2021/22 and 2022/23 respectively (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Effort (days fished) for purse seine fishers that reported landing Blue Mackerel in NSW 2009/10 to 2022/23.

Catch rate information

Catch rates of Blue Mackerel (median kg per day purse seining in the Ocean Hauling Fishery) have fluctuated since 2009/10 with higher rates during 2019/20 and 2020/21, before falling dramatically to approximately 180 kg/day during 2021/22 and increasing again to 430 kg/day during 2022/23 (Fig. 3). More detailed logbook data in terms of catch per shot indicates considerable annual increases since 2013/14, with data for 2022/23 showing the highest catch rate per shot (Fig. 4), noting these are raw catch rates and do not account for factors such as vessel size, net size etc. At present such catch rate standardizations are not required for assessment purposes. It should be noted that catch rates of Blue Mackerel by the method of purse seine are unlikely to be useful for inferring relative abundance due to: (i) the schooling nature of the species; (ii) the ability of the gear to encircle entire schools of fish, and; (iii) the market driven nature of fishing operations for this species in NSW.

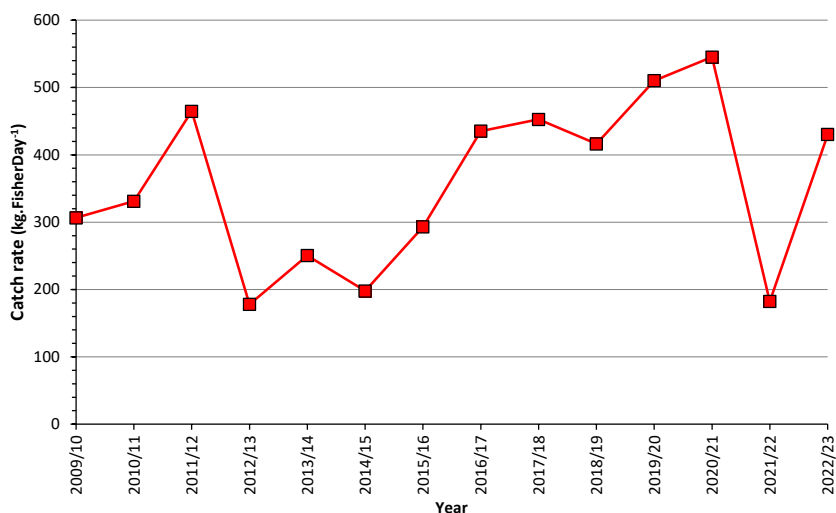


Figure 3. Commercial catch rates (raw kg per day) of Blue Mackerel using purse seining for years 2009/10 to 2022/23 in NSW.

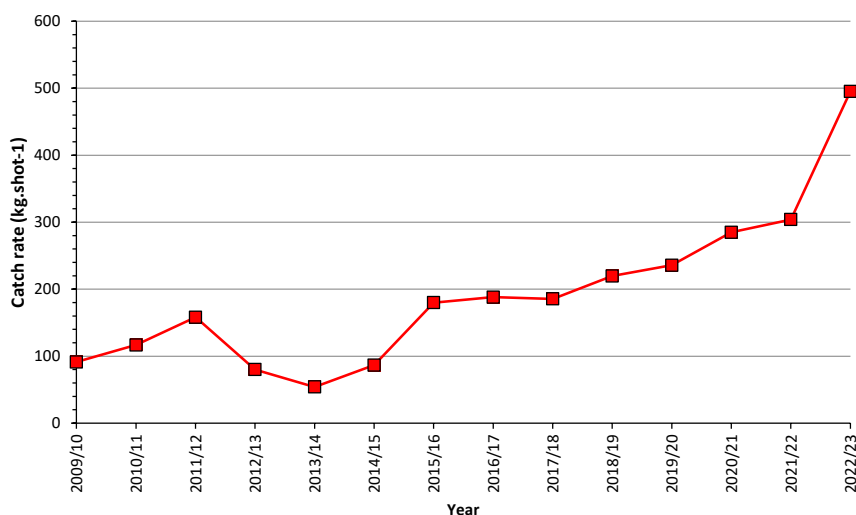


Figure 4. Commercial catch rates (kg per shot) of Blue Mackerel using purse seining for years 2009/10 to 2022/23 in NSW.

Stock Assessment

Stock Assessment Methodology

Blue Mackerel is assessed in terms of biomass through Daily Egg Production Method (DEPM) surveys. Sustainable levels of fishing are assessed through catch as a percentage of biomass. Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) of the Commonwealth SPF Harvest Strategy (Smith et al., 2015) established that an exploitation rate of up to 23% may be suitable for eastern Blue Mackerel under the Commonwealth SPF harvest strategy. The current harvest strategy exploitation rate following a Tier 1 assessment is only 15%, ensuring a very low probability of the stock falling below 20% of unfished levels. A Stochastic Stock Reduction Analysis (SSRA) was also done to estimate depletion levels up to 2015 (Punt et al., 2016a; Punt et al., 2016b).

Year of most recent assessment:

2023.

2019 - Daily Egg Production Method (DEPM) biomass estimate.

2015 - Stochastic Stock Reduction Analysis (SSRA).

Assessment method:

Daily Egg Production Method (DEPM) biomass estimate (Ward et al., 2021).

Stochastic Stock Reduction Analysis (SSRA) and Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) of the Commonwealth SPF Harvest Strategy (Smith et al., 2016; Punt et al., 2016a; Punt et al., 2016b).

Main data inputs:

Egg survey during September 2019 between Sandy Cape, Queensland and Ulladulla, NSW. The survey produced estimates of Blue Mackerel egg abundance, egg age and spawning area.

Adult reproductive parameters: average weight, sex ratio, batch fecundity, spawning fraction.

Catch and effort data.

SSRA: Catch, 2014 spawning biomass estimate, growth, maturity, selectivity, stock-recruitment relationship.

MSE: Weight, maturity and selectivity by age.

Key model structure & assumptions:

SSRA: age-structured model, fixed parameters for weight-at-age, natural mortality, selectivity at age and stock-recruitment steepness. Free parameters unfished recruitment, fishing mortality on fully-selected age classes, deviations around the stock-recruitment relationship. 2014 spawning biomass estimate based on the DEPM derived 83,300 t with a CV of 0.5. Assumptions include negligible catch prior to 1997/98, and that assumed parameters are correct.

MSE operating model is age-structured, and recruitment is driven by spawning stock biomass and uses pre-specified values for biological parameters (natural mortality, growth, maturity, and stock-recruit steepness).

Sources of uncertainty evaluated:

Considerable uncertainty exists around all of the key input data for the Blue Mackerel DEPM assessment. Sensitivity analyses were done for all parameters to determine which had the largest influence on estimated spawning biomass. These were done by varying each individual parameter whilst keeping the others constant at the value used to calculate spawning biomass.

Conclusions were drawn based on the most precautionary parameter estimates, resulting in the spawning biomass likely to be under-estimated.

MSE testing of the SPF harvest strategy rules to examine the probability of the biomass falling below the limit reference point of 20% of unfished levels with a less than 10% chance over 50 years.

Status Indicators - Limit & Target Reference Levels

Biomass indicator or proxy	DEPM derived estimate of spawning biomass.
Biomass Limit Reference Point	20% of unfished levels.
Biomass Target Reference Point	50% of unfished levels.
Fishing mortality indicator or proxy	Catch as a proportion of spawning biomass.

Fishing mortality Limit Reference Point	<p>Annual catch is less than 15% of the DEPM derived estimate of spawning biomass. This is the Tier 1 exploitation rate in the Commonwealth SPF Harvest Strategy for setting a Recommended Biological Catch (RBC) for each of five fishing seasons following a DEPM assessment.</p> <p>Five years after a Tier 1 assessment, the RBC is set at the Tier 2 level that is 7.5% of the DEPM derived estimate of spawning biomass.</p> <p>Five years after a Tier 2 assessment, if no updated DEPM is done, the RBC is set at the Tier 3 level that is 3.75% of the DEPM derived estimate of spawning biomass.</p>
Fishing Mortality Target Reference Point	N/A

Stock Assessment Results

Recent harvests of east coast Blue Mackerel have been increasing, but remain below the reference level of 15% of the 2019 derived DEPM estimate of spawning biomass (rounded down to 80,000 t for calculation of the RBC in recognition of the imprecision inherent in such surveys) (Ward et al., 2021) with the RBC calculated as 15% x 80,000 t ~12,000 t (Butler et al., 2023). This level of fishing mortality is unlikely to have substantially reduced the spawning biomass.

Stock Assessment Result Summary

Biomass status in relation to Limit	Stochastic Stock Reduction Analysis (Punt et al., 2016a; Punt et al., 2016b) estimated that the 2015 depletion of Blue Mackerel was likely to be close to the average unfished level. The SPF Harvest Strategy exploitation rates have been tested to provide a high likelihood that stocks will be maintained, on average, at the target reference point of 50 per cent of unfished levels, with a less than a 10 per cent chance over 50 years of falling below the limit reference point of 20 per cent of unfished levels. These exploitation rates have not been exceeded.
Biomass status in relation to Target	As above
Fishing mortality in relation to Limit	Recent harvests of east coast Blue Mackerel have remained below the RBC of 12,000 t.
Fishing mortality in relation to Target	As above.
Current SAFS stock status	Sustainable in 2020.
Current Commonwealth stock status	Not overfished and not subject to overfishing.

Fishery interactions

Commonwealth Small Pelagic Fishery – purse seine and midwater trawl, interacts with the NSW commercial fishery.

Commonwealth Tuna boats access Blue Mackerel for bait under permit.

Recreational fishers who harvest Blue Mackerel for food and bait. An historically contentious fishery interaction with concerns about the impact of commercial operations on the availability of bait for recreational fishers and on the distribution and therefore availability of gamefish.

Qualifying Comments

The DEPM-based estimates of Blue Mackerel spawning biomass are highly likely to be under-estimates, due to potential biases in terms of key parameters (such as spawning area and the assumption that surveys are done at the peak spawning time) always leading to under-estimating spawning biomass. A recognised uncertainty in the Blue Mackerel DEPM biomass estimation has been the use of adult reproductive parameters that were obtained from fish collected in South Australia during the early 2000s. AFMA are currently funding a study to investigate the presence of Blue Mackerel in spawning condition off the east-coast.

The very wide confidence intervals of DEPM-derived spawning biomass need to be acknowledged. In 2019 it was estimated to be 88,265 t (95% confidence intervals 33,320 to 143,209 t) Ward et al., 2021. In 2014 it was estimated at 83 300 t with 95% confidence intervals between 35,100 and 165,000 t (Ward et al., 2015), and in 2004 it was estimated at 23,009 t with 95% confidence intervals between 7,565 and 116,395 t (Ward and Rogers, 2007).

It should be noted that a component of the Stochastic Stock Reduction Analysis (Punt et al., 2016a) investigated the effect of temporal auto-correlation in recruitment (alternating periods of high or low recruitment and something that is observed in other small pelagic species) and concluded that “it is not possible to maintain stocks above the reference points considered with the pre-specified probability (10%) even without fishing, but this is not the case if deviations in recruitment about the stock-recruitment relationship are temporally uncorrelated.” Such a finding supports the rationale of implementing precautionary harvest strategies that rely on regular biomass estimates.

The quality of catch reporting in the NSW OHPS Blue Mackerel Fishery has declined substantially in recent years, and needs to improve if the fishery is to prosper. A summary of catch reporting issues is presented in Appendix 1.

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Appendix 1

Blue Mackerel catch reporting by the NSW Ocean Hauling Purse Seine fishery.

Currently NSW fishers landing Blue Mackerel under quota are required to report their landings through two separate processes. Fishers are required to report ‘real time’ quota use through the FisherMobile application. In addition, fishers are required to submit details of their fishing activity, including catch and effort, through mandated logbooks (paper-based or via the FisherDirect online reporting portal). Monitoring and assessment is done based on the time series of reported catch and effort information submitted by fishers through their mandated logbooks.

Since the introduction of quota management for the 2019/20 fishing season (May to April) the quantity of Blue Mackerel reported as being landed through compulsory logbooks has been less than the quantity reported through the quota management system (Fig. 5). During the 2022/23 season 57% of the reported quota used was reported through the logbooks. It is important to note that the catch and effort data used for assessments, and supplied to the Commonwealth for use in TAC setting for their fisheries, is derived from the mandatory NSW logbooks, and not from the real-time quota reports.

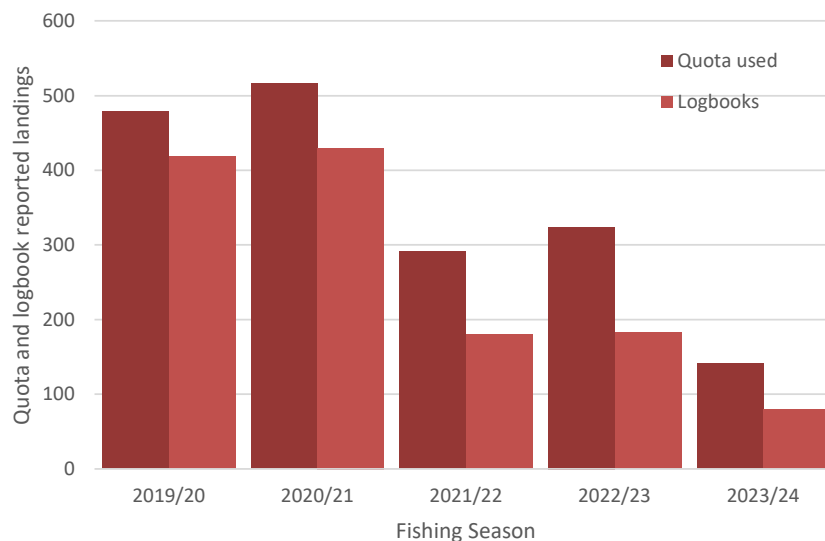


Figure 5. Blue Mackerel reported as landed by the Ocean Haul Purse Seine fishery through mandatory logbooks and real-time quota reporting since the introduction of quota management. Note that the 2023/24 quota season was only 6.5 months completed at the time of data extraction, and that logbook returns were likely yet to be fully compiled.

Performance of the NSW Blue Mackerel quota fishery against the allocated TAC of approximately 758 t p.a. is relatively low, whether assessed from real-time quota reports (Fig. 6) or mandatory logbooks (Fig. 7). The official catch data indicates that less than 25% of the allocated quota for 2022/23 was caught, yet quota reports indicate that this is a large under-estimation.

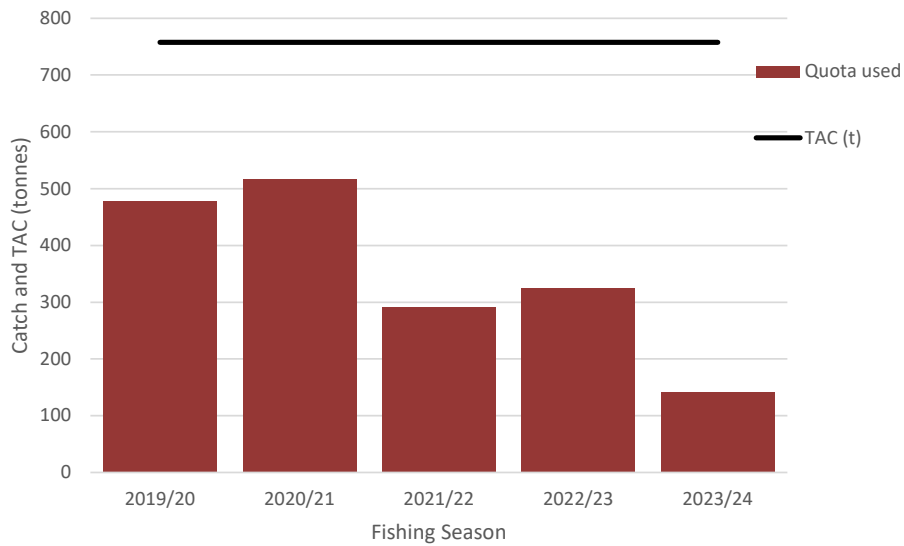


Figure 6. Blue Mackerel landings reported through the real time quota usage system, and allocated TAC, since quota management was implemented. Note that the 2023/24 fishing season was only 6.5 months completed when these data were collated.

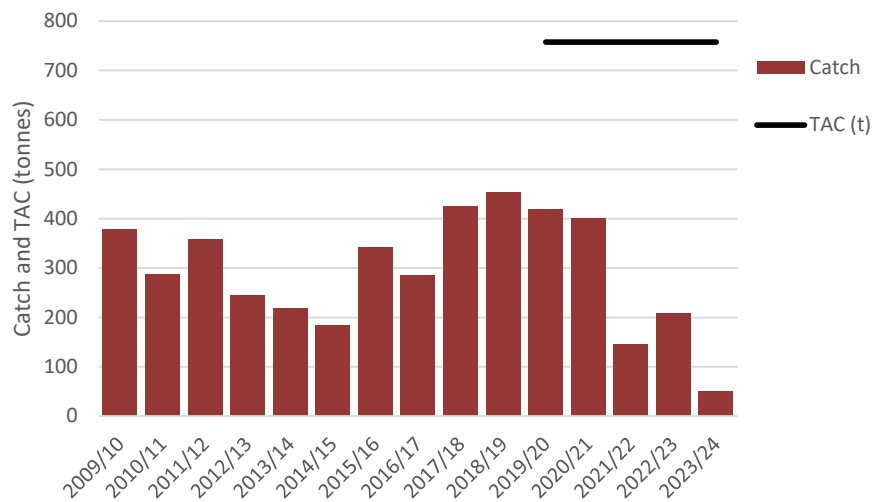


Figure 7. Blue Mackerel reported as landed by the NSW Ocean Haul Purse Seine fishery through mandatory logbooks, and allocated TAC, each year since 2009/10. Note data for 2023/24 is incomplete. Quota management began in 2019/20.