

West Coast Demersal Scalefish Resource Harvest Strategy Development

Final Project Outline

Purpose

To develop a draft harvest strategy for the West Coast Demersal Scalefish Resource (WCDSR) in line with the '*Harvest Strategy Policy and Operational Guidelines for the Aquatic Resources of Western Australia*' (Fisheries Management Paper No. 271, July 2015).

Background

The WCDSR includes all demersal scalefish within the (open) waters off the West Coast of Western Australia between 26°30' south latitude and 115°30' east longitude. The resource is primarily exploited by licensed commercial fishers operating in the West Coast Demersal Scalefish (Interim) Managed Fishery (WCDSIMF) and the Temperate Demersal Gillnet and Demersal Longline Managed Fisheries (TDGNLDMF) as well as recreational fishers fishing from recreational vessels and licensed charter vessels.

In 2007, a stock assessment of the indicator species for this resource (WA dhufish, pink snapper and baldchin groper) revealed that overfishing was occurring. This led to the development of the first harvest strategy control rules for the WCDSR to guide management decisions aimed at recovering the resource and ensuring its long term sustainability¹. As a result of the level of overfishing that had occurred, the harvest strategy control rules required a reduction in the level of effort and fishing mortality across all sectors by at least 50 per cent to enable stocks to recover. A recovery plan was implemented around 2010 to rebuild the resource to the target range by 2030 based on reducing and maintaining the recreational and commercial catches by at least 50 per cent of the 2005/06 levels.

In 2015, the Department released the '*Harvest Strategy Policy and Operational Guidelines for the Aquatic Resources of Western Australia*' (FMP 271) to guide the development of formal harvest strategies for all of the state's aquatic resources. With the WCDSR now 10 years into a 20-year recovery process, it is appropriate that the original harvest strategy is reviewed and updated into the new contemporary harvest strategy format under the 2015 harvest strategy policy to guide the recovery of the resource.

The WCDSR was also subject to a formal allocation decision under the WA Government's Integrated Fisheries Managed (IFM) policy in 2012 which resulted 64 per cent of the total suite of species in the WCDSR being allocated to the commercial sector and 36 per cent to the recreational sector². Consistent with the harvest strategy policy, it is also appropriate that decision rules around managing each sector to its allocated harvest level under IFM are also incorporated into the harvest strategy.

¹ Fisheries research report No. 163 - Spatial scales of exploitation among populations of demersal scalefish: implications for management. Part 1: Stock status of the key indicator species for the demersal scalefish fishery in the West Coast Bioregion. Final FRDC Report – Project 2003/052, September 2007.

² http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/Documents/minister_determinations/determination-wcd-scalefish-resource-allocation.pdf

In accordance with DPIRD's 'Guideline for stakeholder engagement on aquatic resource management-related processes' (Fisheries Occasional Publication No. 131, Aug 2016) the development of a harvest strategy and recovery plan should be developed through collaboration with the key stakeholders, the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council (WAFIC)/commercial fishing sector bodies and Recfishwest. The process also needs to actively seek to involve key stakeholders (other than WAFIC/sector bodies and Recfishwest), as well as broader consultation with other stakeholders, interested parties and the public as appropriate.

Objectives

The project objectives are to develop a draft harvest strategy and recovery plan for the WCDSR consistent with the *Harvest Strategy Policy and Operational Guidelines for the Aquatic Resources of Western Australia* (Fisheries Management Paper 271, July 2015). The draft Harvest Strategy will be subject to the approval of the Minister for Fisheries.

The **core elements** of a harvest strategy are outlined in section 4.1 of the Harvest Strategy Policy, as follows;

1. Articulation, at an operational level, of what is to be achieved, and why, both for the resource and each of the relevant fisheries and sectors (operational objectives);
2. Determination of the performance indicators to be used to measure performance against operational objectives;
3. Based on achieving acceptable risk levels, establishment of appropriate reference points/levels for each performance indicator;
4. The selection of:
 - a. the most appropriate Harvesting Approach (e.g. constant harvest/exploitation, constant escapement/stock size, constant catch);
 - b. the associated Harvest Control Rules which articulate pre-defined, specific management actions based on current status designed to adjust fishing intensity (catch/effort) for each fishery/sector to either maintain target levels and avoid breaching thresholds/limits or return to acceptable levels in an appropriate timeframe (Recovery Plan – see section 5.4.3 of the Harvest Strategy Policy); and
 - c. the Acceptable Catch/Effort Tolerance for each fishery/sector which is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the current management arrangements in delivering the catch/effort required by the Harvest Control Rules and/or IFM allocation decisions;
5. Monitoring and assessment procedures for the collection and analysis of all the data needed to underpin the harvest strategy and determine stock status and fishery performance against operational objectives; and
6. The timetable and frequency for review of the harvest strategy elements.

It is important to note that while Harvest Control Rules may result in the need to adjust fishing intensity (catch/effort) for each fishery/sector by a specific predefined amount, the appropriate management settings to achieve this adjustment will be determined through a separate management review process involving consultation with relevant stakeholder groups.

Additionally, it is not appropriate for the harvest strategy to address resource allocation or the priority of objectives, only deliver them. These decisions should be progressed through the existing IFM process or during the development of an Aquatic Resource Management Strategy under the new *Aquatic Resources Management Act 2016*.

Approach

1. Approval of Project Plan by the Director Aquatic Management (DPIRD) and the Chief Executive Officers of WAFIC and Recfishwest.
2. DPIRD to establish a Harvest Strategy Working Group (HSWG) with an Independent Chair and representation from DPIRD, WAFIC, Recfishwest, the commercial and recreational fishing sectors as well as the charter sector.
3. DPIRD to provide the HSWG with relevant background material and a briefing on stock assessment methodology, current management settings and past resource allocation decisions.
4. The HSWG to develop a set of agreed principles to guide the working group process which includes what is in and out of scope.
5. The HSWG to systematically work through the core elements of the harvest strategy with a view to formalising a position on each in regards to the WCDSR.
6. DPIRD to incorporate the HSWG's harvest strategy elements for the WCDSR into a draft harvest strategy document.
7. HSWG members to meet to finalise draft WCDSR Harvest Strategy.
8. The draft WCDSR Harvest Strategy to be published on DPIRDs website for a 4-week public comment period.
9. HSWG members to consider a summary of comments received during the public comment period and make further amendments to the draft harvest strategy as necessary.
10. The final proposed WCDSR Harvest Strategy to be provided to the Minister for Fisheries for consideration and approval.
11. Subject to Ministerial approval, the finalised WCDSR Harvest Strategy is to be published on the Department's website.