

Public comment GASCOYNE OCEANIC PINK SNAPPER STOCK

Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
March 2018

1. BACKGROUND

In the Gascoyne, the oceanic pink snapper stock is targeted by both commercial and recreational fishers. Historically, approximately 80% of the pink snapper catch has been landed by commercial operators fishing in the Gascoyne Demersal Scalefish Managed Fishery (GDSMF). The stocks in the inner gulfs of Shark Bay are predominantly fished by the recreational and charter sectors.

Over certain months of the year pink snapper form large spawning aggregations which makes them particularly vulnerable to overfishing. Oceanic pink snapper in the Gascoyne are no different with approximately 80% of oceanic pink snapper catch taken during the peak spawning period from June to August (inclusive).

In 2002, a stock assessment conducted by the Department of Fisheries found that the spawning stock of oceanic pink snapper in the Gascoyne was depleted. Following stakeholder consultation, a ten-year recovery plan was established to manage commercial and recreational fishing to help rebuild the stock. The recovery plan included a reduction in commercial catch limits from 564 to 277 tonnes and incremental reductions in the recreational daily bag limit of pink snapper from eight to three. Until recently, periodic stock assessments indicated that the Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper stock was rebuilding.

1.1. Gascoyne Demersal Scalefish Resource Harvest Strategy

In 2017, the Minister for Fisheries approved *Fisheries Management Paper No.284: Gascoyne Demersal Scalefish Resource Harvest Strategy 2017 – 2021* (Harvest Strategy). The Harvest Strategy outlines the management objectives for the Gascoyne Demersal Scalefish Resource (GDSR) to guide the development of future management responses.

The main ecological objective in the Harvest Strategy is to maintain spawning stock of each retained species at acceptable levels. Oceanic pink snapper and goldband snapper are used as indicator species in stock assessments for the GDSR, with goldband snapper the indicator for the status of the broader suite of demersal scalefish species.

1.2. Latest Gascoyne Demersal Scalefish Resource Stock Assessment

In late 2017, the Department undertook an assessment of the GDSR, including indicator species oceanic pink snapper and goldband snapper. This assessment highlighted that the **Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper stock is no longer recovering at an acceptable level** and will require additional management action for both the recreational and commercial sectors.

Key factors contributing to the current status of pink snapper stocks include: significant warm water events in the Gascoyne (between 2011 and 2013) affecting snapper behaviour during spawning periods and subsequently juvenile recruitment; and fishing practices that target main spawning aggregations.

The stocks of goldband snapper and the broader suite of demersal scalefish are considered adequate.

1.3. Harvest Strategy Reference Group

In December 2017, the Department established a Harvest Strategy Reference Group (Reference Group) comprising of recreational, charter and commercial representatives to consider the GDSR stock assessment outcomes and performance of the GDSR against the reference levels in the Harvest Strategy. The Reference Group is tasked with providing advice on strategies aimed at meeting the objectives of the Harvest Strategy. The proposals outlined in this document have been developed by the Department with advice from Reference Group members.

1.4. Rebuilding oceanic pink snapper spawning biomass to sustainable levels

The status of Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper stock is unacceptable and additional management action is required to rebuild the stock to sustainable levels.

Recreational, charter and commercial fishers have played important roles in providing catch data to help assess the state of the fishery, and all sectors are being asked to help manage this issue into the future.

Two key strategies have been identified to support the development of a recovery plan for pink snapper stocks:

1. Reduce catches of oceanic pink snapper; and
2. Provide targeted protection for oceanic pink snapper spawning aggregations.

1.5. Current proposals

In line with the above strategies, and to address an immediate need to provide protection to pink snapper stocks, two proposals have been prepared to take effect prior to the start of the 2018 oceanic pink snapper peak spawning period.

The Department is currently consulting with the commercial fishing sector on the first proposal: A significant reduction in the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) of oceanic pink snapper to address the immediate need to reduce catches of oceanic pink snapper.

The Department seeks public comment on the second proposal: A spatial closure to provide targeted protection for pink snapper spawning aggregations during the peak spawning period (1 June – 31 August inclusive). More details on this proposal are provided below.

2. PROPOSAL FOR PUBLIC COMMENT - TARGETED PROTECTION OF OCEANIC PINK SNAPPER SPAWNING AGGREGATIONS

2.1. Pink snapper spawning closure

The Department is seeking public comment on its proposal for a spatial closure north of Bernier Island off the Carnarvon coast (refer to the map at Figure 1) to provide targeted protection for pink snapper from 1 June – 31 August inclusive.

2.2. Location of the closure

The closure aims to protect key Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper spawning aggregations north of Bernier Island, including Koks Island (Bernier Island is located approximately 50km off the coast from Carnarvon). This area represents approximately 2-4% of the total area fished by the GDSMF and charter operators in the Gascoyne coast bioregion. However, 40% to 70% of the total annual catch of Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper is taken in this area during the peak spawning period.

2.3. Spawning closure duration

It is estimated that over 80% of the total annual catch of Gascoyne oceanic pink snapper is taken during the proposed period 1 June – 31 August.

2.4. Species included in the closure

The closure will be specific to pink snapper only. The closure will prohibit the take, landing and possession of pink snapper within the waters of the closure area. This is similar to other spawning closures for pink snapper in Cockburn and Warnbro Sounds and the inner Gulfs of Shark Bay.

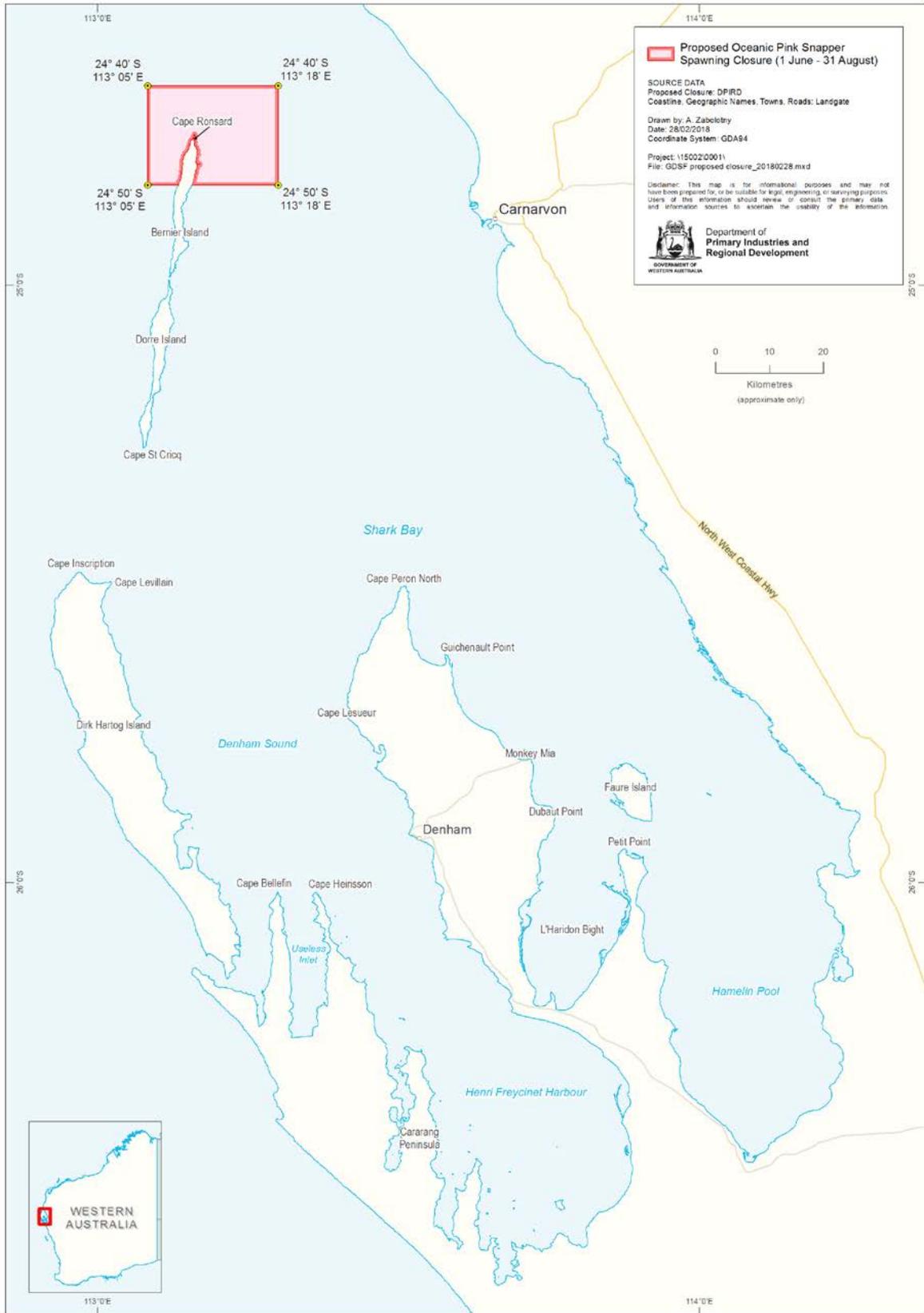


Figure 1. Proposed pink snapper spawning closure from 1 June to 31 August (inclusive).

2.5. Providing comment

The peak fishing industry bodies, Recfishwest and the WA Fishing Industry Council, will undertake consultation with their respective sectors and provide feedback on the proposed pink snapper spawning closure.

Following consideration of advice from the peak industry bodies the Department will provide recommendations to the Minister for Fisheries for his consideration.

Submissions can also be made directly to the Department. To help us consider your submission please:

- make your comments clear and concise;
- reference the relevant topic sections in this paper you are addressing;
- describe briefly each topic or issue you wish to discuss;
- state whether you agree or disagree with any or all of the information within each topic or just what is of specific interest to you;
- clearly state your reasons and interest in the issue (i.e. whether you're a commercial, recreational or charter fisher or simply an interested community member), particularly if you disagree and give sources of any additional information you are referring to where possible; and
- feel free to suggest alternative management options.

2.6. Where and when to send your submissions

If you are a recreational fisher or commercial fisher affected by this proposal you can provide your submission to the following organisations to enable a consolidated view from each fishing sector:

- All recreational fishers should direct their comments on the above proposals to Matt Gillett at Recfishwest at Matt@recfishwest.org.au;
- All commercial fishers should direct their comments on the above proposals to Angus Callander at the Industry Consultation Unit at eo@icu.org.au.

Alternatively, comments can be provided to Shane Walters at the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development at Shane.Walters@dpird.wa.gov.au.

The closing date for submissions is 5:00pm on Tuesday 3 April 2018.