Stop the Trawler Alliance - Briefing Paper

Outstanding Questions on Super Trawler and Small Pelagic Fishery Science

The following issues remain unaddressed by current science, resulting in the need for the proposed legislation by the Federal Government to prohibit the entry of the super trawler FV Abel Tasman (formerly FV Margiris) into Australian fisheries.

Localised Depletion Unaddressed

The super trawler has the ability to concentrate the catch of target species due to its very large carrying capacity (over 6,000 tonnes) and onboard processing facilities. The ship can operate anywhere in the East and West zones of the small pelagic fishery[1]. However, economic considerations, mainly with regards to fuel costs alone, mean fishing effort is likely to be concentrated to restricted areas, which could lead to local stock depletion. There is a lack of knowledge regarding movement patterns and distribution of the target species; for example, the Small Pelagic Fishery Assessment Report[2] published in April 2012 notes the following:
"Little is known about the movement patterns of Blue Mackerel in Australian waters" (p.4)
"No specific studies have focused on the movement of Jack Mackerel or Yellowtail Scad" (P. 20)
"No studies have investigated Redbait movement." (P.47)
"The movement patterns of Sardines in Australian waters are poorly understood" (P.72)

Scientific evidence indicates that localised depletions attributable to fishing effort have already occurred around Tasmania. Large surface schools of jack mackerel were once common off Tasmania until they were targeted by trawlers more than 20 years ago. These surface schools soon disappeared and have not been seen since. Data on the size and age of these fish populations indicate fishing had an impact on these fish[2]. Over the last decade or so the Tasmanian mid-water trawl fishery for redbait developed, then failed when these fish could no longer be found. Industry claimed that this was due to warmer surface waters rather than overfishing, but no evidence has been produced to support that claim and overfishing and localised depletion may have occurred.

There is no science-based strategy to avoid localised depletion and the move-on clause proposed by Seafish is neither proven to work nor enforceable, and was subsequently rejected by recreational fishers during the Minister's Working Group process around the introduction of the super trawler[3].

Impacts On The Food Chain Unaddressed

Taking large quantities of pelagic fish like jack mackerel and red bait from a limited area may deplete local populations – and the flow-on effects could impact other marine wildlife who may lose their food source, such as penguins, tuna, seals, whales and dolphins. Populations of little penguins in Western Australia are already suffering from low bait feed availability, and may be further impacted by the super trawler operations in their waters[4]. Generally, there is currently little science available to allow an assessment of the ecosystem impacts of taking this quantity of pelagic fish from around Tasmania.

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[1] http://www.afma.gov.au/managing-our-fisheries/fisheries-a-to-z-index/small-pelagic-fishery/maps/

[2] Ward TM, Lyle J, Keane JP, Begg GA, Hobsbawn P, Ivey AR, Sakabe R and Steer MA, April 2012. Commonwealth Small Pelagic Fishery: fishery Assessment Report 2011. SARDI Publication No. F2010/000270-3; SARDI Research Report Series No.614

[3] http://www.tarfish.org/documents/SPF%20Media%20Statement%2020120817.pdf

[4] http://www.sciencewa.net.au/topics/fisheries-a-water/item/1646-climate-and-little-penguin-population-monitored

Bycatch Of Mammals And Non-Target Fish Unaddressed

The super trawler will catch non-target fish species like sardines, which Seafish will then buy quota for to market. The South Australian Sardine Industry have publicly opposed the introduction of the super trawler because Seafish have said if they unintentionally catch sardines they will market it, however there is no available quota to do so[5]. If Seafish are not allowed to market the sardines, hundreds of tonnes of sardines may be dumped. Squid fishers from Tasmania have also spoken out about concerns that commercial quantities of squid could get caught as bycatch, impacting on their industry[6].

The bycatch conditions to further protect threatened and protected species applied by Minister Burke using the EPBC Act still allow up to 10 seals to be killed every day, and if more are killed a 'review' is triggered and the trawler is required to move 50 nautical miles[7]. Trawlers can cover these distances in a few hours, and given marine wildlife such as seals and dolphins are highly mobile, this does little to protect them. Impacts on other protected species, such as seabirds, are also still of concern. Seabird Management Plans have been utilised in other Australian fisheries, but still result in the deaths of threatened seabirds[8].

Lanternfish are another small and important species of fish in the food chain. Due to their size they usually slip through the trawl nets without being captured; however, they are incredibly sensitive fish and can be killed from a touch, yet there has been no assessment of these mortalities or ecosystem impacts.

Small Pelagic Fishery Stock Assessment Questions

Stock assessments are based on just one or two years of sampling, which do not provide robust estimates of population dynamics over ecologically meaningful timeframes or ensure accurate estimation[2]. Due to the poor track record of small pelagic fisheries around the world[9],[10], and the failure of two small pelagic fisheries in the Tasmanian regions where large quantities have been taken and local depletions appear to have occurred, these assessments must be updated before fishing begins.

The lawfulness of the Australian Fisheries Management Authority process that resulted in a doubling of the quota for Seafish to enable it bring the super trawler into Australian fisheries is currently being assessed through a Formal Inquiry by the Commonwealth Ombudsman[11].

International Record Of Subsidisation And Overfishing

The ship owner, Parlevliet & Van Der Plas, is a member of the European Pelagic Freezer-Trawler Association (PFA), which consists of 34 factory trawlers that are among the biggest and most powerful in the world. The largest ultimate owner of the companies represented by the PFA is Parlevliet & Van der Plas (PVP), a Dutch company that, through a number of subsidiaries, controls 15

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[5] http://stopthetrawler.net/unseen-bycatch-impacts-on-commercial-fisheries/

[6] http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-07-17/super-trawler-quota-could-expand/4135850

[7] http://secure.environment.gov.au/coasts/fisheries/commonwealth/pelagics/pubs/small-pelagics-part13-sept2012.pdf

[8] See Protected Species Interaction Reports: http://www.afma.gov.au/managing-our-fisheries/environment-and-sustainability/Protected-Species/

[9] Beverton, R. J. 1990, Small Marine Pelagic Fish and the Threat of Fishing: are they Endangered?

[10] Pinsky, ML, Jensen OP, Ricard D and Palumbi SR, 2011. Unexpected patterns of fisheries collapse in the world's oceans. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, Vol 108: 20 p. 8317-8322

[11] http://www.ombudsman.gov.au/media-releases/show/212

pelagic freezer-trawlers – including the FV Abel Tasman (formerly FV Margiris). From 1994 - 2006 PVP received €17,688,495 in direct vessel subsidies and €20,965,000 for non-vessel subsidies[12].

Principles established in the UN FAO code of conduct for responsible fisheries, to which Australia is a signatory, direct states to take steps to reduce overcapacity and avoid management actions that contribute to overcapacity. These principles were reaffirmed by Prime Minister Gillard this month in Rio along with a commitment to work towards cuts to fishing subsidies[13].

As recently as March this year, FV Margiris has been fishing in West Africa, off Mauritania and Morocco, where most of the pelagic stocks are considered fully exploited or overexploited (e.g. the sardinella stocks in northwest Africa and the Gulf of Guinea) [14]. Consequently, local fishermen find it increasingly hard to find fish, having to go further for longer to get their catch.

Whilst the status of the majority of Australian fish stocks could to be considered to be better than the fisheries of some other nations, nonetheless 42 per cent of our fish stocks are over-fished or of unknown status[15].

[12] Profundo, Nov 2011, Direct and Indirect EU Support for the Members of the Pelagic Freezer-trawler Association (PFA). Available at: http://www.greenpeace.nl/Global/nederland/report/2011/Direct%20and%20indirect%20EU%20support%20PFA.pdf

[13] https://rio20.un.org/rio20/records/page

[14] FAO, 2012. State of world fisheries and aquaculture (SOFIA), p.57 http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i2727e/i2727e00.htm

[15] Woodhams J, Stobutzki I, Vieira S, Curtotti R and Begg GA (eds) 2011. Fishery status reports 2010: status of fish stocks and fisheries managed by the Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, Canberra.