

Consultation Report on Proposed Management Changes to the Southern Offshore Trawl Region

Summary

During Southern Offshore Harvest Strategy workshop meetings in July 2021 industry members raised several concerns regarding effort shift into the region increasing the risk of the effort cap being reached, excess competition and continued harvest of prawns at sub optimal sizes and certain times. To address these risks, a range of management options were discussed however, an agreed view was not reached on the best option to address all stakeholder concerns.

As a result, Fisheries Queensland undertook further targeted consultation from 4 to 18 August 2021 where all stakeholders could have their say via an online survey through the eHub engagement platform, by making an online submission or by submitting a written submission via email. All T1 and T2 licence holders and key stakeholder groups including industry associations, seafood marketers and environmental non-government organisations were notified of the discussion paper and consultation period.

The response was significant with around 80 responses received through various avenues including the online survey, survey submissions, phone calls and individual responses received directly via email.

Responses to the consultation demonstrated a lack of clear support for any of the proposed options. Most responses raised concerns about the risk of increasing effort in the region and implications for reaching the sustainable effort cap prior to the season ending on 1 November. Feedback identified risks around additional vessels being used in the Southern Offshore Trawl region and the access these new vessels have to excess effort units in the region. Other concerns were about sustained effort in the deepwater part of the fishery and the disproportionate amount of protection on prawns in the inshore areas of the fishery as they grow.

The feedback generally indicated that prawns should be protected as both juveniles and adults but how best to do that could not be resolved at this time. Concerns were also raised about the role of the harvest strategy workshop in making recommendations that may bias a certain part of the fleet without due consideration of this impact in the decision-making process.

Given the broad range of responses regarding possible closures in the southern offshore region and no clear preferences identified, any decisions on possible changes to closures in this region will be deferred until a later date. Without clear support for any option legislation changes are not able to be progressed and will be reviewed prior to the 2022-23 fishing season.



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Background

The Southern Offshore Trawl Region is a region of the east coast otter trawl fishery that operates from Swain Reefs south to the Qld/NSW border, excluding the regulated Southern Inshore Trawl Region. The fishery targets eastern king prawn (*Melicertus plebejus*) and retains other permitted by-product species. Eastern king prawns are endemic to Australia and occur as a single stock along the east coast of Australia. The stock was most recently assessed as sustainable in 2020 and estimated that the 2019 spawning biomass was 62% of unfished biomass, above the target reference point identified through the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy and in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region Harvest Strategy.

The harvest strategy has set an initial total allowable commercial effort (TACE) for the region at 845,266 effort units to achieve the target biomass based on a bio-economic model for the eastern king prawn stock completed in 2021. Fishing effort in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region has been around 700,000 – 800,000 effort units since 2010. In 2020 a total of 810,541 effort units were used in the region.

Table 1: Historical effort unit usage across the East Coast Otter Trawl Fishery.

Effort Units Used				
Year	Central Trawl Region	Northern Trawl Region	Southern Inshore Trawl Region	Southern Offshore Trawl Region
2012	172,242	246,958	287,007	717,814
2013	223,527	224,991	234,234	683,120
2014	315,299	235,729	196,419	728,394
2015	186,384	277,279	241,535	720,768
2016	244,087	307,357	219,101	722,820
2017	340,276	290,873	182,253	780,050
2018	287,509	244,972	245,826	724,543
2019	319,896	214,814	186,338	830,971
2020	348,371	178,457	167,625	810,541

Southern Offshore Harvest Strategy workshops were held over 28 June, 12 July and 19 July 2021. The main purpose of the meetings was to discuss management options for the Southern Offshore Trawl Region aimed at optimising the harvest of prawns during the seasons and to address concerns around the risk of reaching the effort cap commencing 1 November for the 2021/22 fishing season.

Current management arrangements include:

- Closure period (20 September – 1 November each year) for the shallow water fishery (inside 50 fathoms)
- Strip closures in small prawn areas between 20 September – 1 March each year
- A southern trawl fishery effort trigger which, if reached, reduces effort in the fishery to 24 days per month during May, June and July.

However, industry remain concerned about the management of the effort in the region and the continued catch of small prawns.

Consultation Process

The Southern Offshore Region Harvest Strategy workshops held throughout June and July 2021 discussed a range of options to better manage effort in the region and provide further protection for small prawn. The initial June workshop was cut short due to a COVID-19 lockdown and the communique was combined with the follow up meeting on the 12 July 2021. The meeting communique is available [online](#).

Based on advice from the workshops, Fisheries Queensland released a discussion paper for consultation on two proposed management options:

Option 1: No fishing from 20 September – 20 October (4 weeks) and 23 December to 20 January (4 weeks) in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region (e.g., inside and outside 50 fathoms). Allowing trawling south of Point Lookout from Monday 6pm to Friday 8am in the December/January closure.

Option 2: Continue the existing no fishing closure period of 20 September – 1 November (6 weeks) and apply this to the entire Southern Offshore Trawl Region (e.g., inside and outside 50 fathoms).

The discussion paper also consulted on amendments to current inshore strip closures to protect small prawn from 20 September to 1 March annually. The proposed changes to strip closures were to:

- expand the Caloundra/Moreton Island strip closure to include the area off Caloundra and a modified area near Jumpinpin Bar;
- expand the closure off South Stradbroke Island to extend further north to Point Lookout; and
- introduce an additional closure near North Reef around the Swain Reefs.

All T1 and T2 licence holders and key stakeholder groups including industry associations, seafood marketers and environmental non-government organisations were notified of the discussion paper and consultation period. Consultation was open between 4 August and 18 August 2021 and stakeholders could have their say via an online survey through the eHub engagement platform, by making an online submission, or via email.

There were 662 page views on the e-hub and 116 document downloads.

Respondents

In total 62 survey responses were received, of which 6 came from duplicate emails and 15 were completed anonymously. 2 online submissions were made through the department's online eHub engagement platform. A further 18 responses were received via email, consisting of 9 independent emails and 9 form letters. Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) also submitted a response that canvassed the views of industry members. Correspondence was also sent to the Minister responsible for fisheries which consisted of 14 duplicates of correspondence provided through the consultation process. A number of stakeholder phone calls were also made over the consultation period and notes recorded.

Southern Offshore Trawl Region closure period

General feedback

62 individuals responded to the question on the closure period options. Overall survey feedback regarding management of effort in the region was mixed, with most respondents supportive of management action but mixed views regarding the preferred option. 18 respondents supported Option 1, 20 respondents supported Option 2 and 24 respondents supported an alternative option. Figure 1 shows the survey responses to this question.

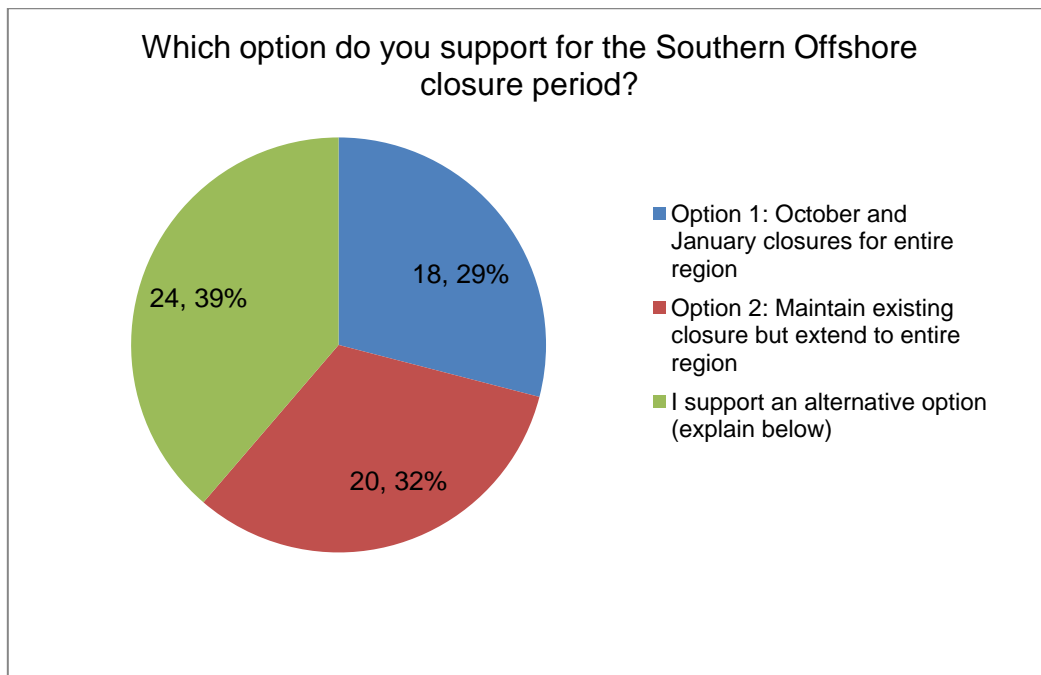


Figure 1: Summary of survey results to the question ‘Which option do you support for the Southern Offshore closure period?’ (n=62).

Respondents who supported Option 1 provided the following comments:

- support for additional protection of small prawns through the January period.
- support for closure in January when effort in the fishery peaks.
- support for social benefits two closure periods may have for crew.

Respondents who supported Option 2 provided the following comments:

- support for consistent management for shallow and deep-water sectors of the fishery; and
- support for continued access to the Christmas and January holiday period.

Respondents who supported an alternative option were asked to describe it in the comment box and a range of alternatives were suggested including:

- monthly or annual caps on the number of nights a boat can fish.
- aligning the season opening and closure to other trawl regions.
- separate closure periods for the shallow and deep-water sectors of the fishery (e.g. existing shallow water closure and introduce a January-March deep water closure);
- preferred/limited access after closure periods depending on whether a boat fished a closure period or not; and
- maintain existing management arrangements.

Written submissions

18 email responses were received including 9 independent emails and 9 form letters. Of these, 1 respondent supported Option 1, 15 respondents supported Option 2 and 2 respondents did not support either option. 14 of the written submissions were also sent to the Minister’s office.

The form letter, submitted by 9 respondents and all sent to the Minister’s office, supported Option 2 plus additional restrictions including:

- 24 days per month per boat to protect spawning stock in the deep-water sector.

- Preferred/restricted access periods where you would have to sit-out of an area for 6 weeks if you fished through another area's closure period.

The alternate options proposed in the email submissions were also submitted via the survey responses and were covered in the section above. Additional recommendations included reassessing the existing Effort Unit Conversion Factor in legislation and updating the relationship between boat size and effort units used per night to account for excess effort units and to provide an updated relationship based on modern vessels that is more reflective of current catch and effort.

The QSIA submission supported Option 2 as it provided consistent management between shallow and deep-water fisheries and was the best option to start a new management plan.

Two online submissions were received but only one provided feedback on the closure options. The submission did not support either of the proposed options. The submission supported alternative management changes involving a 20 night per month cap on boats and opening the deep-water fishery for the entire year.

Strip closures

62 individuals responded to the question on the strip closures. Overall survey feedback regarding the strip closures was mixed. 40 respondents supported the strip closure changes and 22 respondents did not support the strip closure changes. Figure 2 shows the survey responses to this question.

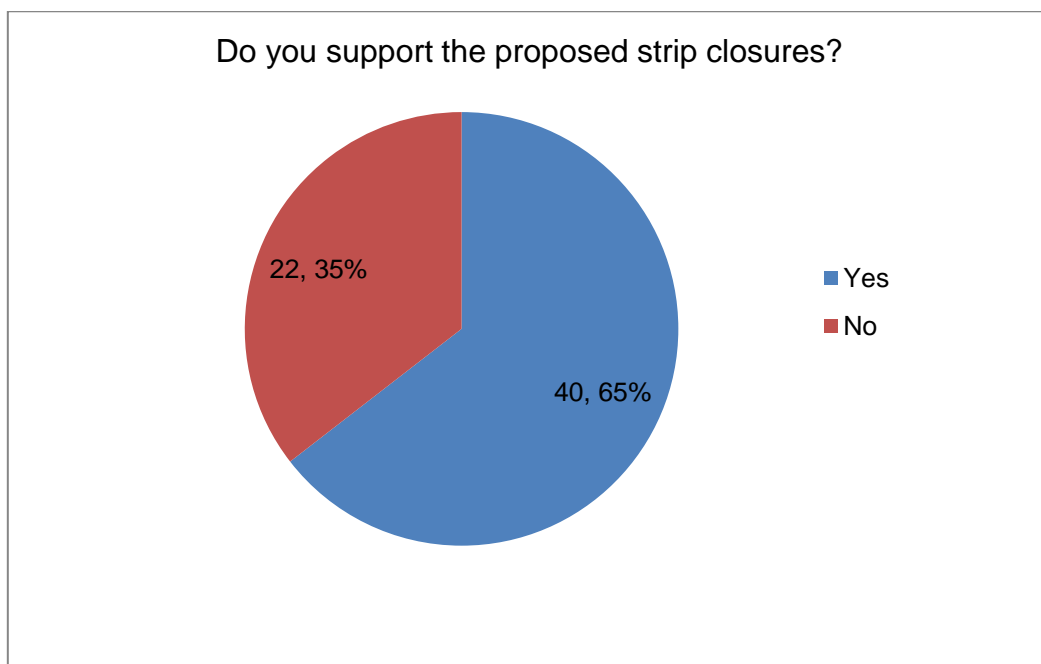


Figure 2: Summary of survey results to the question 'Do you support the proposed strip closures?' (n=62).

Respondents who supported the strip closure changes provided the following comments:

- support for protecting small/juvenile prawn;
- support for increased compliance/enforcement of the strip closures; and
- support for surveying the prawns before opening the strip closures.

Respondents who did not support the strip closure changes provided the following comments:

- it disproportionately impacts the smaller shallow water boats;
- no science or research behind the strip closures;

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- the strip closures are not in the right locations.
 - the stock biomass is at sustainable levels so there is no need.
 - not enough time has passed to understand whether the current strip closures are effective.
 - the closure period is too long (support 23 December to 1 March); and
 - the closure period occurs when prawns are at their highest market prices.

Other comments or suggestions included:

- introducing a minimum 2¼ inch mesh size for the region.
- additional locations for strip closures (e.g. Wide Bay Bar) or other changes (e.g. 3nm from Point Lookout to the border).

Written submissions

18 email responses were received including 9 independent emails and 9 form letters. Of these, only 10 emails responded to the proposed strip closure changes. 4 respondents supported the proposed strip closures, and 6 respondents did not support the strip closures. 14 of the written submissions were also sent to the Minister's office.

Email respondents provided the following comments:

- alternative management change to increase minimum mesh size for the Southern Offshore trawl region to 2¼ inch to protect small prawn.

The QSIA submission had mixed views on the strip closure changes and provided the following comments:

- support for research on the strip closures.
- the Southport and Tweed fleets support extending the South Stradbroke strip closure to 3nm off the beach to Point Lookout, but only from 1 January to 30 March.
- potential for fishery to shift further offshore by linking strip closures to current arrangements.
- support for better consultation with industry/the entire fleet.
- difference in impacts on large versus small vessels (strip closures disadvantage smaller vessels);
- concern about impartiality of hull unit conversion factors.

2 online submissions were received. One supported the proposed strip closure changes, and one supported the strip closure off Stradbroke Island, but only for January and February.

Response to feedback

Given the broad range of responses regarding possible closures in the southern offshore region and no clear preferences identified, any decisions on possible changes to closures in this region will be deferred until a later date. Without clear support for any option legislation changes are not able to be progressed.

New management arrangements commenced on 1 September 2021, and these may change effort unit usage and risk in each of the trawl management regions. The next Southern Offshore Trawl Region Workshop can consider the impact of the new management arrangements along with stakeholder feedback, focused on those who own Southern Offshore Effort Units and/or operate in the region. The workshop will review the situation and look to identify a more supported option to address effort and small prawn concerns in this region in the future if required.

Fisheries Queensland will also adjust the timing and hold the annual Southern Offshore Trawl Region Workshop to March/April 2022 to allow additional time to undertake consultation, resolve any uncertainty around a preferred management option and enable legislative changes to be implemented ahead of the 2022-23 season, commencing on 1 November 2022.

Next steps

No changes will be made to the existing fishery closures at this time in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region. This means that all current management arrangements remain in place for the upcoming season (2021-22).

The next meeting of the Southern Offshore Harvest Strategy Workshop will be held in March/April 2022 to discuss the feedback and enable more supported management options to be progressed for the 2022-23 season.