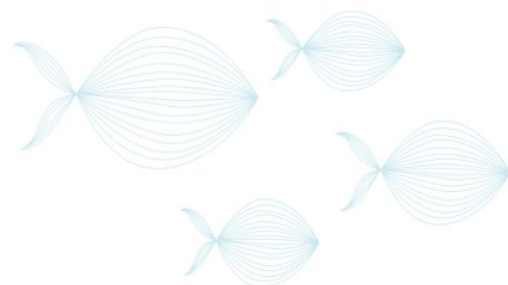


# Southern Offshore Trawl Region Discussion Paper August 2021



The Southern Offshore Harvest Strategy workshop was held over 28 June, 12 July and 19 July 2021. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss management options for the Southern Offshore Trawl Region aimed at optimising the harvest of prawns during the season and to address concerns around the risk of reaching the effort cap commencing 1 November for the 2021/22 fishing season. The meeting communique is available online at <https://www.daf.qld.gov.au/business-priorities/fisheries/sustainable/fishery-working-groups/trawl-working-group/communiques>.

## ***Southern Offshore Trawl Region closure period***

Fisheries Queensland presented data showing the stock biomass is a 62% of unfished levels and the proposed initial Southern Offshore Harvest Strategy effort cap for the 2021-22 season is 845 266 effort units. Effort unit usage in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region in 2020 was around 830 000 effort units and has been around 700 000 - 800 000 effort units since 2010.

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

Industry expressed concern of increasing effort in the Southern Offshore Region and the risks of potentially reaching the effort cap prior to the end of the season (31 October). Concerns were that this situation may create a race to fish given changes to regionalise the trawl fishery and proposed management changes to the scallop fishery. Industry was concerned about effort shift into the Southern Offshore Trawl Region.

Whilst the potential risk of increasing effort unit usage in the region is an unknown and stocks are healthy, the workshop discussed several options for fishing closures to help manage effort in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region, minimise the risk of the effort cap being reached early and protect small prawn and the spawning stock for the future.

The following two closure options were identified for consultation:

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 period.

2. Continue with 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).

Industry also supported the removal of the existing Southern Trawl Fishery effort trigger which, if reached, reduces effort in the fishery to 24 days per month during May, June, July.

The data below shows the 2019 and 2020 monthly catch and effort for Eastern King Prawns in the Southern Offshore Trawl region.

Month	Year					
	2019			2020		
	Licences	Days Fished	Catch (kg)	Licences	Days Fished	Catch (kg)
January	108	1558	223474	126	1830	289801
February	105	866	153199	119	1333	248473
March	123	1676	388350	115	1121	234584
April	111	1239	206128	96	1000	207080
May	104	1451	256858	96	1068	249139
June	96	1051	153844	85	1085	256941
July	88	1135	170824	80	1082	231740
August	83	1141	144885	89	1179	198578
September	81	891	103298	81	947	118899
October	47	627	60429	51	571	71583
November	112	1387	159342	91	1090	122631
December	114	1179	153543	100	807	90737

**Option 1** aims to resolve the differing operating requirements between some deep and shallow water operators. This option would reduce more effort in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region with approximately 95 000 effort units used on average in January. Average usage in October is around 38 000 effort units. This option also has the benefit of potentially reducing effort shift from other regions and reduces effort on prawns at a time when larger proportions of the stock are smaller and soft because of being in a rapid growth period. This option would align with the Southern Inshore Trawl Region closure periods and may reduce the likelihood of effort shifting between adjacent trawl regions and from the northern regions.

The workshop discussed that if the Southern Offshore Trawl Region operators have a closure until 20 January there is a high likelihood that the deep water fleet will head outside 50 fathoms at the opening as stocks may have replenished locally. Likewise, if the Southern Inshore Trawl Region mirrors an October/January closure those vessels may stay in the Southern Inshore Trawl Region for February as the bugs would have had a rest for a month. Furthermore, a January closure may make it unappealing for Central/Northern operators to steam down to fish the Southern Offshore Region as it's hard to justify the fuel for just 1 month of fishing prior to the Central/Northern region opening in March. The Fraser Island area would more than likely only see the current level of fishing predominately from the Tin Can Bay fleet.

The timing of this closure may have impacts on some fishing businesses however some operators believed the long-term benefits to the stock would offset this impact. For this reason, access to the area south of Point Lookout was proposed to allow some inshore harvest to meet current market needs in December and January to support affected inshore fishing businesses.

**Option 2** seeks to maintain the existing closure period and extend it to the entire Southern Offshore Trawl Region. This option would have less impact on effort unit usage in the Southern Offshore Trawl Region with fewer days fished during October, could allow possible effort shift between regions more easily but will allow harvest to continue during months that are important to both the shallow water and deep water fishery in order to meet market demand around Christmas. This option relies more heavily on the strip closures to offer protection to small prawn during September to March rather than a full closure. However, potentially doesn't address the concerns around reaching the regional effort cap as adequately but still offers some effort reduction. Some industry members preferred this approach due to the stocks being healthy and to allow fishers to adjust to the recent regional effort unit changes and see the effects of these on fishing behaviour prior to making significant change.

Fisheries Queensland acknowledges that both options presented have benefits and impacts and an agreed position on how to best address the concerns raised could not be resolved at the workshop.

Fisheries Queensland does not recommend the removal of the 24 day per month Southern Trawl Fishery effort trigger as proposed for both Option 1 and Option 2. This restriction is intended to reduce effort on the prawn stocks during the main spawning months. The removal of this may serve to increase effort on stocks at an important time of their life cycle and may not help address the concerns raised by the workshop.

**Response required: Fisheries Queensland is seeking feedback on which option you would support, and if not what alternative you would support?**

### **Strip Closure Amendments**

The current inshore "strip" closures, led by industry, to protect small prawn from 20 September to 1 March annually have been well received. The workshop discussed options for additional protection to small prawns, particularly if an optimal closure period couldn't be identified.

The workshop discussed areas of continued concern of small or soft prawn harvest and recommended two inshore "strip" closures to be amended and an additional closure be introduced:

- the Caloundra/Moreton Island strip closure to be expanded to include the area off Caloundra and modified area down near the Jumpinpin Bar.
- the closure off South Stradbroke Island to be extended further north to Point Lookout; and
- an additional closure is proposed near North Reef around the Swain Reefs.

The proposed closure maps have been attached.

***Fisheries Queensland's preferred option is to implement the closures as described.***

**Response required: Fisheries Queensland is seeking feedback on if you support the proposed strip closures?**

Feedback is to be received no later than 18 August 2021 by completing the survey available online at <https://daf.engagementhub.com.au/southern-offshore-trawl> or by emailing [fisheriesmanagers@daf.qld.gov.au](mailto:fisheriesmanagers@daf.qld.gov.au).