The top half of the cover features a light blue background with a pattern of fine, overlapping wavy lines representing water. Several stylized fish, composed of fine lines, are scattered across this area, swimming in various directions. The bottom half of the cover is a solid dark blue color.

Queensland commercial trawl fishery (fin fish)

Consultation on proposed management actions

Discussion paper

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The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries proudly acknowledges all First Nations peoples (Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders) and the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the country on which we live and work. We acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and commit to ongoing reconciliation. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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Background

Harvest strategy workshops are held to review performance of fisheries and provide input from key stakeholders into the administration and development of harvest strategies.

An online harvest strategy workshop for the commercial trawl fishery (fin fish) was held on 13 August 2021. The workshop discussed various management strategies to meet the fishery's harvest strategy targets, including:

- a new independent observer protocol
- legislative timelines and processes for transitioning existing trip limits into annual quotas
- amending the fishery area to within 20 fathoms
- introducing the southern fishery closure to legislation.

This discussion paper is seeking feedback on possible management measures proposed by the working group to ensure sustainable management of the fishery in accordance with the fundamental principles of the *Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy: 2017–2027*, the *Commercial trawl fishery (fin fish) stout whiting harvest strategy: 2021–2026*, the main objective of the *Fisheries Act 1994* and the Queensland Government's responsibility to ensure our public fishery resources are managed in a responsible and sustainable manner.

Have your say

Fisheries Queensland is seeking feedback from commercial, recreational, charter and traditional fishers, environmental groups and other stakeholders on management measures presented in this discussion paper to manage the Queensland commercial trawl fishery (fin fish). Feedback on this discussion paper will be used to assess options presented for management action regarding effort caps, latent effort and sustainable management of stocks.

Different management measures will have different impacts on individual sectors within the fishery (e.g. commercial fishers, recreational fishers, traditional fishers, fish and chip shop owners, tackle retailers and environmental organisations). Therefore, it is important to understand the preferences of people who have an interest in the fishery so we can make a balanced decision on final management arrangements.

No decisions have been made and none will be made until after consultation.

The fastest and easiest way to provide your feedback is to complete the online survey at:
<https://daf.engagementhub.com.au/stout-whiting>.

The survey questions are also available at the end of this document if you would prefer to print the survey and post your submission to:

Commercial trawl (fin fish) discussion paper
Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
GPO Box 46
Brisbane Qld 4001

PLEASE NOTE: The survey questions are designed to seek your input – they are not a voting tool. Answers to these questions will provide insight into the preferences of all stakeholders.

Submissions close 5 pm, 22 July 2022.



For more information, email fisheriesmanagers@daf.qld.gov.au or call 13 25 23.

If you would like to receive updates on the commercial trawl fishery (fin fish) consultation, email your details to fisheriesmanagers@daf.qld.gov.au.

About the fishery

The commercial trawl fishery (fin fish) targets stout whiting (*Sillago robusta*) in water depths of 20–50 fathoms between Sandy Cape and the Queensland – New South Wales border, defined in Schedule 8 of the Fisheries (Commercial Fisheries) Regulation 2019.

The fishery is permitted to retain other by-product species such as red spot whiting (*Sillago flindersi*), yellowtail scad (*Trachurus novaezelandiae*) and goatfish (family Mullidae). It is a limited-access fishery with five T4 licences currently operated by two licence holders – one using Danish seine gear and the other using otter trawl nets. While stout whiting is the target species in the fishery and constitutes the majority of harvest, several other species are permitted to be taken and some catch limits are in place for these permitted species. There is no recreational harvest of stout whiting; however, recreational fishers do catch yellowtail scad as a bait species.

The stout whiting spawning biomass is estimated at 42% of virgin levels, which is greater than the biomass associated with maximum sustainable yield. The risk of fishing to the sustainability of the stock is considered low due to the existing management framework and the low number of operators with access to the fishery.

Catch of stout whiting as the target species for the fishery has been managed through total allowable commercial catch (TACC) since 1997, with stock assessments scheduled every three years to set the TACC. In interim years, annual monitoring of standardised catch rates and fishery trends occurs to allow comparison to a reference period to monitor performance and adjust the TACC for the following year, based on achieving long-term target biomass levels.

For the 2022 fishing season, stock assessment analysis provided a recommended biological catch of 2786 tonnes to achieve 48% biomass by 2027. The stock assessment also estimated the proportion of total harvest of stout whiting (including discards) attributable to each fishery over the financial years from 2016 to 2020, with 46% of the total harvest estimated to be from the T4 commercial fishers. Accordingly, 46% of the recommended biological catch will be allocated to the T4 fishing sector as a total quota entitlement, which corresponds to a total quota entitlement of 1281 tonnes for the 2022 fishing season.

Catch of other permitted species, managed under either a TACC (goatfish and yellowtail scad) or trip limit (octopus, squid, cuttlefish and threadfin bream), is low.

Table 1: Summary of fish stocks covered by this fishery

Feature	Details
Target species (tier 1)	<p>The target species is stout whiting (<i>Sillago robusta</i>).</p> <p>The target species is managed under a TACC for prescribed whiting, which also includes red spot whiting (<i>Sillago flindersi</i>).</p> <p>The majority (>99%) of the harvest is stout whiting.</p>
Secondary species (tier 2)	<p>Yellowtail scad (<i>Trachurus novaezelandiae</i>) and goatfish (family Mullidae) are managed under TACC through individual non-transferable quota associated with the T4 symbol.</p>
By-product species (tier 3)	<p>Permitted trawl species managed using trip limits are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • threadfin bream/pinkies (family Nemipteridae) • octopus (<i>Octopus</i> sp.) • cuttlefish (<i>Metasepia</i> sp., <i>Sepia</i> spp.) • squid (<i>Loliolus</i> sp., <i>Notodarus</i> spp., <i>Photolugio</i> spp., <i>Sepioteuthis</i> spp.). <p>Permitted trawl species not subject to any catch limits are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balmain bugs (<i>Ibacus</i> spp.) • Moreton Bay bugs (<i>Thenus</i> spp.).

Proposed management actions

We are seeking feedback on three proposed reforms for the fishery:

- expand the regulated fishery area to inside 20 fathoms, including a 1 nautical mile buffer from the shore and recognising any existing closed areas
- introduce an annual southern closure south of Cape Moreton from 20 September to 31 March
- transfer permitted species trip limits to individual annual catch limits.

1. Expanded fishery area

Between 2017 and 2020, as an expanded fishery area trial the two T4 licence holders were issued a General Fisheries Permit to allow them to fish waters inside 20 fathoms within the regulated fishery area to within 1 nautical mile of shore, excluding any marine park closures or existing trawl fishery closures.

Throughout the expanded fishery area trial, observed and standardised catch rates in the fishery improved and the TACC was reached for the first time. Feedback from the two commercial licence holders is that the expanded fishery area allows them to fish their quota more efficiently and spend less time on the water. This is reflected in the logbook data.

Expanding the fishery area for the T4 fishery is considered low risk as the waters between 20 fathoms and 1 nautical mile proposed to be added to the regulated fishery area are already accessed by the east coast otter trawl fleet under T1 symbols. The addition of two extra vessels in these waters is not expected to have a significant impact on the ecosystem.

Nets used to harvest stout whiting have low bycatch rates, so additional impacts on bycatch by the fishery are considered negligible. Observer data for the fishery from 2010 showed low catches of recreational species and low bycatch rates overall. Danish seine gear fishing accounts for 60% of the fishery harvest and presented particularly low bycatch rates. Bycatch risk for trawl gear is minimised by using large mesh sizes, turtle excluder devices and long sweeps.

A new data validation program, which commenced in 2022, includes observer coverage in the fishery and will collect information on target and non-target species.

Expanding the current fishery area to provide increased access to the stout whiting resource is likely to improve the economic viability of the fishery by reducing the number of days at sea. During the expanded fishery area trial no complaints or issues were raised by any T1 operators. Conflict between the T1 and T4 fleets was minimal due as neither group competes for access to the same resource. Feedback from T1 fishers during the trial was positive, as the trial resulted in less stout whiting taken as trawl bycatch, improving trawl catch quality with a higher percentage take of target species .

See Figure 1 overleaf for a map of the proposed expanded fishery area.

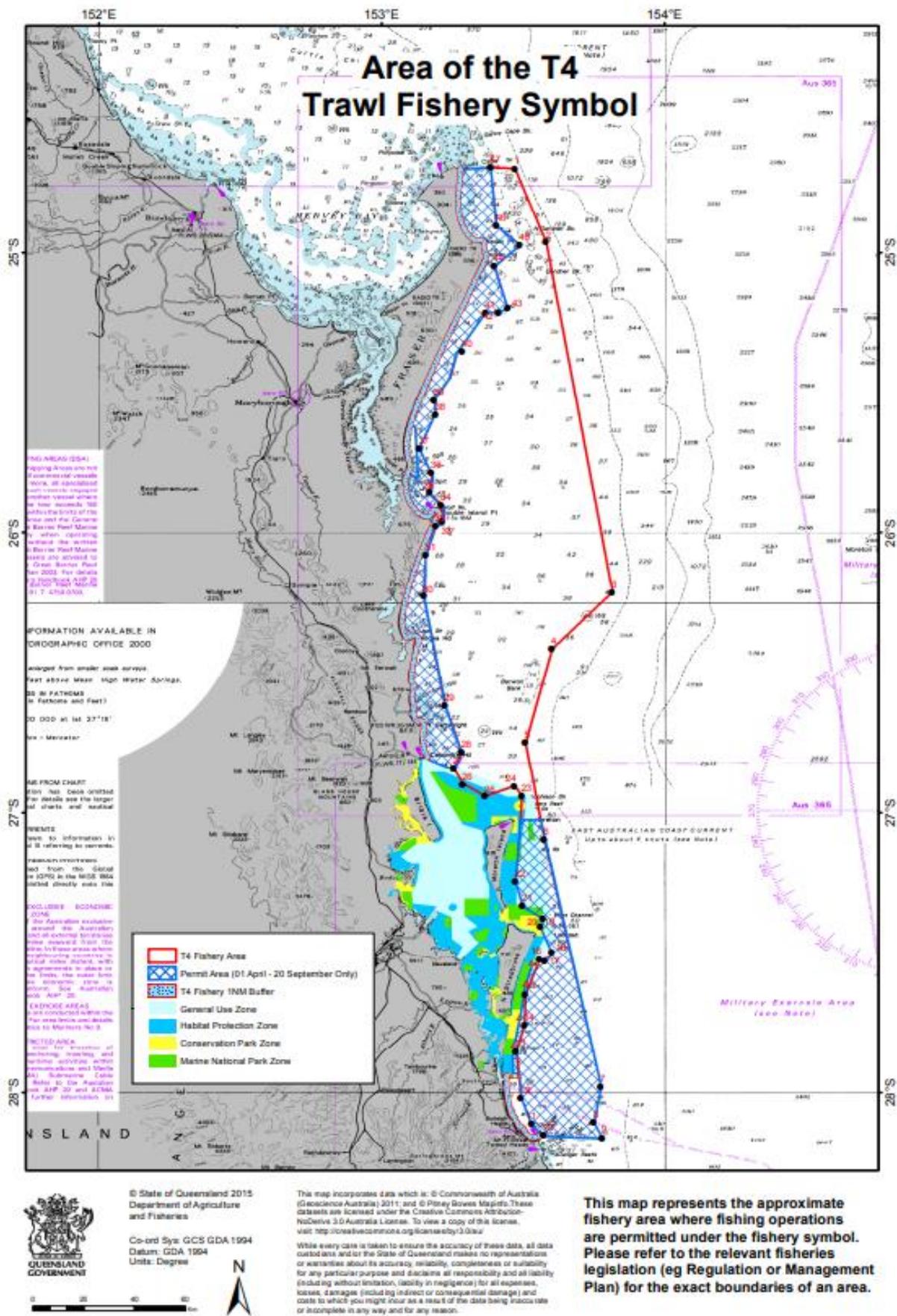


Figure 1: Proposed expanded fishery area

2. South of Cape Moreton closure

A proposed area closure will exclude T4 licence holders from operating south of Cape Moreton from the start of the existing six-week southern regulated waters closure on 20 September until the conclusion of the main period of the shallow water prawn season on 31 March.

This closure will restrict access to existing otter trawl areas when otter trawl effort is high, and will exclude fishing activity during key prawn recruitment periods in shallow water nursery areas. This closure also reduces ecological risk as half of the fishery area would be closed for half of the season.

The closure was included as part of the management trial through permit conditions between 2017 and 2020. The closure is currently enacted voluntarily by T4 licence holders and is supported by T1 fishers on the Gold Coast. No complaints were received from stakeholders during the closure trial.

3. Transfer trip limits to annual catch limits

Currently, a number of permitted species in the fishery are regulated by trip limits under the Fisheries Declaration 2019. This includes:

- squid – 260 kg trip limit
- octopus – 100 kg trip limit
- cuttlefish – 260 kg tip limit
- threadfin bream – 200 kg trip limit.

As part of the 2017 permit trial, 40 tonnes of threadfin bream was issued to each T4 symbol.

Trip limits were initially introduced when there were five active licences operating in the fishery. There are now only two active licences operating in the fishery and vessels have been upgraded to increase freezer capacity, meaning fewer trips are taken each year in the fishery. While the number of trips taken per year have been reduced, trip limits for permitted species have not changed, meaning that licence holders have catching lower quantities of permitted species than in previous seasons.

Licence holders also report that most catch of permitted species is currently being discarded as it is not marketable at the small volumes currently regulated by the trip limits.

To reduce discarding of species that can be sustainably harvested and to allow operators to fish efficiently, it is proposed to convert trip limits into Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) limits issued to each T4 symbol through individual non-transferable annual quota units. This is similar to what is currently in place for other secondary species in the fishery, such as goatfish and yellowtail scad. Annual quota limits may allow fishers to retain more catch and access new markets, providing positive benefits for the local economy and reducing the amount of bycatch discarded at sea.

The proposed TACCs limits are based on the average number of trips taken in recent years, during which the number of active operators has remained constant, multiplied by the current trip limits. Number of trips and total catch of secondary species are described in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Number of trips and total catch of secondary species under current trip limits

Year	No. trips	Squid (kg) – 260 kg trip limit	Octopus (kg) –100 kg trip limit	Cuttlefish (kg) – 260 kg trip limit	Threadfin bream (kg) – 200 kg trip limit
2015	55	374	463	756	1463
2016	63	833	1035	395	13434
2017	69	769	438	935	3736
2018	61	590	110	218	6492
2019	62	303	215	165	1
2020	57	1513	478	79	2282

The proposed TACC limits to be issued under individual non-transferable quota units are:

- squid – 16 tonnes (no T1 limit)
- octopus: 6 tonnes (limit of 61–66 litres for each seven-day period for the T1 fishery)
- cuttlefish: 16 tonnes (no T1 limit)
- threadfin bream: 100 tonnes (not a T1 species).

TACC limits for permitted species also offer a more responsive and effective tool to manage any overfishing risks which arise.

Next steps

Feedback from this consultation will inform a decision by the Queensland Government about changes to management actions.

Survey questions

Your say matters and we want to hear from you about these proposed management measures. The questions with an asterisk (*) are mandatory.

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries is collecting the information on this form to inform management actions for the east coast otter trawl fishery under the *Fisheries Act 1994* and subordinate legislation.

This information is being collected for the purpose of obtaining feedback on proposed changes to management actions. Your personal information will not be disclosed to any other parties unless authorised or required by law.

Question 1. Your information

Name:

Address:

Postcode*:

Email address*:

Question 2. What sector of the fishing industry are you from?*

- Commercial fisher
- Recreational fisher
- Charter fishing operator
- Traditional fisher / Traditional Owner
- Seafood wholesaler/marketer
- Hospitality (restaurant, café, fish and chip shop) owner/worker
- Fishing tackle retailer
- Environmental group, industry peak body or other non-government organisation
- Interested community member
- Other

Question 3. Do you support the expansion of the T4 fishery area to inside 20 fathoms?*

Yes

No

Comments:

Question 4. Do you support legislating the closure of the T4 fishery south of Cape Moreton?*

Yes

No

Comments:

Question 5. Do you support transferring trip limits to annual quotas for permitted species?*

Yes

No

Comments:

Question 6. Are there any other issues, opportunities or solutions regarding these proposed management measures that you would like to raise?

Question 7: Do you have any other comments, suggestions or ideas relating to this discussion paper and not covered by the questions above?

Yes

No

Comments:
