



# Review report

## Use of Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme funds to assist fishers with out-of-pocket expenses

November 2022

### 1. Background

This report is prepared in response to item 4.2 in the Queensland Ombudsman's preliminary observations and proposed actions. It provides an overview of the Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme and the rationale for using funds from the scheme to provide out-of-pocket assistance to fishers who purchased a vessel tracking unit from provider, Option Audio but did not receive the unit.

**Table 1:** Extract from Ombudsman's preliminary observations and proposed actions

No.	Observations	Proposed actions
4.2	The department accessed the rebate scheme to provide funds to reimburse fishers' costs that resulted from Option Audio's service delivery actions. The terms of the rebate scheme do not appear to provide for the use of the allocated funds in this manner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review the department's decision to utilise funds from the rebate scheme, instead of its own budget, to provide payments to fishers in addressing Option Audio performance problems.</li><li>• Consider the terms of the rebate scheme at the time and whether the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) provided approval for the rebate scheme to be used for this purpose.</li><li>• Take appropriate action where the rebate scheme was not appropriately utilised and report outcomes in the review report.</li></ul>

Source: [Ombudsman's preliminary observations and proposed actions](#)

## 2. Review

### 2.1 Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme

Vessel tracking became a requirement for all major commercial fisheries in 2019–2020 (an action under the *Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy: 2017–2027*). The Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme was established in 2018 to help implement vessel tracking. The objective of the scheme is to help eligible commercial fishers with the costs of purchasing and installing approved vessel tracking units on their commercial fishing boats. A total of \$3.1 million was originally available under the scheme, including \$2.2 million from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and \$0.9 million from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF).

### 2.2 Out-of-pocket assistance

After implementation of vessel tracking in 2019, DAF received complaints from fishers concerning provider, Option Audio, including their failure to supply purchased units and provide outstanding refunds for returned units. DAF actively managed these issues to resolve the matters with Option Audio. Due to the protracted delays by Option Audio, DAF took additional steps to assist fishers with some of their out-of-pocket expenses.

Prior to providing out-of-pocket assistance, DAF allowed fishers to continue to operate without vessel tracking if they could provide evidence that they had taken reasonable steps to receive and install a vessel tracking unit. Addressing the outstanding refund issue ensured all fishers could become compliant in a reasonable period of time.

### 2.3 Use of funds from the rebate scheme and GBRMPA endorsement

The funds for out-of-pocket assistance were drawn from the Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme. DAF did not seek approval from GBRMPA. DAF was of the view that the use of the rebate scheme funding aligned with the objective of the scheme to assist with the implementation of vessel tracking. Further, DAF contributed close to 30% of funds to the rebate scheme and it was determined that the assistance would be drawn from DAF's portion of the funds. Approximately \$50 000 was used for out-of-pocket assistance.

In addition, it was anticipated that there would be an underspend of the scheme. From the \$3.1 million, only around \$480 000 had been used at the time. To date, there is still over \$2 million remaining in the rebate scheme, which has been extended until June 2024.

DAF discussed the withdrawal of funds with GBRMPA at a later date and they endorsed the process and consideration that DAF undertook at the time.

### 2.4 Review summary

DAF and GBRMPA are satisfied that the use of the Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme funds to provide out-of-pocket assistance to fishers falls within the scope of the objective of the rebate scheme, to help commercial fishers with the costs of purchasing and/or installing approved vessel tracking units on their commercial fishing boats.

DAF acknowledges that GBRMPA is a co-contributor of the Vessel Tracking Rebate Scheme and will ensure any future use of the scheme funding is endorsed by both parties.