

Net Free Zones Policy

Outcome of a dysfunctional legislative environment



The net free zone (NFZ) policy was introduced by the current Queensland government as an election commitment. At no stage did the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA) identify any economic modelling or sustainability issue to justify a resource reallocation from the commercial fishing to recreational fishing sectors.

This component of the QSIA submission provides some context in which the legislative and regulatory framework in which Queensland commercial fishers is flawed and needing an overhaul that removes political interference with fisheries management. The ongoing political interference in fisheries management puts at risk a viable food producing sector.

The value of the Queensland commercial seafood harvest in 2012-13 (latest figures) has been estimated at approximately \$277 million per year¹. This figure excludes the value of seafood once it travels through its supply chain to restaurants, small fish & chip shops, retail and wholesale outlets.

1. Failure to allow public scrutiny of 'Sustainable Fishing Policy'

Industry expected an opportunity to scrutinise government policy in an open and transparent manner. The outcome included:

- The release of a 'Sustainable Fishing Policy' on 29 January 2015, two days before the State election, see **Attachment B**.
- No time provided for industry or public scrutiny of the policy.
- No economic modelling was ever provided to the community or industry.

2. Poor Consultation Process

A Survey Monkey survey was composed by the government that was promoted as a means to consult with the community. The Survey instrument was focussed solely on commentary on zone boundaries not the merits of the policy.

The online poll attracted fewer than 6,000 responses in favour of the Government's plan – this is less than 1% of Queensland's 600,000 recreational fishers and a minuscule percentage of Queensland's total population of 4.7 million residents.

The survey did not have demographic filters so that it is impossible to know if non-Queensland residents expressed views on the policy. It was also impossible to assess how many times responses were duplicated.

Extensive industry-level investigations have revealed there was no discussion or engagement with any representative sector of the commercial fishing sector or the businesses that rely on the continuing supply of fish and seafood.

¹ Australian Fisheries and Aquaculture Statistics (2013, p.18).

3. Poor Policy Justification

The primary arguments used by the government to support the policy included:

- Ecological Sustainability;
- Building Recreational Fishing, Tourism and Charter Fishing Businesses; and
- Linkage to 2050 Reef Plan.

In terms of 'Ecological Sustainability' there is substantial evidence that sustainability is a spurious argument. Data compiled by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences and the DAF indicates that commercial species in Cairns, Mackay and Rockhampton are sustainably harvested by the commercial sector. Equally importantly, most of the commercial target species were NOT the target of the recreational sector; refer to **Attachment A**.

Questions of sustainability only arise for species where there is insufficient control over the recreational take. Using ecological sustainability as a foundation for removing viable, family owned business does not make sense, when the control of recreational fishing is virtually self-managed, if managed at all.

In terms of 'Building Recreational Fishing, Tourism and Charter Fishing Businesses' Queenslanders are becoming more aware that there are no regulatory obstacles to any type of tourism or charter business establishing in Cairns, Mackay or Rockhampton now or ever. No evidence has been produced to suggest that the introduction of NFZs will lead to new tourism, recreational or charter related businesses being established.

Attempts to link the introduction of NFZs to the listing of the GBR as endangered are totally unfounded. The inclusion of the NFZ points in the 2050 Reef Plan was entirely the work of the Queensland Government and not by any means a requirement of the Australian government. Three undertakings were made by the Federal and State governments including²:

- Establishment of an 80% reduction in pollution run-off in the property by 2025 and the commitment of an initial additional investment of \$200M to accelerate progress in water quality improvements;
- Confirmation of protection of greenfield areas by restricting major new port development in and adjoining the property, thereby limiting capital dredging for the development of new or expansion of existing port facilities to within the regulated port limits of the major ports of Gladstone, Hay Point/Mackay, Abbott Point and Townsville, excluding Fitzroy Delta, North Curtis Island and Keppel Bay from future port development and ensuring consistency with the 2003 Great Barrier Reef Zoning Plan; and
- The commitment toward a five-yearly evaluation of the plan performance and adaptation of its actions and targets on the basis of the results of future Great Barrier Reef Outlook reports.

² UNESCO – Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage World Heritage Committee, Thirty-ninth session. Bonn, Germany 28 June – 8 July 2015. UNESCO response which does not mention commercial fishing impacts at any level nor does it recognise or place any importance on the proposed net free zones. Full transcript: <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2015/whc15-39com-19-en.pdf>

The NFZ policy was never endorsed by the Federal government; the need to respond to UNESCO and the final inclusion of the NFZ policy in the 2050 Reef Plan never equalled bi-partisan support.

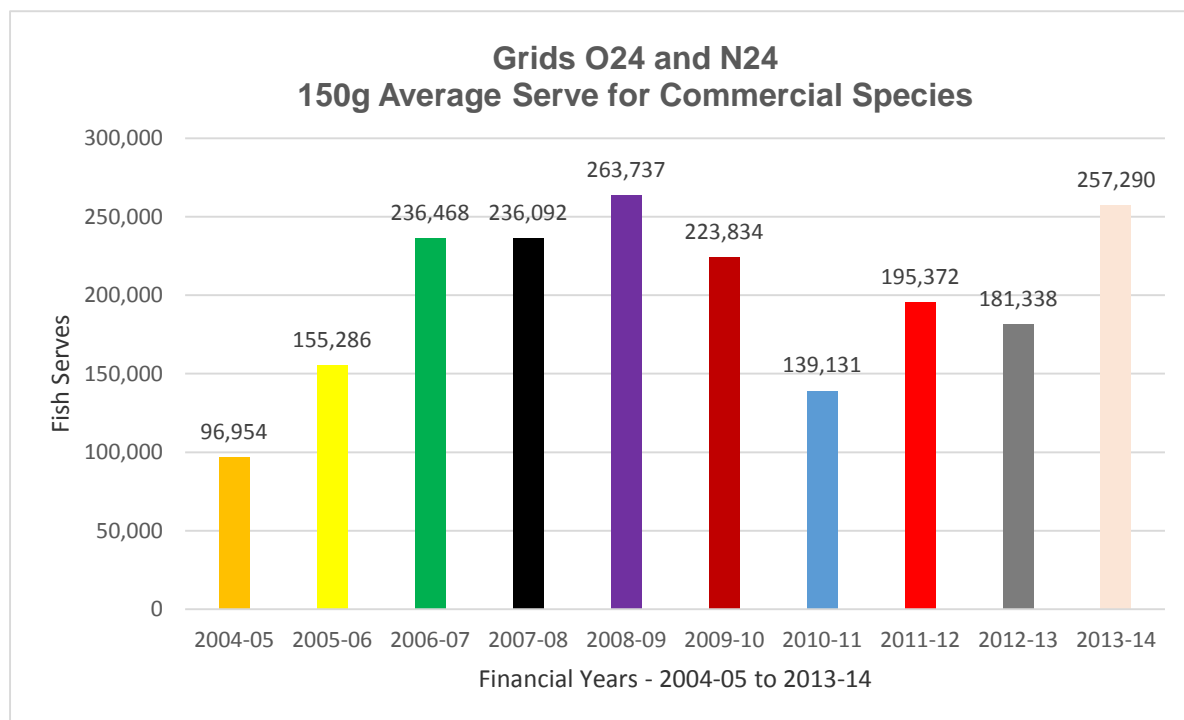
4. Outcomes

The introduction of the NFZs continues the use of closures as a means of managing commercial fisheries in Queensland. It is a crude but politically useful tool for governments that do not want to anger the recreational fishing lobby. What should be understood is that the loudest elements of the recreational fishing sector do not represent the ‘mum’s and dad’s’ that fish but a vocal minority who have the means and discretionary income to spend on their hobby.

With the loss of the NFZs Queensland consumer have lost access to many net caught fish species including: Barramundi³, Bream, Flathead, Grunter, Grey Mackerel, Mullet, Queenfish, Shark, Blue and King Threadfin.

Outlined in Figure 1 are commercial fishing Grids O24 and N24 cover the Mackay region and historic catches of multiple, net caught species and the loss of fish serves.

Figure 1. Average Fish Serves



Source: Qfish website⁴, data contained at **Attachment C**.

Notes: Each year represents the total number of 150g serves of fish for Barramundi, Bream, Flathead, Grunter, Grey Mackerel, Mullet, Queenfish, Shark, Blue and King Threadfin.

³ One third of commercially caught Barramundi has now been denied to the Queensland domestic market to the benefit of local recreational fishers.

⁴ The QFish website Queenslanders to analyse and present Queensland commercial and recreational fisheries data through the use of cubes (interactive tables) and maps. QSIA has used this publicly available data to create the tables and excel spread sheets linked to Grids O24 and N24. Link: <http://qfish.daff.qld.gov.au/>

The data in Figure 1 only represents the loss of fish from the Mackay region. Cairns and Rockhampton increase the loss of fresh caught, local fish by commercial net fishers.

5. Summary of Failures

The legislative framework has failed commercial fishers in Queensland. This failure is the culmination of multiple issues, including:

- Political influence and advocacy of a small but vocal group of recreational fishers;
- Ongoing influence of environmental non-government agencies and their influence of commercial fisheries policy;
- Diminishing budget situation facing Fisheries Queensland limiting their capacity to undertake fisheries management;
- Ongoing investment warnings in every Queensland fishery;
- Lack of political leadership;
- Fisheries managed on commercial fishing data alone;
- Limited understanding of the cumulative impact of recreational fisheries;
- Suspect controls on recreational take (i.e. bag limits); and
- No long-term vision for any Queensland fishery.

The NFZ were never developed to address sustainability issues. In the decade before its introduction commercial and recreational fishers were able to enjoy the benefits of a sustainable fisheries in Cairns, Mackay and Rockhampton.