



CARPENTARIA SHIRE
Outback by the Sea®

Gulf of Carpentaria Inshore Fishery Consultation

November 2023

*It's a great place to work,
live and play*





www.carpentaria.qld.gov.au

Enquiries:

Email: council@carpentaria.qld.gov.au

Telephone: 07 4745 2200

Fax: 07 4745 1340

Street Address: 29 – 33 Haig Street Normanton

Postal Address: PO Box 31 Normanton QLD 4890

Carpentaria Shire Council would like to respectfully acknowledge the Gkuthaarn, Kukatj and Kurtijar peoples as the traditional owners of the lands and waters that form the Region. Council pays its respect to elders' past, present and emerging and welcomes the ongoing role that indigenous people play within the Carpentaria community.



Contents

Introduction.....	3
Regional Position and Local Economic Profile	4
Council's Response	5
ECONOMIC IMPACT	6
SOCIAL IMPACTS	7
Closing Comments.....	8



Introduction

Carpentaria Shire Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries on the Gulf of Carpentaria Inshore Fishery Discussion paper on behalf of our commercial fishing industry and the residents of Karumba, Normanton and the surrounding region.

Carpentaria Shire Council is committed to providing a quality lifestyle for residents who live in the Gulf and tri-partisan support on decisions that impact on the lifestyle of our communities is essential to ensure that our residents continue to have a sustainable economic future to support that lifestyle.

On behalf of the Carpentaria Shire communities, Council takes its role as an Advocate for the Shire, and the broader region, seriously and is always seeking opportunities to advocate for solutions that secure a strong future for our residents. This includes challenging State and Federal Governments on decisions that have the potential to damage the economic, social, cultural and / or environmental fabric of our communities.

Council is concerned that the proposed changes are provided with limited transparency. The data and science behind the proposed closures is lacking. Given the fact that there will be inter-generational impact on the economic health of the Shire and the commercial fishing industry, Council would expect a more robust and thorough analysis of available data would have been presented to support the decision making proposed and that the five-week time to respond limits the capacity of the industry to respond in a holistic way.



Regional Position and Local Economic Profile

Carpentaria Shire is located on the Savannah Way in North West Queensland in the South Eastern region of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Shire covers an area of approximately 65,000 square kilometres and has a population of 1,971. The Shire is in the Federal Seat of Kennedy and State Seat of Traeger.

Carpentaria Shire is located across the traditional country of the Gkuthaarn, Kukatj and Kurtijar peoples and is the Local Government Authority representing the townships of Normanton and Karumba and is a member of the Townsville and North West Regional Development Australia.



Population

The Estimated Resident Population of the Carpentaria Shire was 1,971 as of the June 2021.

Building approvals

The value of building approvals in Carpentaria Shire was \$2m in the 2021-22 Mar FYTD financial year.

Housing prices

In June 2022, the median house price in Carpentaria Shire was \$180,000. The housing market is greatly restricted due to finance and supply chain constraints and availability of housing is scarce in the area. This adds significantly to the ability of Council as well as other local organisations, to find accommodation for those most in need in this remote, disadvantaged community.

Businesses by industry

The Shire has a diverse industry base with agriculture, fishing, mining, tourism and government administration providing the majority of the Shire's income. While Normanton is the region's government and administrative centre, much of the Shire's commercial activity comes through Karumba, which has an active port based around the export of zinc and lead. It also has a substantial commercial fishing industry that harvests prawns, barramundi, Spanish mackerel, salmon and mud crabs.

The Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing industry had the largest number of total registered businesses in Carpentaria Shire, comprising 30.1% of all total registered businesses, compared to 8.9% in Queensland.

In 2021/22, the Carpentaria Shire contributed 6.5% of Queensland's employment in Fishing related industry and 3.7% of its value added. There were 196 FTE jobs in the sector, and it generated \$29.54m of activity during that period.

Unemployment and disadvantage

The Shire is classified as one of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia using the SEIFA measurement scale (851). Kowanyama (to the north) and Doomadgee (to the west of Carpentaria) are amongst the top ten areas of disadvantage in the country. Source: Socio-



Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2021 | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au).

In the 2023 March quarter, the unemployment rate in the Carpentaria Shire was 29.2%.

In the broader Carpentaria area at the SA2 level, at last census there were 3,062 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. In Carpentaria Shire alone there are 823 First Nations People or 39.6% of the population.

Council's Response

The proposal to establish additional gill net free zones will have considerable impact on the economic viability of Carpentaria Shire and in particular, the community of Karumba.

Council is concerned that the period of consultation (5 weeks) to comment on the proposal to introduce additional zones has limited the capacity of the industry to respond with robust and in-depth analysis, noting that the data behind the definition of the new zones has not been made publicly available.

At the 6th meeting of the Future Fishing Taskforce held on 01 Sept 2023, the Taskforce noted that the previous stock assessment for King Threadfin was estimated to be at around 5% of unfished biomass but also noted that this was being updated with more data and the new assessment would give a greater degree of confidence to inform management decisions which will be available in coming months. They also noted that latent licences, lack of harvest strategy and absence of total allowable commercial quota meant displaced fishers from the east coast fishery could shift into the Gulf of Carpentaria if this wasn't pre-emptively managed.

At the same time, the Queensland Sustainable Fisheries Strategy 2017 – 2027 highlighted a need to set parameters, measure and record data and performance. Foundational reforms include: 1. Improved monitoring and research (page11).

Then specifically, *Action 6.1 commits to: Develop a guideline on harvest strategies, including a process for how parameters should be set. At a minimum, this will include:*

- defining the fishery and its overall objective
- defining reference points for fish stocks (target reference points, limit reference points and triggers for management action)
- defining performance indicators and monitoring activities, as well as the process for assessing fishery performance against objectives
- defining decision rules and appropriate management responses if triggers are reached
- a biennial review to ensure management arrangements remain effective.

None of these activities or actions seems to have occurred to date.

Council and the industry agree that a clear framework to inform the future direction of the inshore fishery and operational landscape and the proposed harvest strategy will future-proof the industry, but it is the strategy and improved monitoring and reporting arrangements that should inform the consultation about changes to fishing zones. That is; the process is being conducted in reverse.



Council holds concerns that:

- There is limited up-to-date available data and evidence of need to support the new zones
- Australia's border security will be impacted - Australia's commercial fishing fleet are the nation's first line of defence, as noted by Border Security offices at the Gulf of Carpentaria Commercial Fishing Association AGM held at Karumba on October 12, 2023
- The loss of income to fishing businesses that will impact on the ability of industry to service existing debt and / or expand their business which impacts on future ability to attract investment to the Gulf
- The flow-on impacts to other local businesses – Karumba's fishing fleet also supports local processing, accommodation, food and retail businesses and the tourism industry
- Effort shift into other commercial fisheries
- That businesses in the supply chain are not considered in the proposed compensation program
- The overall economic and social impact on the Carpentaria Shire.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

The total conservatively estimated annual impact is a loss of 41 local jobs, \$8.39m in output and \$3.59m in value added. (Source: Economy ID)

In a town the size of Karumba (population 487) the economic impact of the additional zones will be devastating. There are an estimated 196 jobs involved either directly or indirectly in fishing related industry and the projected impact of the additional zones if the catch is reduced by the similar amount of area affected (i.e., 20%) would result in the loss of 29 direct local jobs per annum on an ongoing basis. This would reduce \$6M in direct output per year and \$2.57M in industry value added per year. The impact is likely to be even greater than this however, as the proposed areas for closure are some of the most productive fishing zones of the inshore fishery.

From this direct contraction in the economy, it is anticipated that there would be flow-on effects into other related intermediate industries as well as decreased new employee consumption expenditure. These combined flow-on effects are estimated to lead to a decrease of another 12 indirect local jobs per year and reduction of \$1.02M in indirect industry value added per year off the back of \$ 2.39M in output.



SOCIAL IMPACTS

The impacts on our small remote community of these zone closures will be immense. The investment that fishing businesses have made into the area will need to be considered in compensation packages and job losses as projected in a small community will be felt in many other sectors also. Being a remote community our connectedness to the rest of the State and country is always an issue. Isolation has negative effects on many people's mental health and these proposed changes would exacerbate this further. ([Social isolation and loneliness - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au))

The impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic were felt deeply by our community and many businesses had only just started to recover, when a late and extended wet season further isolated towns, limiting the 2023 tourist season to a few months. Pleasingly, the Gulf fishery benefited from the extended wet and anecdotal evidence suggests that recreational and commercial fishing is as healthy as ever. Hence, the confusion in our community as to the need for these zones.

Despite this recovery, there is significant research to suggest that policy change does impact on the mental health of commercial fishers.

A 2017 study, published in 2021 found that the most commonly perceived stressors were those relating to changes in government regulation, red tape and uncertainty about future regulatory changes. Financial concerns along with fluctuating prices and the demands of running a business were also widely perceived as stressors, as were issues of poor public image and conflict with the recreational sector.

"The unpredictability of governance decisions, including a sense of public disregard or even demonization, which potentially undermines political support for commercial fisheries, is both types of modern uncertainties that have added to the stressors already posed by traditional risks." (*Mental health in the commercial fishing industry: Modern uncertainties and traditional risks, April 2021, Fish and Fisheries Wiley, King Et al*).

This follows from over 20 years of previous research that confirms commercial fishers are at high risk of ill mental health and for our community the current status of the proposed changes raises the real possibility of significant increase in mental health challenges within our commercial fishers community if their concerns are not heard and managed effectively. In a remote community, with limited access to mental health care, this is a significant concern.



However, our community is mindful that a sustainable fishery and improved environmental outcomes, biodiversity maintenance and ecological outcomes are in everyone's best interest, and if there are opportunities to do things differently, then we expect the industry, and Council, will be open to this, but within reason. Hence, the need to allow for additional time for consultation and further in-depth measurement of the health of the fishery.

The University of Queensland in its report on the Great Barrier Reef (*Net Gains, April 2023*), responding to the findings of the UNESCO Reactive Monitoring Mission, provided some useful guidance on a *Sustainable and Equitable Transition (page 15)* for that world heritage listed area. Some of these recommended actions may also be usefully considered for the Gulf inshore fishery, but perhaps not all. Industry, and our community, need more time to digest and analyse reports such as this, that are focussed more specifically on the Gulf fishery, and to undertake additional data collection, to make a responsible and measured transition.

Should the government progress towards these closures in an expedited manner, as projected, then our community may not have capacity to cope with the social change that will be forced upon it.



Closing Comments

Carpentaria Shire Council appreciates the opportunity to provide this submission into the Gulf of Carpentaria Inshore Fishery Consultation.

Thank you for considering our submission and we look forward to the opportunity to participate in further and future discussions as we continue to consider the impacts this has on our local economy and fabric of our small community and the larger Region.



