

INDUSTRY BUY-IN SWELLS VOLUNTARY DATA COLLECTION

In its first year of taking on contracted management roles, the Northern Prawn Fishery has shown that industry involvement can be quite a success

THE FISHERY

The Northern Prawn Fishery is located off Australia's northern coast and extends from the low-water mark to the outer edge of the Australian fishing zone in the area between Cape York in Queensland and Cape Londonderry in Western Australia.

It is Australia's single most valuable Commonwealth fishery, with an estimated real gross production value of \$76.8 million in 2007-08 (in 2008-09 dollars).

Source: www.abare.gov.au

28

Industry 'ownership' of some management tasks that used to be performed by the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) has certainly had an impact on data collection in the Northern Prawn Fishery (NPF).

In its first year of taking on contracted co-management duties from AFMA, NPF Industry Pty Ltd – the company set up to represent NPF fishers – the amount of fisheries data collected by Crew Member Observers (CMO) more than tripled. The reconciled fishery catch and effort data was also delivered to researchers on time, despite the fact that NPF Industry rolled out a fisheries-wide electronic logging program at the same time.

For Annie Jarrett, NPF Industry executive officer, the results from the company's first trial year reinforce the industry's resolve to try a new style of management.

"Last year was the first year we managed the NPF CMO program," she says. "We designed and implemented the program, recruited CMOs, organised what data needed to be collected, held

David Carter,
CEO of Austral
Fisheries.

PHOTO: EVAN COLLIS

training workshops and organised the collection of fishery data and samples. And through constant liaison our CMOs more than tripled the amount of data collected compared to the previous year.

“It was a big achievement and industry involvement and leadership of this program has resulted in a much larger data sample than previously available.”

Annie Jarrett attributes that success to industry ownership: “The company runs the trials and the skippers and crews feel that too.”

The NPF is one of a number of Commonwealth Fisheries that has begun trialling co-management arrangements with AFMA. NPF Industry’s formal contracted agreements with AFMA began in February 2009 and will end in June 2011. It sees industry taking on data management and CMO program management functions.

Annie Jarrett says that during its first year of undertaking data-management functions, there were some testing times, mostly due to technicalities. “We rolled out the fishery-wide e-log program at the same time as we took over the data-management function and there were complexities in that, which caused some challenges,” she says.

The fishery collects real-time data via e-logging, including recording catch, area and interaction with protected species, and sends this information to AFMA in Canberra using 3G phone connections. It is this catch and effort data that is used in CSIRO’s stock-assessment program.

“We successfully worked with AFMA to resolve those technical challenges, meeting the required deadline of January 2010 to provide reconciled catch and effort data to CSIRO for incorporation into stock assessment processes.”

For David Carter, CEO of Austral Fisheries, which operates a fleet of nine trawlers in the NPF, implementing the e-log system across the fishery was a special moment. “We moved to get all of the fleet onto one piece of software and I am not sure if there is a precedent for this, but I believe that it’s a world-first for electronic reporting in fisheries,” he says.

Annie Jarrett says that by working together through NPF Industry, fishers have been able to collaborate in other ways, including having an advisory role on the ‘Above and Below the Line’ trial to test if further management responsibility can be devolved to industry.

The trial sees industry provide recommendations to government on changes to season length, and in-season management, such as monitoring catch levels to determine if the season will continue or not.

This collaborative spirit saw a voluntary small-prawn-avoidance policy implemented last season. “When operators went into areas where there were smaller than optimum-sized prawns, they reported it back. And so we advised others to stay out of those areas and were very successful in implementing a voluntary closure in one area of the NPF. The cooperation of the whole fleet to avoid that area

was really good. In a way, it’s another level of co-management.”

Annie Jarrett says that overall the trial with AFMA has been very successful. “I think it’s been a very positive year and we’ve proven we can deliver. We’ve not yet determined the costs and benefits of what it means for us in taking over those tasks, but in terms of industry ownership and improved capacity building it’s been very positive.”

David Carter agrees. “Without question, the AFMA trial is heading in the right direction. It has opened up prospects for cooperation between industry and government across a much broader range of fisheries’ activity, setting a more holistic approach to management that marries science, regulation and commerce in ways that have not been possible before,” he says.

Earlier this year, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) reported that profitability had improved in three key Commonwealth fisheries since the conclusion of the ‘Securing our Fishing Future’ structural adjustment package in late 2006.

For the NPF, the number of active boats declined by 36 per cent between 2005 and 2009 to 51 boats. Over the same period, net economic returns are estimated to have increased by \$20.4 million from a loss of \$9.4 million in 2005 to a profit of \$11 million in 2009.

At the boat level, the decline in numbers combined with the increase in fishery level catch resulted in an 89 per cent increase in catch per vessel.

However, good conditions also helped boost returns, with ABARE stating that a higher-than-average catch rate of Banana Prawns in 2007-08 and 2008-09 was a major contributing factor to profitability.

Annie Jarrett says the fishery has been undergoing an evolutionary process post-buyback, with greater industry cooperation and now co-management.

“The AFMA/industry co-management team is now developing an analysis process to test whether the trial has been effective or not and, if it has been, how similar functions can be rolled out to other fisheries.”

For the NPF itself, there could also be greater industry involvement in management, with the feasibility of industry leading the fisheries scientific observer program also being investigated. **F**

COOPERATION GOES BANANAS

Although not strictly related to the co-management trial with AFMA, a greater working relationship across industry in the NPF – made possible by forming NPF Industry Pty Ltd – has seen joint promotion campaigns, such as the NPF’s ‘Go Wild, Go Bananas’ Banana Prawn promotion.

Annie Jarrett says this would not have been possible if the industry did not have the company structure and “working-together approach”.

“It’s meant that during the past two years, the product has gone on to the domestic market and that Banana Prawns are registered in the mind of Australian consumers,” she says.

The voluntary program saw industry contribute about \$100,000 a year for the past two years and this is something it will repeat again this year. “It’s another example of industry working together. If industry doesn’t work together first, we can’t work with AFMA and we can’t do joint marketing promotions.”

TABLE 1 KEY CHANGES IN THE POST-BUYBACK PERIOD FOR THE NORTHERN PRAWN FISHERY

	2005-06 (pre-buyback)	2008-09 (post-buyback)	Change
Boat numbers	86	55	↓ 36%
Fishery level net economic return	-\$9.4 million	\$11 million	↑ \$20.4 million
Catch per boat	63 tonnes	119 tonnes	↑ 89%
Real revenue per boat (\$000)	\$994	\$1426	↑ 43%
Real costs per boat (\$000)	\$1103	\$1225	↑ 11%

Note: Estimates for 2008-09 are only available for the Northern Prawn Fishery. Real values are in 2008-09 dollars.

Source: ABARE