



Gulf of Carpentaria Commercial Fishers Association - Response to *Primary Industries Prosper 2050*

The Gulf of Carpentaria Commercial Fishers Association (GoCCFA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft *Primary Industries Prosper 2050* blueprint, a 25-year vision for Queensland's primary industries, including fisheries, open for consultation until June 9, 2025.

As stewards of the Gulf's marine resources, we are committed to sustainable fishing practices and the economic vitality of Gulf communities. However, achieving this vision requires addressing critical challenges that threaten the viability of commercial fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria over the next 25 years, including regulatory restrictions, climate change, economic pressures, stock management, and social impacts.

Below, we outline these challenges and provide recommendations to ensure the Gulf fishery remains a cornerstone of regional economies and communities, as well as contributing to Queensland and Australia food security into the future.

Key Recommendations

Strengthen Consultation and Representation

Recent fishery reforms, such as the gillnet-free zones implemented on May 17, 2024, have faced significant criticism due to inadequate consultation and insufficient consideration of economic impacts on fishers (Gillnet-Free Areas). GoCCFA emphasizes that meaningful consultation is essential to restore trust and ensure policies are effective and equitable. We advocate for a formalized, transparent consultation process that includes commercial fishers as equal partners from policy inception through implementation.

We propose establishing a dedicated Gulf fishery advisory panel, with GoCCFA representation, to co-design harvest strategies, management reforms, and future regulatory changes. This panel should provide ongoing input to ensure fishers' voices are respected. As governance evolves, inclusive structures are crucial to foster collaboration and trust. It must include stakeholders from overlapping jurisdictions.

GoCCFA **strongly urges** that overlapping jurisdictional management necessitates coordinated fisheries management to ensure sustainability and economic outcomes for all fishers.

The Gulf's shared resources mean that actions in one jurisdiction can impact others, such as fishing effort shifts due to gillnet-free zones in Queensland affecting NT waters. A shared vision must incorporate including data and research to understand fish stock dynamics, environmental impacts, and socio-economic effects across boundaries. For instance, data on stock assessments and bycatch interactions with protected species like sawfish require harmonized approaches to inform management decisions.



The evidence leans toward improved outcomes when stakeholders collaborate, as seen in the Northern Prawn Fishery, where AFMA has delegated legislative functions to NPFI for data distribution, enhancing trust and efficiency.

These examples highlight the potential for coordinated action to improve fishery health and industry resilience.

Queensland Fisheries' must lead

Queensland Fisheries is well-positioned to lead coordination efforts due to its extensive coastline along the Gulf and diversity of commercial activities in inshore & offshore fisheries. Queensland's leadership can foster partnerships that enhance fishery management, ensuring policies are practical avoid duplicity while being considerate of fishers' realities.

Collaboration with NT Fisheries, AFMA, and Industry Stakeholders

Collaboration with NT Fisheries and AFMA are essential, given the shared Gulf waters and the need for aligned management strategies. AFMA's role in Commonwealth fisheries, particularly in the NPF, complements state efforts, with co-management arrangements demonstrating trust and responsibility.

Industry stakeholders like GOCCFA and NPFI bring operational insights that are essential to informing scientific exports, fishery managers and broader fishing community. Engaging these groups ensures policies reflect fishers' needs, such as addressing economic pressures and regulatory burdens.

Existing joint efforts, like sawfish, spear tooth and king salmon research, highlight the potential for successful coordination.

These initiatives show that formalizing partnerships can enhance environmental monitoring and conservation, aligning with the Primary Industries Prosper 2050 blueprint's sustainability goals.

Benefits and Challenges

The benefits of coordination will improve stock assessments, aligned regulations, and support for fishers' livelihoods, ensuring the Gulf's fisheries remain viable.

Data sharing can enhance research on climate change impacts, such as mangrove dieback affecting nursery grounds, and inform adaptive management strategies. Challenges include jurisdictional differences, resource allocation, and ensuring equitable representation, particularly for Indigenous communities and small-scale fishers, particularly where there is increased terrestrial activities growing in the region that have direct impacts on water catchment in the region that are critical to stock recruitment.

Queensland's leadership can address these by establishing formal coordination mechanisms, such as advisory panels and regular forums, to foster trust and collaboration.

Key Coordination Aspects and Impacts

Aspect	Impact on Coordination	Timeframe Considerations
Jurisdictional Overlap	Requires unified policies to prevent overfishing and ensure sustainability	Ongoing, with increasing complexity over 25 years
Data and Research Sharing	Enhances stock assessments, informs management, improves outcomes for fishers	Immediate and long-term benefits
Research	Review with a re-focus of research that is appropriately funded to inform and support the commercial fishing sectors activities. This must include coordinating research activities to ensure that researchers have time to conduct and publish research that provides confidence to all stakeholders when making fishing decisions. We must manage fisheries with science rather than under the vale of precautionary principle.	Immediate and essential for long term benefits
Queensland Leadership	Leverages resources, fosters partnerships, drives collaborative initiatives	Critical in next decade for effective management
Industry Stakeholder Engagement	Ensures practical policies, addresses economic and operational needs	Essential for short-term trust, long-term viability
Existing Collaborations	Provides foundation, such as ghost net removal, scientific research for formal coordination	Builds on past successes, needs formalization

We must balance Sustainability with Economic Viability

The blueprint's focus on sustainability aligns with our commitment to responsible fishing, as evidenced by our updated industry code of conduct and participation in sawfish, spear tooth shark conservation research (Gulf Inshore Fishery) (Mud crab Fishery). However, measures like gillnet-free zones and Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) limits have reduced fishing grounds and increased costs, threatening livelihoods.

Economic pressures, including rising fuel prices, competition from imported and farmed seafood, and the need for better source labelling, further challenge viability. Uncertainty and confidence in

current stock assessment and modelling, particularly for king threadfin requires adaptive management (Gulf Inshore Fishery), particularly in the current context of limited and outdated science to inform harvest strategy decisions.

We recommend:

- **Socio-Economic Impact Assessment:** Conduct a thorough assessment of net-free zones to quantify impacts on fishers and communities, informing policy adjustments.
- **Adaptive Harvest Strategies:** Develop flexible strategies for species like Grey & Spanish mackerel, Barramundi and Mud crab, supporting stock rebuilding where required with regular reviews.
- **Transition Support:** Increase funding for voluntary licence buybacks and programs to assist fishers in diversifying or exiting the industry.

Climate change, with rising sea temperatures and habitat loss, threatens fish stocks. The blueprint should prioritize research and adaptive frameworks to build resilience. Social impacts, including mental health challenges and crew shortages, require support programs to maintain community stability.

Invest in Gulf Infrastructure

The Gulf lacks adequate infrastructure, such as ports and processing facilities, increasing costs and limiting growth. The blueprint's regional development goals offer an opportunity to address these gaps.

We propose a \$50 million Gulf Fishery Infrastructure Fund over the next decade to improve ports, upgrade processing facilities, and enhance transport networks, boosting efficiency and market access. Investments should be planned with local stakeholders to align with regional needs.

Support Innovation with Practical Solutions

We support innovation like the Qld eFisher app and trial of onboard monitoring on the basis that they are practical and robust, cost effective and contribute positively towards the commercial sectors social license to operate. However, adoption challenges for small-scale fishers must be balanced to fitness of hardware in harsh marine environments and operational challenges in remote GOC waters.

We recommend:

- **Financial Support:** Provide subsidies or grants for technology adoption, tailored to small-scale operators.
- **Collaborative Development:** Engage fishers in testing monitoring systems, building on our voluntary participation.

The blueprint should leverage technology for data collection to enhance management and sustainability.



Enhance Collaboration with Indigenous Communities

The Gulf's fisheries are culturally and economically significant to Indigenous communities. We support inclusive management and propose:

- **Co-Management Arrangements:** Establish structures incorporating Indigenous knowledge in decision-making.
- **Joint Research Programs:** Combine traditional and scientific knowledge for resource management.
- **Training Programs:** Offer tailored training for Indigenous fishers in sustainable practices and business skills.

These initiatives should then be leveraged by co-funded commitments from Queensland, Federal and other funding pathways that can be enabled by communities to purchase commercial fishing rights as a means of facilitating exit pathways for the existing fishing cohort, while empowering the fishing aspirations for first nation communities and fishers in the region.

Address Regulatory Complexity

The industry faces complex regulations, with multiple reporting requirements and overlapping systems, The blueprint's "simpler rules" goal is critical.

We recommend:

- **Streamline Reporting:** Consolidate obligations into a user-friendly platform.
- **Align Systems:** Ensure TACC and Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) systems are consistent, with regular reviews.
- **Compliance Support:** Offer helplines, workshops, and resources for remote fishers.

Simplified regulations will allow focus on sustainable practices and growth.

Address Climate Change and Environmental Impacts

Climate change threatens the fishery with rising sea temperatures, altered rainfall, and extreme weather, impacting fish distributions and habitats like mangroves. Mining and terrestrial farming activities and proposed developments require greater scrutiny from government agencies and stricter financial penalties for environmental vandalism. Changes to watercourses and flows in the Gulf, such as those resulting from damming are of particular concern to the fishing community, as they disrupt essential environmental flows that are essential to all marine species.



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We recommend:

- **Enhanced Monitoring:** Invest in tracking environmental and stock changes, collaborating with scientists and stakeholders.
- **Habitat Protection:** Prioritize restoration of mangroves and seagrass beds.
- **Adaptive Frameworks:** Develop dynamic catch limits and closures based on real-time data.
- **Industry Adaptation:** Support research into resilient gear and training for new skills.

These measures will ensure long-term viability amidst environmental challenges.

Conclusion

GoCCFA is committed to a sustainable, prosperous future for Queensland's fisheries, but this requires policies that support fishers as well as the environment.

We urge the Queensland Government to incorporate our recommendations into *Primary Industries Prosper 2050* to ensure the Gulf of Carpentaria inshore fishery remains a cornerstone of regional economies and communities. We look forward to ongoing collaboration through the consultation process and beyond.

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