




Speech By
Hon. Mark Furner

MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE

Record of Proceedings, 28 November 2023

**FISHERIES LEGISLATION (SPANISH MACKEREL AND BAR ROCKCOD)
AMENDMENT DECLARATION**

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

 **Hon. ML FURNER** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries and Minister for Rural Communities) (6.38 pm): I rise to speak against the motion to disallow the Fisheries Legislation (Spanish Mackerel and Bar Rockcod) Amendment Declaration 2023 as moved by the member for Traeger on 15 November 2023. The interest of the member for Traeger, as well as the other members of the Katter party, in this declaration is understandable, and I respect them for their approaches on this matter. However, I must make it clear that as a government we need to listen to the experts and the science when it comes to fisheries management. That is the approach that I took when it came to coming to conclusions and making the difficult decisions that the government had to make. Notwithstanding that, you need to be mindful of the reason we have a Sustainable Fisheries Strategy. I will address some of the points previous speakers have with regard to why we have a Sustainable Fisheries Strategy.

We may not always like what we hear, but there are real risks and concerns that fisheries will become depleted and unsustainable if we do not manage them well. I want to see a fisheries sector that is here for the next generation and the generation thereafter. The motion seeks to disallow the declaration which came into effect on 1 July 2023, which introduced new measures to ensure the future sustainability of Spanish mackerel and bar rock cod. To allow Spanish mackerel stocks to rebuild, a number of new management measures were introduced for the commercial, recreational and charter fisher sectors. For bar rock cod, a new commercial quota limit was introduced in accordance with the pre-defined management trigger in the coral reef finfish fishery harvest strategy. All of these measures were critical to ensure the future sustainability of our fisheries resources.

As the fisheries minister, I have always been a firm advocate for sustainable fisheries management, urging careful consideration of the long-term health of our marine resources and the communities that depend on them. As most members of parliament would be aware, Spanish mackerel is a culinary delight and cultural icon that makes a significant economic contribution to our coastal communities. I want to thank the member for Cook in particular for her contribution with regard to her interest in not only this species but also the importance of the communities of the Torres Strait to the Spanish mackerel and other fisheries sectors in that region.

Spanish mackerel is a truly iconic species and the one that I order when I visit the local fish and chip shop when I travel to Townsville—particularly Tobin Fish Tales in Townsville. I want to commend the members for Townsville for supporting that particular fishery and others in their home town. When I travel there I always make sure I order Spanish mackerel. That mackerel—

Mr Head: You won't be able to order it now!

Mr FURNER: You wouldn't know—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Martin): Direct your comments through the chair, please, Minister. Order, members!

Mr Mickelberg interjected.

Mr FURNER: The member for Callide is clueless, like the member for Buderim. Talking about fisheries—

Opposition members interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Members, the level of interjection is getting out of control. I would ask you all to refrain.

Mr FURNER: When I travel to Townsville, I love—

Opposition members interjected.

Mr FURNER: Listen to the dopes from the other side. It has nothing to do with this debate—

Mr Head interjected.

Mr Mickelberg interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Pause the clock. Member for Buderim, you are warned. Member for Callide, you are also warned.

Mr FURNER: Once again I will reiterate: I love a feed of Spanish mackerel when I go to Townsville, particularly at Tobin's. In fact, when I was there last I was fortunate to have two meals of Spanish mackerel when we had cabinet up in Townsville. It was an enjoyable occasion.

In the financial year 2020-21 the commercial sector alone contributed 110 full-time-equivalent jobs and \$8.5 million to our gross state product, while recreational enthusiasts throughout Queensland poured an estimated \$6.8 million into the economy in 2019-20 with Spanish mackerel fishing trips. However, the fisheries landscape is not without challenges.

The 2021 stock assessment revealed a biomass teetering between 14 per cent and 27 per cent of unfished levels—but most likely at 17 per cent—meaning that urgent action was required. Most people who have some idea about fisheries understand the importance of reaching that trigger of 20 per cent where action is required.

Ms Camm interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Whitsunday, cease your interjections.

Mr FURNER: I know there will be some who believe that because of the uncertainty of biomass—including that it may be above 20 per cent—action should not be taken. Biomass is a range, but I reiterate it is likely at 17 per cent, which is below the 20 per cent trigger to make sure action is taken. It is vital to recognise that a biomass less than 20 per cent is an internationally recognised trigger. Best practice fisheries management compels intervention that will allow stocks to rebuild back to a sustainable level. That is usually around 40 to 60 per cent unfished biomass. Those in the House who have some idea about fisheries have seen the rebuilding of many stocks where our sustainable—

Ms Camm interjected.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Martin): Pause the clock. Member for Whitsunday, your interjections are disorderly. You are warned.

Mr FURNER: I was indicating some examples where, as a result of the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy, we have seen the rebuilding of many species to 40 to 60 unfished biomass. Spanish mackerel stock health is of particular concern in Queensland. It should be noted that much of the Spanish mackerel caught comes from our very own Great Barrier Reef World Heritage listed property. In addition, there was also other evidence that suggested stocks of Spanish mackerel were not healthy.

Historical analyses suggested a substantial contraction of the known spawning aggregations of Spanish mackerel in North Queensland. There were reports of known spawning aggregations off Cairns disappearing in the 1990s. Previously stock assessments showed a trend of declining fish numbers over the last 20 or so years. This historical, sustained decline, combined with recent low biomass estimates, raised uncertainty and concern over the continued viability and sustainability of Spanish mackerel and suggested that significant management changes were warranted. Doing nothing was not an option. By disallowing this declaration we would effectively be doing nothing.

In response to this stock assessment result the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries commissioned an independent review by Dr Neil Klaer, a former CSIRO fisheries scientist. Where a stock assessment such as this one may lead to management changes, it is not unusual that an independent third-party peer review the stock assessment methodology and result ahead of any decisions being made. While Dr Klaer did affirm this stock assessment model and data at the time, he

did raise questions about some aspects of the model. For this reason, I do not support closing the fishery entirely—which was a decision that was open to me to take—which is what best practice fisheries management would recommend for stocks below 40 per cent unfished biomass.

Following two rounds of public consultation where more than 2,200 submissions were received and considered, and after quite fulsome and detailed consideration, I adopted a balanced approach and opted against a complete fisheries closure. I table those two discussion papers.

Tabled paper: Department of Agriculture and Fisheries: Discussion paper titled 'Queensland east coast Spanish mackerel fishery: Consultation on management action' [2018](#).

Tabled paper: Department of Agriculture and Fisheries: Discussion paper titled 'Queensland east coast Spanish mackerel fishery: Final consultation on proposed management action, July 2022' [2019](#).

Despite what we have heard today from some speakers claiming that the fishery is closed, that is contrary to what is happening out there. Instead of a complete fishery closure, on 14 September 2022 I announced a series of strategy management arrangements to rebuild the Spanish mackerel fishery. These consisted of: two northern seasonal closures of three weeks in October and November; two southern seasonal closures of three weeks each in February and March; recreational possession limits reduced from three fish per person to one; a new boat limit of two fish per boat carrying two or more recreational fishers; removal of the extended charter trip limit; and total allowable commercial catch reduced from 578 tonnes to 165 tonnes, noting actual landings for commercial fisheries averaged 270 tonnes each year. I think that is a reasonable and balanced approach when you consider what was caught—not quite halving the amount to 165 tonnes.

I would like to reinforce that these decisions were not taken lightly. I understood that the measures, the approach and this decision would weigh heavy on those people who enjoy Spanish mackerel and the areas in which they fish and who are concerned about the economic contribution this makes to the communities in those areas in North Queensland. In light of the peer reviewed Spanish mackerel stock assessment result at the time, decisions were made with the overarching goal of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Spanish mackerel population. The measures have been progressively introduced, with the first seasonal closures commencing in October 2022 and the reduced total allowable commercial catch and recreational limits taking effect on 1 July this year.

On 30 June 2023, the Queensland Seafood Industry Association published a review by Dr Simon Hoyle and Mr Alistair Dunn. This endeavour was a positive and proactive step by the QSIA, and I would like to extend my appreciation to Mr David Bobbermen, the chief executive officer of QSIA, for his positive engagement on this complex issue. There has been some comment that the department ignored this report, and nothing could be further from the truth. I would like to point out that stock assessments are intricate mathematical processes with several uncertainties, and different scientific opinions are not uncommon.

The department's feedback on the draft report, despite some noted technical issues, was considered by Dr Klaer. The department acknowledges the concerns raised in both the QSIA funded review and the department's own funded review by Dr Klaer. However, without a new stock assessment result, Fisheries Queensland must remain steadfast in its commitment to the quota changes made to the east coast Spanish mackerel fishery that is represented by this quota amendment declaration.

Since the debate around the confidence of the Spanish mackerel stock assessment surfaced, I think it would be worth highlighting some of the complex stock assessment mathematical terms. Misspecification, a nuanced term in the world of fisheries science, refers to situations where model assumptions may not fully capture the true dynamics of the fish population being assessed. The QSIA funded review suggests signs of misspecification without explicitly stating it. Steepness is another critical parameter, and this reflects how resilient a fish stock is. The higher the steepness value, the more resilient the stock. The QSIA funded review recommends a broader range of steepness values be considered but without proposing a clear alternative to that used by Fisheries Queensland scientists.

In response to both these issues, the department intends to bring forward the next full stock assessment to early 2025 and will work with industry to incorporate the feedback from QSIA's review. In addition, the department is co-investing in a Fisheries Research and Development Corporation project, which is currently underway and is already examining these issues very closely.

Fisheries output controls such as quotas are a vital tool of fisheries management and ensure the sustainable use of our marine resources. Setting sustainable quotas has been a large focus since the start of the Sustainable Fisheries Strategy 2017-2027, and we now have 17 harvest strategies in place that set many sustainable catch limits across Queensland's fisheries. These are underpinned by a significant investment in our assessment and monitoring activities, which cannot be done without the support from our recreational and commercial fishers right across Queensland. I thank them for their support in this important information and data-gathering exercise.

The economic impacts to the commercial fishery cannot be dismissed, and I acknowledge the concerns of affected commercial fishers. However, it is essential to consider the broader implications of inaction. The decision to reduce the commercial quota to 165 tonnes, down from 578 tonnes, is a measured response based on historical catch data, and there is currently no defensible alternative available based on robust scientific assessment, especially as the commercial harvest has previously remained stable at about 300 tonnes per year of TACC.

The department has taken steps to mitigate the financial impact on commercial fishers, waiving Spanish mackerel fishery fees from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024. This fee waiver totalled \$147,495 and included quota unit, licence transfer, quota transfer, tender movement and symbol movement fees. It is a strategic move to support fishing businesses manage cash flow and maintain jobs during this transition period.

Research is the bedrock of informed decision-making and has become a focal point in addressing the challenges posed by the 2021 stock assessment. The FRDC funded project, with a total cost exceeding \$1 million, is looking into various aspects: close-kin mark-recapture—a genetic technique for fishery-independent estimates of population abundance, partnering with CSIRO; shark depredation and post-release survival—investigating impacts on the stock assessment model through onboard observer coverage and satellite-based survival tags; catch per unit effort refinement—utilising high-resolution vessel-tracking data to enhance the precision of fishing effort measurement; and environmental influences—conducting a comprehensive investigation of environmental factors affecting Spanish mackerel abundance and recruitment. This strategic research investment underscores our commitment to understanding and addressing the complexities of the Spanish mackerel fishery comprehensively.

In conclusion, the decisions made regarding the east coast Spanish mackerel fishery are rooted in a deep commitment to sustainability, informed by scientific assessments, public consultation and a dedication to long-term stewardship. Fisheries management sometimes means making the hard decisions now to ensure that we have fisheries into the future. These decisions may not always be popular, but they are backed by science and it is for the good of the entire fisheries sector. We listened to the science, we consulted, we took action that has allowed the fishery to remain open, and we have engaged with the peer review and industry reviews. My department recognises the challenges and uncertainties and is actively engaged in ongoing research and collaboration with industry stakeholders as we take on board all new information and research outcomes to ensure the sustainability of our Spanish mackerel stocks for future generations to come. As I said earlier, Spanish mackerel is an iconic species and we need to ensure we preserve the stock for future generations. Doing nothing is not an option.

In my closing couple of minutes, I want to reflect on some of the comments made by previous speakers. We heard that this was in some way linked to the UNESCO decision that has been made about the removal of gillnets in the Great Barrier Reef. Far from it. There was no reference in terms of the consultation, in terms of the engagement with Queensland fisheries, to anything to do with UNESCO. It raises concerns of why people are talking about this particular matter and linking it to this debate here today.

Other speakers spoke about the importation of fish from overseas. I recognise that. It is an area that this government has been working on not only with our recreational fishers but by building on the aquaculture opportunities for Queensland. That is why we have seen growth in the aquaculture industry of \$224 million. Other speakers from the Katter party spoke about the industry being shut down. That is far from the truth. Many of those who made a contribution today spoke about the quota management for commercial fishermen and also the quota and catch limits for recreational fishers.

Last week I was in Tokyo, at the Toyosu seafood market. They are envious of what we have in Queensland in terms of our Sustainable Fisheries Strategy. They would love to have that in their government to make sure they have fisheries for future generations.

(Time expired)