




Speech By
Robbie Katter

MEMBER FOR TRAEGER

Record of Proceedings, 28 November 2023

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

Disallowance of Statutory Instrument

 **Mr KATTER** (Traeger—KAP) (5.30 pm): I move—

That the Fisheries Legislation (Spanish Mackerel and Bar Rockcod) Amendment Declaration 2023, subordinate legislation No. 80 of 2023, tabled in the House on 22 August 2023, be disallowed.

In particular, I take issue with the following elements of the regulation: reducing the total quota entitlement take of Spanish mackerel for commercial fishers from 578 tonnes to 165 tonnes; reducing the recreational possession limit to one fish per person, or to two fish per boat; removing the previous additional possession allowances for extended charter trips; and adding a further regulated period for the northern Spanish mackerel waters for 2023-2025. I table the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries 2017 stock assessment report that places the Spanish mackerel fishery sustainable biomass at 40 per cent.

Tabled paper: Department of Agriculture and Fisheries: Report titled 'Stock assessment of Australian east coast Spanish mackerel: Predictions of stock status and reference points', 2018 [2012](#).

I table the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries 2021 stock assessment report that, just three years later, places the fishery's sustainable biomass at 17 per cent.

Tabled paper: Department of Agriculture and Fisheries: Report titled 'Stock assessment of Australian east coast Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus commerson*) 2021' [2013](#).

I table the peer review by Neil Klaer, commissioned by the government, into the fishery's 2021 stock assessment report.

Tabled paper: Report by Mr Neil Klaer, dated 2021, titled 'Independent review of the stock assessment of east coast Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus commerson*) in Queensland, Australia' [2014](#).

I table the independent review of the 2021 assessment by Dr Simon Hoyle, an expert tuna fish family stock assessment scientist, which was commissioned by the Queensland Seafood Industry Association.

Tabled paper: Report by Mr Simon Hoyle and Mr Alistair Dunn, Hoyle Consulting & Ocean Environmental, dated 30 June 2023, titled 'Review of the 2021 stock assessment for Australian east coast Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus commerson*)' [2015](#).

The stock assessment done by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in 2017 placed the mackerel fishery at 40 per cent. The same department's 2021 stock assessment report, just three years later, placed the fishery's sustainable biomass at 17 per cent—a dramatic decline in a very short period. The east coast Spanish mackerel fish is an iconic fish in North Queensland, with the species often being the fish of choice for many, including me. It is always my first choice when I go to the fish and chip shop. I love my mackerel.

The fishery also provides recreational fishers with an opportunity to connect with our sea country and is heavily relied upon as a source of food. In 2018-19, the fisheries commercial sector contributed \$6.7 million, including flow-on effects to the economy, for the mackerel fishery. In 2018-19, the fisheries

commercial sector contributed 66 full-time-equivalent jobs. A lot of people might think that is not many jobs, but in a small community like Lucinda it is a hell of a lot of jobs. That is a really big number. All too often, we sit in this place and look at numbers and say, 'It is only 100 or 50 jobs. We'll just take some more money out and create some more Public Service jobs. We have replaced jobs, so no-one has lost any jobs.' But these jobs are created from using a renewable resource from the ocean. We did not have to take taxpayers' money away from something to create something here. A sustainable business is run off a renewable resource that has been there forever, and you are taking that ability away from us. Whilst it may not seem like a large number of jobs, they are very important to the communities that rely on access to the fishery.

During 2018-19, the total value of commercially landed catch was estimated to be \$3.4 million. Approximately 90 per cent was sold in Queensland, with the remainder sold interstate. You had better find another activity that will create some economic activity in that same place and of commensurate value, because we keep closing these sorts of industries in Queensland. I do not see anything magically replacing it that is not directly funded, like the construction of infrastructure, by the taxpayer.

Prior to this year, which will see Spanish mackerel catch quotas reduced to just 165 tonnes, around 300 to 350 tonnes of Spanish mackerel was harvested annually by commercial fishers in Queensland—about 240 licences—while about 170 tonnes are taken by the recreational sector. The total allowable catch for the commercial sector has been 578 tonnes. For quite some time now, they have been catching up to 600 tonnes as the quota amount. The Queensland government, through the fisheries department, has been saying, 'You're allowed to have 600 tonnes,' and they have been saying, 'We've only been taking out 300 to 350 tonnes of that.' They have been taking half of what they have been allowed for many years. Now Fisheries has come to government with a new stock assessment model: 'Hey presto, you are at 17 per cent now. You have smashed the fishery and you've been taking too much.' I think you could reasonably respond by saying, 'It sounds like you have done a pretty bad job of managing the fishery then.' Otherwise, you have invented this new stock assessment model which conveniently works to the ideology of the government, which is to shut down these industries, particularly the ones that offend people who watch David Attenborough and *Finding Nemo* on the TV. They say, 'We don't want to catch any fish in the sea. That's terrible business. Any activity that involves the killing of an animal has to be removed out of the Queensland economy.' That is what is happening. I challenge anyone to deny that.

Look at what we are dealing with in the gulf and east coast with net fishing at the moment. There is absolutely no science behind it, but the government want to pursue this. They did have a crack at the science on the Spanish mackerel, so it will be interesting to see what some of the responses will be here.

In 2021 Fisheries claimed for the first time that Spanish mackerel stocks were depleted. This was despite the stocks being put at 40 per cent a few years prior. Once it goes below 20 per cent, you have a problem and you need to start cutting back the industry drastically. They base this on two things: calculations of fish stock using data going back to 1912; and data on the fish catch to set their baseline—how many boats were operating—with a computer model that calculates how many mackerel are in the reef now. Much of this is based on taking the logbooks and catch inventory from the boats that are out there. An interesting part of that process was that the people who were contributing the data would say, 'We're not happy with the results you are getting from this. We can't see how this has all played out. Can you give us the data so we can apply it through the modelling that we have to try and replicate these results, because we just don't know where you are coming up with this.' They could not once find where this 17 per cent figure came from.

It is hard to conceive of any other scenario than one which would be entirely consistent with the theme from this government, which is, 'Let's just find an industry to sacrifice at the altar of the environmentalists to wave our credentials down in Brisbane—something to shut down and sacrifice.' Again, it might not seem much to members here, but those 66 jobs meant something to us in North Queensland. They really did. Members can think flippantly that it might win them some votes in the election, but there is a real cost to this. There is also a real cost for people around Queensland who are trying to buy mackerel for their table.

There are immediate and widespread concerns about the new stock assessment model that was used to arrive at the currently available biomass. It was said that this stock synthesis model, this new model that was being used, could have some flaws. At the time of the release Fisheries Queensland claimed this work had been peer reviewed. As we mentioned before, a report was commissioned. Then Neil Klaer, the peer reviewer, stated very explicitly that he had considerable disagreement with the main conclusion of the original report. He states in the last sentence of the summary—

I am unable to support the conclusions regarding future harvest levels for the east coast Spanish mackerel stock ...

Then Peter Ridd made commentary on this saying that a peer reviewer's disagreement was hidden. He said, damning as it is, that is not the concern. He said the concern is that when the fisheries department was talking about this they said, 'We have come up with this model and it has been peer reviewed.' However, they did not go on to say, 'The peer reviewer actually disagreed with what we said.' They just said to the unwitting public, who are assumed to be ignorant on this subject—and they are preying on that—'It's been peer reviewed so that is it.' That was highly deceptive conduct. They should have been saying, 'It has been peer reviewed but he disagreed with us.' It was highly misleading of the government and the fisheries department to do that.

Following the release of the report, the Queensland seafood industry—fish and seafood shops—immediately rallied and expressed their concerns overnight. The government told them the industry was in crisis and the only way to address this was a ban on Spanish mackerel fishing. The industry reps were asking, 'How can we have any trust in Queensland fisheries' ability to manage anything when they have been the one managing this fishery for years. We have caught half the quota and now you are telling us it is under stress and we have to pay the price.'

I expect the minister and the government tonight to say there was a consultation process, but from our perspective this has been tokenistic. It was designed to provide a mandate to push this through. I can assure honourable members there is a hell of a lot of participants in the industry who are very dissatisfied with this outcome. Obviously shutting down the industry is not the outcome they would ever be happy with. The motivations behind the policy are for the government to explain. This is much more an argument about environmental protections and winning environmentalist votes than it is about real science and proper management of the fisheries.

The commercial fishing sector strongly and universally disagrees with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries' claims that the Spanish mackerel fishery has declined to an unsustainable biomass. This has been supported by multiple independent scientific reviews, namely those I have tabled. Anyone worth a grain of salt who has a foot on the ground would know that it has been a bumper mackerel season. Honourable members can take it on face value but all we have heard out there is you can walk across them in the water. People who have been out on the water for 40 years or more have said, 'We have never seen more Spanish mackerel in the water.'

It is not surprising that when the same fisheries mob came up to the gulf they said, 'There's only five per cent king threadfin salmon up there.' Everyone said, 'Are you joking?' I was sitting on a plane next to a bloke who said, 'Have a look at this video,' and it showed the king salmon boiling in the water at Karumba. Five per cent of the fishery means no-one has seen anything; one person occasionally has caught one this year. Five per cent does not mean half of Mount Isa is going up to Karumba and catching them off the beach. That is a 50 per cent fishery. We cannot reconcile the things that people on the ground are saying with what is being said here.

Let's throw a bone to the fisheries department and say, 'Look, guys. You had a good crack at this stock assessment model. It did not work. We're not going to blame you too much.' However, they cannot take what they are saying and then say, 'We better shut this fishery down because they said it could be 70 per cent,' and the precautionary principle in this place means we shut down everything. Precautionary things are never consistent. Take jobs, welfare, preserving a town or keeping an industry alive as an example. However, it is precautionary for the environment because that suits the politics of the day, and that is where we are at.

We are not arguing because the fisheries department came up with this. We are arguing this because every 12 months we have to make some sacrifices at the altar of environmentalism in this place. There needs to be some strength and some backbone in government for them to say, 'We know what you feel out there, but we have to be adults about this and work off the science.' This is not working off the science; it is fake science. It drives people crazy because it does not reconcile with what is happening on the ground, and it drives uncertainty and distrust of government moving forward. When they do bring some real science back that is important, how can we ever trust it? If they keep doctoring these things and saying, 'It is peer reviewed, but they do not say, 'The peer reviewer disagreed with us,' how can we trust anything in this place?

Maybe mackerel is not the biggest issue of the day, but the whole suite of issues around the fisheries is and there needs to be leadership shown on this.