

## Key Findings of the Audit Report

The trawl fishery in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is a highly diverse and complex fishery with demanding management challenges. Major improvements, which have been achieved in the fishery through the introduction of revised management arrangements over the past two years, are acknowledged. There has been a significant reduction of fishing effort and the introduction of effort units has (at least nominally) capped fishing effort in the fishery. The implementation of a satellite-based vessel monitoring system has enabled closer monitoring of the fleet's activity, which has major compliance benefits and may assist with stock assessment of the fishery in the longer term. Additional closures in areas where trawling had not occurred previously were introduced under the revised Trawl Plan.

Many key target species are regarded as “fully exploited”. However, there are only limited assessments on the amount of product that can be harvested sustainably. Currently, there is no stock assessment of bycatch species. The adoption of the precautionary principle requires that uncertainties be factored into the assessment process. The level and quality of monitoring and research work in the fishery need to be improved as a matter of priority. The importance of data quality in stock assessment is stressed. There are dangers in unadjusted catch rates being used as an indicator of the fishery's “well being”. Improvements in the gathering of data and stock assessment processes are required for there to be public confidence that stocks are not being over-fished and the environmental impacts of trawling are being mitigated by proper management.

Tightening of the legal requirement for trawlers to carry prescribed turtle excluder devices is welcomed. A similar revision to the specifications for bycatch reduction devices is needed.

Of primary interest to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is the broader impact of the fishery on the GBR ecosystem. Research has demonstrated that bottom trawling has a major impact on seabed biodiversity. There has been limited monitoring of the impact of the fishery on bycatch species and the wider ecosystem. Monitoring and research efforts have been focussed primarily on key target species. The adoption of the precautionary principle requires that a risk assessment be undertaken to identify those bycatch species most vulnerable to trawling.

The effort reductions achieved through the structural adjustment scheme and subsequent restructure of the fishery are acknowledged. However, it is noted that fishing activity in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is nearing the effort cap set under the Trawl Plan. It is of concern that the effort reductions achieved under the plan can be undermined through efficiency increases by the trawl fleet (referred to as “effort creep”). Unless this is factored into stock assessments, catch rates may appear to be stable in the fishery when in fact they are declining. Current management measures for reducing fishing effort are likely to be only partially successful.

Performance measures in the Trawl Plan to alert managers of overfishing and environmental impacts are unlikely to achieve their purpose and management intervention (in response to a review event being triggered) therefore is likely to be delayed. The review of performance indicators and review events begun by Queensland is supported. Improved performance measures should be used in any future assessments of the fishery's ecological sustainability.