Charter fishing action plan
2017–2020
Discussion paper
Foreword

Charter fishing provides a diverse range of experiences and attracts local, interstate and international clients. Charter fishing occurs in freshwater rivers and impoundments, inshore waters, coral and rocky reefs, and deep water.

Some people go charter fishing to catch a meal, to experience the wilderness or to catch and release a trophy fish. For some, it is a chance to learn from an expert guide to enhance the experience. For others, it means not needing a boat of their own.

The diversity of the businesses, clients and areas of operation has meant that the management of the industry has also been diverse, with regulations applying to some but not others. Until now, there has been no plan to bring the industry together, no plan to support the industry and no plan to grow the tourism benefits for Queensland.

As part of its sustainable fishing election commitments, the Queensland Government committed to developing a charter fishing action plan—a commitment that was also adopted in the Reef 2050 long-term sustainability plan.

However, this plan cannot be achieved by focusing solely on fishing—it needs to be much broader and address all the impediments and challenges facing the industry. Industry, community and all levels of government must work together if this plan is to be successful.

The Queensland Government is focused on creating jobs for Queenslanders. That means supporting and encouraging new small businesses such as charter fishing operations and inshore fishing guides. We can do this by creating more pathways and reducing the barriers for start-up businesses.

This discussion paper is the start of a process to develop a strategic charter fishing action plan, and we are seeking your feedback so we can finalise the plan later in 2017.

I encourage charter fishing operators and all interested members of the community to provide feedback on the future of a world-class charter fishery in Queensland.

The Honourable Bill Byrne MP
Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries and
Minister for Rural Economic Development
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Introduction

Charter fishing in Queensland

Charter fishing in Queensland is a diverse and vibrant sector that accesses a range of world-class fisheries—from freshwater impoundments to the waters of the Great Barrier Reef. Charter fishing operations are uniquely positioned to take advantage of Queenslanders’ passionate engagement with recreational fishing. Operators offer expert advice, unique local knowledge and memorable fishing experiences. Coupled with the recent introduction of net-free fishing zones, charter fishers have an opportunity to grow their small businesses and provide unique recreational fishing opportunities for an expanded range of clients.

A charter fishing action plan

As part of its sustainable fishing election commitments, the Queensland Government committed to developing a charter fishing action plan.

This commitment recognises charter fishing as a distinct fishing activity with an economic benefit for Queensland, and identifies that a charter fishing action plan will, among other things:

- identify fisheries resources with tourism-related potential at a detailed regional level
- develop mechanisms (e.g. quota systems) to enable charter fishing to operate on a sustainable basis with minimum regulation, including the ability to increase access to fisheries resources in line with economic opportunities.

This discussion paper proposes a long-term vision for the charter fishing sector, and a number of objectives and actions to be achieved over a 4-year period (2017–2020), as a first step to achieve that vision.

Progress so far

Targeted consultation with a range of charter fishing operators from the Gold Coast to Cairns and Weipa occurred in April 2015. The operators consulted covered a diverse range of operations. A total of 11 focus group meetings were held. Further discussions were held with charter representatives, other stakeholder groups and other relevant government agencies (e.g. tourism, transport).

The targeted consultation canvassed views about the different types of charter fishing operations, impediments to development, species of importance, possible actions that could better grow the industry and ways the government should engage with the charter fishing sector into the future.

That consultation has informed the development of this discussion paper.

Developing the action plan

This discussion paper outlines the proposed objectives for the charter fishing action plan, the key issues facing the sector and possible actions to address these issues. It constitutes a whole-of-government approach to progressing economic development for the industry and achieving the long-term vision for the sector.

You are invited to provide comment on the objectives, issues and possible actions to establish a world-class charter fishery in Queensland. This feedback will inform the development of a charter fishing action plan for consideration by the Queensland Government later in 2017.
The charter fishing sector

Current fisheries management arrangements

Under the Fisheries Regulation 2008, administered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (DAF), a charter fishing trip means a trip on a boat, during which a person uses a boat (the charter boat) to take paying passengers to fish as recreational fishers.

Prior to July 2006, charter fishing operators were required to hold a permit in order to operate fishing tours. These permits were issued for a 12-month period. Charter fishing operators were then required to apply for a new permit every year.

Since the introduction of a new licensing system on 1 July 2006, charter fishing operators in offshore waters (defined as greater than 2 metres in depth) have been required to hold a charter fishing licence. The licences are issued for an indefinite period and allow access to waters across Queensland. There are no restrictions on the numbers of licences issued. The initial application fee is $97.95, with an annual renewal fee of $305.85. It is compulsory for all charter fishing licence holders to report catches in logbooks.

While recreational fishers on licensed charter trips must use fishing gear permitted for recreational fishing and abide by the recreational size and possession limits, some special provisions also apply on extended charter fishing trips to allow for higher possession limits (e.g. for coral reef fin fish, pearl perch, snapper and Spanish mackerel). Licensed charter fishing operators may also apply for exemption from the coral reef fin fish closures during the two 5-day closures in October and November each year, provided they meet specific qualifying criteria (generally that they have a history of conducting extended charter fishing trips). At present, there are 11 licence holders with an exemption.

Other management arrangements

While other government agencies do not specifically manage charter fishing, there are a number of rules that apply to operators. These include regulations relating to marine parks and maritime safety.

Both federal and state marine parks are in place in areas across Queensland, with a range of rules applying to all marine tourism operators (as opposed to charter fishing specifically). These management arrangements require relevant authorisations to operate in specific areas and are subject to reporting obligations. For Queensland, those arrangements are administered by the Department of National Parks, Sports and Racing (under the Marine Parks Act 2004) and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act 1975).

Maritime safety is overseen by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, with Maritime Safety Queensland responsible for ensuring minimum standards for vessels operating under the Marine Safety (Domestic Commercial Vessel) National Law Act 2012.
Participants

As at September 2016, there were 355 charter fishing licences issued under the Fisheries Regulation 2008. Figure 1 shows the number of charter fishing operators reporting catch between 1994 and 2014. It should be noted that prior to 2006, fisheries regulations required all charter fishing operators to hold a permit, not just those in offshore waters. At its peak in 2004, there were 368 licence holders reporting catch in Queensland. However, by 2014 this number had dropped to 150 licence holders reporting catch. The decline in operators reporting catch is thought to be a result of changes to the licensing arrangements in 2006 and other changes that came into effect around the same time, including changes to the coral reef fin fish fishery and marine parks.

During the focus discussion, a number of operators indicated that access to many very productive fishing grounds had been reduced through the implementation of marine park zoning, under both state and federal jurisdictions. There were concerns expressed that the cumulative effects of multiple layers of complex regulatory obligations had impacted on their profitability and had, in part, driven a decline in client numbers.

Figure 1: Number of charter fishing licence holders reporting catch between 1994 and 2014

When broken down into regions (Figure 2 overleaf), the data shows that the Subtropical, Townsville and Cairns regions accounted for approximately 80% of licence holders reporting catch.

No additional statistics are available, as other agencies do not differentiate charter fishing from other commercial activities permitted under their management arrangements.
Species of importance

Species of importance to the charter fishery differ by region. However, red throat emperor, coral trout, Spanish mackerel and snapper are reported as the most harvested species overall through charter logbooks.

In the Subtropical region, snapper, pearl perch and teraglin comprise almost 40% of the reported charter catch. Other species of regional importance are Spanish and spotted mackerel.

In coral reef–associated grounds (such as the Capricorn bunker to Far Northern regions), coral trout, Spanish mackerel and tropical snapper are the highest reported species by weight. Red throat emperor, hussar and Venus tuskfish also feature in specific northern regions.

For the Gulf of Carpentaria region, the largest catches are blue threadfin salmon, Spanish and school mackerel, Queenfish, mud crab and barramundi.
Fishing methods and apparatus

Clients on charter fishing trips are restricted to using recreational fishing apparatus and methods. These include a limit of up to three fishing lines with up to six hooks per person, cast nets of up to 3.7 metres and mesh size less than 28 millimetres, and up to four crab pots per person. Additional restrictions on the use of fishing apparatus also apply in both state and federal marine park zones. Spear guns may also be used, provided underwater breathing apparatus (other than a snorkel) is not used.

Catch and fishing effort

Fishing effort increased to a high of 23,500 days in 2004 and has since declined to just over 9,000 days in 2014, corresponding with the declining trend in licence numbers (Figure 3).

The highest catches of 600 tonnes to just over 700 tonnes were sustained between 2002 and 2010, and have declined to around 400 tonnes in 2014. It should be noted that there are some concerns about the quality of information collected through the logbooks, as there is no independent validation program.

Figure 3: Catch and fishing effort between 1994 and 2014 for all analytical regions combined

These trends are reflected in the reported catch and effort for the regions of highest reported activity (i.e. Subtropical, Townsville and Cairns). Regional charter fishing effort is shown in Figure 4 (overleaf).
QUESTION

What factors do you think have influenced the recent decline in the number of charter fishing licences?
Proposed vision and objectives

The proposed vision for the charter fishing action plan is:

**A world-class charter fishery for Queensland**

The proposed objectives to achieve this vision are to:

1. create an enabling regulatory environment to build and sustain a world-class charter fishery and support Queensland small businesses
2. facilitate increased recreational fisher and tourist demand for charter fishing services
3. facilitate increased charter fishing sector access to regionally important species.

These objectives will help frame the charter fishing action plan, and help Queensland Government agencies and the charter fishing industry develop actions to deliver the objectives.

**QUESTIONS**

- Do you agree with the proposed vision and objectives?
- If not, do you have alternative suggestions?
Identified issues and proposed actions

This section outlines the issues identified during targeted consultation with existing charter fishing operators and charter fishing guides in Queensland, and suggests some possible actions.

Issue 1: A voice for the charter fishing industry

Operators expressed concern about the cumulative business impacts of management decisions made by different government agencies that have affected security of access to fisheries resources. Charter fishing operators felt that they needed to be explicitly recognised and given a seat at the table for negotiating changes to management arrangements with government agencies. This would allow the sector’s issues to be considered when management changes were being contemplated.

Operators provided examples of inconsistent approaches taken by different government agencies when addressing the sector’s issues (e.g. inconsistent approaches to implementing new marine reserves, including varying financial assistance for industry).

Operators were of the view that strengthening security of access to fishing entitlements for charter fishing operators was a major priority and would be the single most effective management arrangement that could be implemented. This is discussed further in Issue 2 (overleaf).

Some charter fishing operators also suggested that the creation of an industry peak body would help them deal with government and ensure their views and needs were understood and considered. In general, this remains an issue for the sector itself to address.

CASE STUDY

New South Wales charter management advisory committee

New South Wales established a Marine and Estuarine Recreational Charter Management Advisory Committee comprising regional representatives who are elected by licence holders and appointed by the minister. They meet twice a year and members may hold positions for up to 3 years. The committee:

- helps to develop and monitor the implementation of a fishery management strategy for the marine and estuarine charter fishing sector
- advises the minister on whether the objectives of the strategy are being attained
- makes recommendations to the minister concerning the strategy
- undertakes other functions as requested by the minister.
POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- The charter fishing industry to establish an industry body, and develop mechanisms for ongoing support of that body, to enable promotion of the sector and engagement with government and the wider fishing community.
- As part of the broader consideration of consultation mechanisms for fisheries management, DAF implements mechanisms to actively engage the sector.
- All Queensland Government agencies ensure operators are appropriately consulted and their views considered prior to making decisions that impact charter fishing operations.
- If future management arrangements affect charter fishing operations, consideration is given to the impacts on charter fishing and whether any offsetting strategies are required.

QUESTIONS

- Will these proposed actions improve security of access for charter fishing operators?
- What other actions could help improve security of access?

Issue 2: Access to the charter fishery (including licensing and compliance)

Licensing

Charter fishing operations in Queensland range between small vessel operations in freshwater impoundments and inshore and estuary sports fishing charters, through to bluewater game fishing and extended live aboard charters in the Great Barrier Reef. Therefore, the views of operators vary depending on their business operation.

Current arrangements require vessels fishing in offshore waters greater than 2 metres in depth to hold a charter fishing licence. These operators are also required to complete logbooks recording their catch and effort.

Catch and effort information obtained from licenced operators is used by Fisheries Queensland to estimate the overall fishing effort within a fishery, and to ensure catch rates and fishing effort are maintained at sustainable levels. Charter fishing operations in these waters are typified by short- to medium-term charters with higher catch rates that could impact heavily on fish stocks, especially in localised areas.

In general, charter fishing operators are subject to the rules of recreational fishers, with size and possession limits applying to their clients. However, some operators are able to access extended possession limits for fishers on longer charters. Many of these operators wish to see the current system continue and strengthened further, with a limited number of licences to provide stronger property rights.
Smaller inshore and freshwater guide operations are not required to hold licences and are not required to report their catch and effort. These operators are restricted to the size and possession limits that apply to recreational fishers. Many of these operators want the flexibility to continue operating under these conditions and a reduction in red tape.

Some existing operators have expressed concern about the growth of inshore teaching guides who use their client’s private vessel to undertake a range of fishing activities, and are therefore exempt from the safety requirements under the Transport Operations (Marine Safety) Act 1994. Operators felt that this was inequitable, as licensed charter fishing operators have to meet more stringent safety requirements.

Some existing operators also expressed concern regarding unrestricted access to this fishery for new entrants, and were of the view that open access reduces both the incentive for additional investment and the market value of their businesses. This translates to support for effort capping through limiting licences at a statewide or regional level, or some other form of capping such as introducing a tradeable quota on the number of clients that can be taken on a trip.

**Figure 5: Balancing requirements for charter fishing operators**
Table 1: Licensing options, benefits and limitations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Licence all charter fishing operators (offshore, inshore and guides)</th>
<th>No licensing (restricted to size and possession limits, and other legislative requirements such as safety rules/standards)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Benefits:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• security of access</td>
<td>• fewer barriers to new entrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• provides a property right that has value</td>
<td>• easier for small businesses and inshore guides to get started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• access to extended possession limits</td>
<td>• no fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• licence fees paid by those using a public resource</td>
<td><strong>Limitations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• data collected on catches</td>
<td>• no data collected on the charter fishing sector, apart from normal recreational fishing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• could involve a quota system on the number of clients</td>
<td>• no extended possession limits or access to fisheries during closed seasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limitations:</strong></td>
<td>• no financial contribution to management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• restricts new entrants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creates administrative requirements such as filling out logbooks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compliance

The initial consultation process indicated widespread support for ongoing and improved compliance, and most operators were supportive of the existing inspection regime by the Queensland Boating and Fisheries Patrol (QBFP). Most supported a need for increased visibility of compliance staff and suggested that an increased compliance regime would benefit recreational anglers, as well as reducing the incidence of illegal chartering.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

- DAF introduces a charter fishing licence for all types of operations (including inshore and guides), and potentially restricts the number of licences (or clients) statewide or at a regional level under fisheries regulations.
- DAF withdraws the requirement for a charter fishing licence in Queensland to remove barriers for additional businesses to be established.
- DAF, in association with industry, develops a charter fishing inspection standard operating procedure in conjunction with QBFP and the Queensland Water Police.
- DAF to develop and implement a charter fishing compliance plan for QBFP and the Queensland Water Police.
Question

- Do you think limiting access to the charter fishery is necessary? Why/why not?
- Is limiting access necessary, considering size and possession limits apply to clients on charter trips and there isn’t a limit on the number of recreational fishers in Queensland?
- If licensing was removed, how would catch and effort data be collected for sustainability assessments?

Issue 3: Maritime safety and infrastructure

The need to ensure consistent interpretation of marine safety legislation by individual vessel surveyors was a major factor raised by charter fishing operators. The cost imposed on industry by changing or different interpretations of the maritime requirements is a major burden. During initial consultations, it was suggested better support and education about the rules would help operators comply with marine safety legislation. It should be noted that as at 1 January 2016, responsibility for the accreditation of vessel surveyors was transferred to the control of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority.

Australian Maritime Safety Authority regulations regarding the new National System for Domestic Commercial Vessel Safety are perceived to have a significant future impact on the small inshore charter vessel fleet. Operators believed that the regulations were more suited to larger vessels (i.e. those greater than 30 metres in length), and felt the onerous safety standards for new vessels would result in an ageing fleet as operators would be unable or unwilling to purchase new vessels and comply with the new standards.

Charter fishing operators also indicated that the multiple layering of ownership of port infrastructure was creating difficulty and increasing costs for operators across the state. Examples cited included port owners increasing access fees and situations in which charter operators were excluded from using the infrastructure for several days due to competing users.

Possible Actions

- DAF to work with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority to encourage consistent interpretation of the marine safety legislation across the state and educate charter fishing operators regarding their responsibilities.
- DAF to work with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and vessel surveyors to improve consistency in the interpretation of marine safety legislation.
- DAF to work with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority and Maritime Safety Queensland to encourage them to provide support to vessel builders to comply with both the legislative and business requirements for charter fishing operations.
- Industry to engage with the Department of Transport and Main Roads and local port authorities to identify infrastructure ownership and access rights for charter fishing operators.
Issue 4: Declining resources and increasing fishing pressure

During consultation, there was a recognition that fisheries resources were under considerable pressure from growing recreational and commercial fishing practices, particularly through increases in fishing power (e.g. better and cheaper technology and the use of social media to share information). Inshore localised depletions of fish stocks were an issue of concern for all charter fishing operators. However, the longer range, multiple-day operators were generally satisfied with the state of the fishery within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park area.

It was suggested that there could be an overall review of fish size and possession limits, as charter fishing operators in general thought they were too high in the case of possession limits (especially for iconic species such as barramundi). Long-range operators, however, felt the possession limits were acceptable and provided flexibility by giving higher possession limits for extended trips.

There was broad support from charter fishing operators for the government’s policy to introduce net-free zones.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

• DAF to consult with all stakeholders to develop criteria for government consideration that will guide the establishment of future net-free zones.
• DAF to review size and possession limits for recreational fishers to ensure they are preventing localised depletion and protecting iconic species.

QUESTIONS

• Do size and possession limits for recreational fishers need to be reviewed?
• Should possession limits for charter fishing clients be different to normal recreational fishing limits?
Issue 5: Promotion of charter fishing

For the first time, under the charter fishing action plan, charter fishing will be recognised as a distinct industry and will be developed and promoted to ensure maximum benefits. With the recent introduction of the three net-free zones, there are emerging opportunities to promote charter fishing to a range of local, domestic and international visitors to encourage growth of the industry. There are a range of ways this could be delivered—through formal organisations such as Tourism Queensland, by industry or a combination of both. Industry has already identified a number key iconic species and experiences that it could promote more broadly to build Queensland’s reputation as a fishing destination (e.g. barramundi in Central Queensland, snapper off the Gold Coast and reef fishing off Cairns).

Industry could also work more actively with local governments and local tourism groups to encourage more locals to take part in charter fishing within their region.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS

• Industry to partner with tourism agencies to promote the benefits of charter fishing and highlight iconic species and regional experiences.
• Industry to fund a promotional campaign for their sector.

QUESTION

• Would a charter fishing industry partnership with tourism agencies be an effective way to promote the industry?

Issue 6: Fishery enhancements

Government could consider providing additional fishery enhancements, including introducing more artificial reefs along the coast and positioning fish aggregating devices to concentrate pelagic species. This has been successfully delivered in a number of areas (e.g. Moreton Bay and the Great Sandy Strait), led by the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing in consultation with other agencies and community members.

There are also opportunities for charter fishing operators to participate in other established environmental programs (like Reef Guardians and citizen science programs) that would assist in the monitoring of fish species and habitat health through tag and release programs and opportunistic habitat observations where possible. In turn, charter operators could promote their environmental stewardship to grow demand for the charter sector in Queensland.

Comments were also made regarding stocked impoundments and the potential to work with stocking groups and dam operators to explore possible mitigation strategies to prevent fish losses from overtopping during floods.
POSSIBLE ACTIONS

• DAF to work with the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing to explore opportunities for further fishery enhancements, such as fish aggregating devices and artificial reefs.
• DAF to investigate intensified stocking rates for impoundments affected by major overtopping events.
• DAF to work with stocking groups and dam operators to investigate mitigation strategies to avoid fish losses during major overtopping events in stocked impoundments.

QUESTION

• How can the charter fishing industry be further supported to improve charter fishing experiences (e.g. through improved infrastructure and stocking)?

Issue 7: Red tape reduction

Charter fishing operators identified multiple examples of inconsistencies between different agencies, and noted that opportunities for streamlining requirements should be explored.

CASE STUDY

Public liability insurance requirements

DAF does not require charter fishing operators to hold public liability insurance to hold a charter fishing licence or any other authority, while the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing does require permit holders in state marine parks to do so.

POSSIBLE ACTION


QUESTION

• In terms of charter fishing operator obligations to different agencies, which requirements should be streamlined?
Have your say

This discussion paper is designed to inform relevant stakeholders about issues and possible actions for consideration in the development of a charter fishing action plan for Queensland.

Feedback is sought from all stakeholders, including charter fishing operators, relevant community interest groups, government agencies and interested members of the public.

Once public comments have been received, the Queensland Government will consider all responses to develop a charter fishing action plan in conjunction with the charter fishing industry.

You can provide feedback by completing the online survey or downloading the response form and submitting it by email or post:

Online:  www.daf.qld.gov.au

Email:  charterreview@daf.qld.gov.au

Post:  Charter fishing action plan discussion paper
       Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
       GPO Box 46
       Brisbane Qld 4001

Submissions close 5 pm, Friday 4 August 2017.

For more information, visit www.daf.qld.gov.au or call 13 25 23.