



Media Release **No. 664**

For release 10 August 2015

PZJA CONFIRMS ASPIRATIONS FOR 100 PER CENT OWNERSHIP OF TORRES STRAIT FISHERIES

The Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) said discussion on the regions aspirations for 100 per cent ownership of Torres Strait fisheries was supported at the recent Protected Zone Joint Authority (PZJA) meeting held on Thursday Island.

TSRA Chairperson, Mr Joseph Elu, said members were encouraged to hear that community consultations are continuing on the draft Road Map to establish the framework of ownership.

“Consultations to-date has shown there is strong community support for developing the roadmap to achieve 100 per cent ownership of remaining Torres Strait fisheries as soon as possible,” Mr Elu said. “We already have full ownership of the finfish and beche de mer fisheries, but we need to keep working on Kaiar (tropical rock lobster) and the prawn fisheries”.

“Consultation will continue and the PZJA will consider the endorsement of the final draft roadmap when this process is complete.”

The 24th meeting of the PZJA also discussed the Tropical Rock Lobster Management Plan, gear and boat trials in the Prawn Fishery, opening of the Black Teatfish Fishery, and development permits for the Pearl Shell Fishery.

PZJA members hosted a public meeting with stakeholders to ensure that their views on items being discussed at the PZJA meeting were represented.

The PZJA emphasised its commitment to delivering the Tropical Rock Lobster Management Plan by March 2016 allowing for the introduction of quota limits for the start of the 2016-2017 fishing season

“This aims to ensure the sustainability of the fishery by capping the take from this fishery, and will ensure that communities in the Torres Strait can begin to benefit from their full share of the resource,” Mr Elu said.

“We have also agreed to review the plan two years after its implementation to allow for changes to improve performance including a possible allocation to individuals or companies within the Traditional Inhabitant sector.”

Members, with exception of the TSRA Chairperson, agreed to a 1 February season opening date in the Torres Strait Prawn Fishery starting in 2016, however did not agree to a trial of larger sizes for boats and trawl gear.

It was also agreed to open the Black Teatfish Fishery for a second year with fishing permitted in the month of November and catches limited to 15 tonnes.

“This is a great economic opportunity for Traditional Inhabitant fishers,” Mr Elu said.

“Improved reporting of catch is critical as the provision of these records will help the PZJA determine the long term sustainability of the fishery.”

Members agreed development permits will be made available for existing fishery licence holders to collect smaller sized pearl shell of between 100-130mm in addition to the current size limits of 130-230mm.

Only 2,000 of the smaller sized shell will be available, allowing the commercial benefits of using smaller shell for the pearl aquaculture industry to be tested.

Other outcomes from the meeting included an agreement of amendments the conditions of scientific permits for a shark-tagging project by the James Cook University, and a turtle and dugong-tagging project by the TSRA.

Over the next six to twelve months, the PZJA agencies will focus on:

- Development and implementation of a management plan for the tropical rock lobster fishery,
- Finalise the roadmap to 100 per cent ownership of Torres Strait fisheries.
- Improve the monitoring and reporting for the Beche de mer fishery,
- In line with administration review:
 - continue to investigate the transfer of domestic compliance responsibilities from Fisheries Queensland to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority,
 - develop legislative amendment priorities to provide immediate improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of fisheries administration in the Torres Strait (for example allow for mandatory catch reporting across all sectors, delegation of powers to grant and varying scientific/development permits, implement Fisheries Infringement Notices)

The PZJA comprises the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Agriculture, Senator Richard Colbeck; Queensland Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries, Bill Byrne; and Chairperson of the TSRA, Joseph Elu, AO.

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TSRA Media Contact – Bruce Nelson telephone 0423 403 449