



RECFISH AUSTRALIA

NEWS RELEASE

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**AUSTRALIA'S SOUTHERN FISH RESOURCES – COAST TO COAST – UNDER
THREAT AGAIN**

The peak national recreational fishing organisation, Recfish Australia, today warned that Australia's stocks of Blue (Slimy) mackerel and the many other fish that depend on them are again under threat despite reassurances this week by the federal fisheries minister.

Recfish Australia's National Executive Director, Graham Pike, said today that the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) had – at best - only flimsy management measures in place to prevent large commercial fishing interests using super-trawlers, such as the Irish-owned Veronica, to fish the Commonwealth's Small Pelagic Fishery (SPF) off NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

Large foreign commercial fishing interests, in partnership with Australian interests, are reportedly about to bring the Veronica to Australia to take Blue mackerel and other small pelagic fish in the SPF for sale as food in South Australian tuna farms and human consumption overseas.

The Veronica is reportedly capable of catching very large tonnages of Blue mackerel and other small pelagics so quickly that she could within weeks exceed the catch levels currently prescribed by AFMA.

Even if these catch levels were exceeded, Mr Pike said, AFMA's current policy for the fishery 'provided for catch above the (set) levels and the opportunity for increases in the catch levels within a fishing year' (from an AFMA document).

Recfish says it's entirely possible, under AFMA's current arrangements for the fishery, for a super-trawler with Australian fishing permits (which apparently the Veronica's owners have purchased) to take and exceed the annual catch limits for the entire Small Pelagic Fishery in say, November and December and then do exactly the same thing again within the first couple of months of a new year.

To compound the situation, Recfish says, there is no Management Plan under the Australian *Fisheries Management Act* which AFMA could use to tightly control commercial fishing activities in the SPF.

Mr Pike said AFMA had, three years ago, rebuffed Recfish Australia's repeated requests to develop a Management Plan for the Small Pelagic Fishery because the Authority maintained that the fishery (at least then) was of too low a value to warrant AFMA's expense of developing and implementing a formal plan. Instead, AFMA proceeded with a management 'policy', the weaknesses of which were now giving rise to the current fears of overfishing by ships such as the Veronica.

"So it came as something of a surprise that the Minister announced four days ago that AFMA would now start developing a Management Plan for the SPF", Mr Pike said. "The problem, though, is that it can take years for AFMA to develop and implement a Management Plan. For example, AFMA has been developing a Management Plan for its Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery for about eight years – and it's still not ready. In fact, they've just re-opened public submissions on it, yet again."

Mr Pike said that the Federal Fisheries Minister, Senator Ian Macdonald, was correct in his Media Release of 6 September when stating that 'small pelagic species are a critical element of the food chain for larger species such as tuna and billfish that are targeted by both recreational and commercial fisheries'. However, recreational fishers could not believe the Minister's claim that 'there is no way that any Australian Government agency would ever see the sustainability of Australia's fisheries resources compromised'.

Currently, the majority of Commonwealth fisheries under AFMA's management are officially classified as overfished or fully fished. Mr Pike said Australians could readily cite a considerable number of fish species which had been commercially fished unsustainably to critically low levels – southern bluefin tuna, orange roughy, gemfish and broadbill swordfish among them.

"The Minister also talks of invoking the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to protect the Small Pelagic Fishery from the prospective operations of the Veronica but the environmental and ecological assessment of the SPF under that Act has already been largely completed and there appears to be no impediment to the Veronica in that assessment", Mr Pike said.

Recfish says that on past performance, AFMA would succumb to pressure from the large commercial fishing interests. If this happened, there would be a renewed revolt of Australia's recreational fishers as occurred four years ago when the Federal Government announced grants to commercial fishers at Eden, NSW, to increase exploitation of Slimy mackerel without proper assessment of existing stocks.

Recfish Australia warned at the time that commercial fishing of the mackerel without scientific knowledge about the health and size of their populations could easily lead to overfishing and a resulting collapse of the most popular and economically valuable recreational and sport fishery in Australia, as well as valuable commercial fisheries.

As a result of the outcry of recreational fishers through Recfish Australia, the Commonwealth Government ordered an urgent preliminary study into Slimy mackerel in

the SPF and based on the results of that study, which confirmed Recfish Australia's fears, instigated a three-year \$3.5 million Federal-State Slimy mackerel research project which began in August 2002.

"Fishing operations in the SPF as reportedly proposed by the Veronica's connections would completely undermine this half-completed research project which is essential if the Small Pelagic Fishery is to be managed sustainably in future", Mr Pike said

"If AFMA folds under this big commercial pressure, and there's a good possibility it will, it is likely to destroy the research arrangements that the recreational fishing sector, working with the smaller Australian commercial fishing operators, has had put in place during the past three years", Mr Pike said.

He added that recreational fishers were also highly suspicious of the unconfirmed report, received yesterday, that the Irish owners of the Veronica had decided to keep the Veronica out of Australia "until after the election".

Media contact: Graham Pike, 0412 960 032