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Fears for fishing rights under NT Fisheries' unjust merger

Australia's largest supplier of tropical snapper has called on the NT Government to dump a controversial plan to merge two top end fisheries, saying the move threatens sustainable fishing and sets a dangerous precedent for all commercial fishing rights across the country.

Australia Bay Seafoods (ABS) says the proposed Northern Offshore Fishery should be put on hold until a new biomass survey of fish stocks can be completed to ensure future quotas of red and goldband snapper are secure and sustainable.

The Timor Reef Fishery and the Demersal Fishery were established as separate fishing grounds in 2011 and 2012 due to dissimilar habitat types and a stark contrast in the levels of target species. ABS is the main permit holder in the Demersal Fishery, with about 68% of the quota.

ABS general manager Michael O'Brien said the proposed merger is "fundamentally flawed" as it's based on an "obsolete" biomass survey conducted by NT Fisheries 30 years ago. He said this should not be considered the "best available science and is an embarrassment for the NT Fisheries to make this claim".

Mr O'Brien said the merger would seriously reduce the value of the larger Demersal without compensation, transfer property rights to the licence holders of the much smaller and less productive Timor Reef fishery, and potentially threaten the sustainability of both.

"Combining two different marine environments and introducing more trawlers will threaten the sustainability of red and goldband snapper stocks," he said.

Such a transfer of wealth has the potential to cost the company \$20 million and could set a precedent that will undermine the security of all quota managed fisheries in Australia.

"Property rights are the foundation of investment in sustainable fishing and responsible stock management by the private sector," Mr O'Brien said. "It would be our property rights being given to someone else for free, which is unjust, unconstitutional and illegal."

ABS says NT Fisheries has ignored its written concerns over the last two years so it is taking up the fight on behalf of all Australian commercial fishers.

Of much concern is NT Fisheries' refusal to support the renewal of ABS' export licence, which expired on 13 June.

"The Morrison Government has publicly said Northern Australia, and the many opportunities it provides, will be extremely important to the economic recovery from the impacts of COVID-19," Mr O'Brien said.

"It smells a bit fishy that ABS had exported significant amounts of fish to Asia and South America over the past 10 years and had never had an issue with approvals until now."

ABS has called on the NT Government to stop the merger until a new biomass survey is complete, which would allow quotas in each fishery to be assessed and if necessary, adjusted.

"We call on the Gunner Government and the NT Department of Fisheries to publicly explain their rationale for pushing through this merger in the absence of compelling scientific or economic reasons."

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