

Flathead Compliance Evaluation

Importance of compliance

Effective fisheries management relies not only on well-designed rules but on a high level of compliance. Stock assessment models also assume high compliance, meaning management measures must be understood, accepted and realistically enforceable. For a depleted stock such as sand flathead, ensuring high compliance is critical. The Department therefore prioritises management rules that are practical to enforce, clearly communicated, and structured to maximise voluntary and observed compliance.

Compliance Issues

NRE Tas considers compliance with current bag and size limits extremely difficult to enforce, largely due to a high level of filleting at sea filleting fish at sea and transit opportunities. Enforcement data highlights several issues specific to bag and size limits (see Appendix).

Bag Limits

Bag limit enforcement depends on police being able to identify fish species during inspections. Tasmania has multiple flathead species, and once fish are filleted, species cannot be distinguished. If frames are discarded at sea, officers cannot confirm species or size, preventing assessment of whether catch limits have been exceeded.

This challenge is compounded by significant variations in bag limits across flathead species. In inner-southern waters, the limit for sand flathead has been as low as two fish, whereas limits for other species are much higher: 20 for tiger flathead, and five each for bluespotted and rock flathead. A combined limit of 20 applies to sand and tiger flathead.

Sand flathead limits have changed several times in response to depletion — from 30 fish (2001), to 20 (2015), to interim limits introduced in 2023, including region-specific limits. These rapid changes have shifted fishers' expectations of a “successful catch,” potentially contributing to deliberate or personally justified non-compliance.

TARFish advocacy during the 2023 rule review also resulted in an inner south-east zone with a two-fish limit and outer waters with a five-fish limit. Tasmania Police advise that the two-fish limit is extremely difficult to enforce. Zone boundaries create opportunities for evasive behaviour, for example, claiming fish were caught in a different zone, which undermines stock protection.

Size Limits

Size limit enforcement faces similar issues. Up to 75% of recreational fishers fillet their catch at sea, making it impossible for officers to measure fish. Tasmania Police report that, even when fish are landed whole, size-limit breaches exceed 25%.

Size limits also differ between flathead species. Fishers may claim small fillets reflect poor technique or that they came from tiger flathead, which has a smaller minimum size (32 cm).

In 2023, the minimum size for sand flathead increased from 32 cm to 35 cm to reduce fishing pressure. However, long-term depletion means larger fish are increasingly scarce, and attachment to previous limits may increase the temptation to ignore rules and fillet at sea to avoid detection.

Scientific compliance assumptions

Scientific models assume high compliance; undetected non-compliance produces overly optimistic stock assessments. In a low-data, recreationally dominated fishery, even modest levels of unverified catch can mask declines, delay rebuilding, and compromise management decisions.

Conclusion

Given that bag and size limits are extremely difficult to enforce in most circumstances and Tasmania Police have found high levels of non-compliance, the Department cannot assume high levels of compliance.

Requiring fishers to land flathead whole – or fillets accompanied by an intact frame – would ensure fisheries officers can accurately identify the species and compliance with species, size and bag limits. This simple rule, common in other jurisdictions, immediately supports the rebuild of the sand flathead fishery.

Marine Resources

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