THE 113-DAY LOCKOUT

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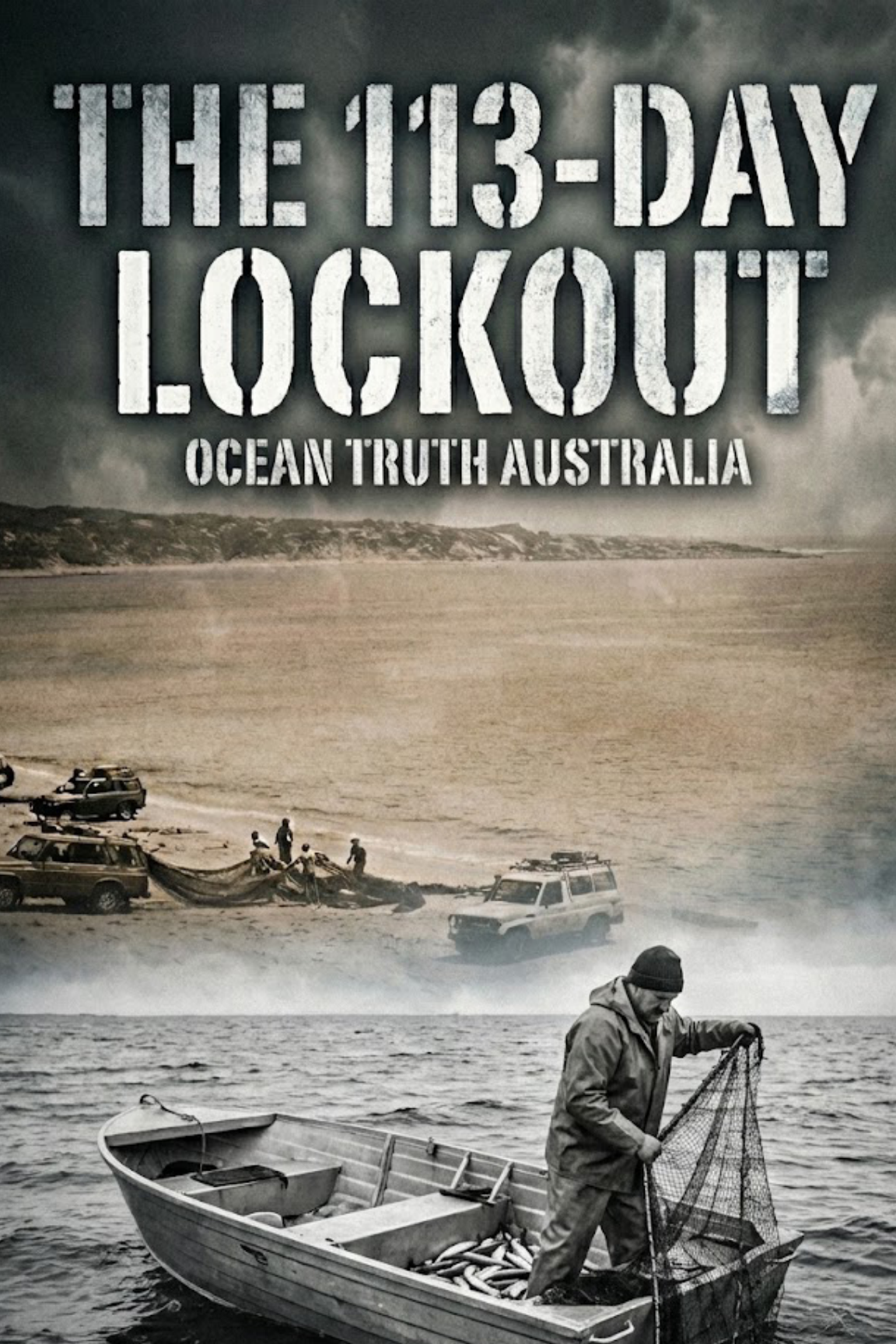

THE 113-DAY LOCKOUT

The view from the Wharf

If you stand on the Patonga Wharf on a Saturday morning, the world looks perfect. The sun hits the water of the Hawkesbury River, the holiday-makers are setting up their umbrellas on the sand, and the smell of salt and sunscreen hangs in the air.

It is the kind of day that sells postcards. It is also the kind of day that breaks a fisherman's heart.

I'm usually down there on the Lyndy, my prawn trawler. She's a solid vessel—blue hull, white cabin, rigging standing tall against the headland. On a Saturday like this, I'm often on the deck, grease gun in hand, or checking the nets, doing the endless maintenance that keeps a commercial vessel safe.

Almost inevitably, a tourist will wander down from the ferry or the caravan park. They see the boat. They see the trawl arms. They see a fisherman working.

They smile, walk to the edge of the wharf, and ask the question that haunts every operator in this state: "Hey mate, any fresh prawns for sale

today?"

I have to wipe the grease off my hands, look them in the eye, and say, "I'd love to sell you some. But I'm not allowed to catch them today."

The confusion on their face is immediate. They look at the flat water. They look at the boat, ready to go. "Is something broken?" they ask. "Is the weather bad?"

"No," I tell them. "It's Saturday. The government says I can't work."

The "Free" Fisher Myth

There is a romanticised idea of the commercial fisherman in Australia. The public imagines us as the last free agents—rugged individuals who wake up, look at the weather, and decide to chase the catch whenever the ocean allows.

The reality is starkly different. We are not free agents. We are food producers who have been placed on a rigid, bureaucratic roster that ignores the reality of nature and the demands of the market.

Whether it is a fisher chasing school prawns and squid in the Hawkesbury River, or a fisher chasing sea garfish 400 kilometres away on the South Coast, we are bound by the same archaic rule.

We are locked out of our own industry for 113 days a year.

The 113-Day Lockout

Most people are shocked when they see the raw data. When you run a small business, you assume you can open the doors whenever you are physically able to work. But for the Hawkesbury Prawn Trawl and the Ocean Haul Garfish sector, the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) effectively padlocks our factory gates every week.

We sat down and crunched the numbers for the 2025 calendar. Between mandatory weekend closures and NSW gazetted public holidays, our busi-

nesses face a staggering amount of downtime:

- 104 Weekend Days: Every Saturday and Sunday of the year.
- 9 Public Holidays: Including the critical periods of Easter, ANZAC Day, and Christmas.
- Total: 113 Days.

That is nearly one-third of the year where we are legally banned from earning an income.

Imagine telling a café owner they must close on weekends. Imagine telling a plumber he is illegal if he fixes a pipe on a Sunday. Imagine telling a farmer he cannot harvest his wheat because it's a public holiday.

It wouldn't happen. Yet, for the people responsible for putting NSW seafood on NSW plates, this is our "business as usual."

The Christmas and Easter Paradox

For the Hawkesbury fishery, this restriction is particularly cruel because of what we catch.

Prawns and squid are not just protein; they are cultural icons. They are "celebration food." When do Australians want to eat fresh prawns? They want them at Christmas. They want them on Australia Day. They want them on Good Friday.

But under the current rules, these are the exact times we are often banned from working.

In the lead-up to Christmas, the demand for Hawkesbury River prawns is insatiable. Prices are strong, and the community wants local product. But if Christmas falls near a weekend, or during the public holidays, we are tied up at the wharf. We are forced to watch the peak demand window slam shut while our boats sit idle.

The same happens at Easter. A fisher on the South Coast sees this with the Garfish run. April is often the peak season for garfish—when the schools

are thickest and the quality is highest.

However, April is also a minefield of closures. In 2025, due to the clustering of Easter and ANZAC Day, commercial fishers will lose 11 days in a single month. That is nearly 40% of the month lost to red tape.

We are forced to fish frantically on the Thursday before Good Friday, knowing that whatever we catch has to last the market through a four-day long weekend. By the time you buy that fish on Easter Monday, it is four days old. If we were allowed to work, you could be eating seafood caught that very morning.

The "Lyndy" is a Factory, Not a Hobby

To the untrained eye, the Lyndy might just look like a picturesque part of the scenery. She is a classic timber trawler, painted in sharp white with striking blue gunwales. Her high, flared bow is built to punch through the river chop, and her tall outrigger booms reach up into the sky, holding the heavy stabilizer "birds" that keep her steady in a swell.

She looks peaceful sitting on the mooring. But to a bank manager or a business owner, she is a floating asset worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The deck is not a lounge area; it is a workspace packed with heavy industrial steel. Dominating the deck is the winch—not a modern hydraulic system, but a mechanical workhorse driven by a Farmall A tractor gearbox. She is a machine designed for one purpose: sustainable food production.

Like any factory, it has fixed costs that do not care what day of the week it is.

- Insurance: We pay 365 days a year.
- Mooring Fees: We pay 365 days a year.
- Maintenance: Saltwater doesn't stop corroding metal on Sundays.
- Engine depreciation: Time and tide wait for no man.

No other industry in Australia would accept a regulation that forces a capital-intensive asset to sit idle for 30% of its lifespan for no scientific reason.

We are trying to run modern, efficient, sustainable businesses. We operate under strict government management plans designed to ensure sustainability.

The Ocean Haul Eastern Sea Garfish fishery is quota managed. A hard annual cap (TACC) is set on how much can be taken, and individual operators are allocated quota within that limit. Once the quota is caught, we stop.

The Hawkesbury Estuary Prawn Trawl fleet faces a battery of other restrictions, including gear limitations, bycatch reduction devices, spatial closures and effort controls.

In both cases, the sustainability lever is already built into the system:

For garfish, it is the total allowable commercial catch.

For prawns, it is the combination of gear, area and effort limits.

Yet in the garfish sector many operators still struggle to reach their quota. Not because the fish are not there, but because the best weather and the strongest demand often fall on days that are closed to them.

Take the lead up to Easter. It is one of the biggest seafood peaks of the year. The weather can be stable, the fish are schooling and the market is crying out for fresh local product. But under the weekend closure a large slice of that window is simply off limits. Boats are tied up at the very moment when they could safely fish and legitimately work towards filling their quota.

Then the knife twists. At the end of the year, the unused quota is held up as evidence that the stock is fragile or the fish are "not available to the fishery". The system blocks us from fishing, then uses the shortfall it creates as proof that the same restrictions must stay in place.

That is why the weekend ban is a redundancy. It does not save fish; it just kills our flexibility.

If a garfish operator lands a tonne of fish on a Sunday instead of a Tuesday, it still counts against the same fixed quota. The total annual catch does not change by a single kilogram.

If a Hawkesbury trawler uses one of their restricted fishing nights on a Sunday instead of a Tuesday, the impact on the stock is exactly the same. The only difference is that the weekend ban stops us from working when the weather is safe and the market is hungry.

A Tale of Two Fisheries

We come from different worlds. Some of us work the estuaries – the muddy, nutrient rich waters of the Hawkesbury, trawling for prawns in the dark, navigating tides and river traffic. Others work the ocean – hauling nets for garfish in the open swell, dealing with the vagaries of the South Coast winds.

But we are united by this single, nonsensical restriction.

We are not asking for a handout. We are asking for the right to go to work under the same modern, science based rules that already limit how much we can catch.

GIVE AN INCH, TAKE A MILE

In Part 1, we revealed the stark reality of the NSW commercial fishing calendar in 2025: 113 days when licensed working boats are shut out by law.

Whenever we share that statistic, the first question from the public is almost always the same: "Why? Is it to let the fish breed?"

It is a logical assumption. We have all been conditioned to believe that every restriction on commercial fishing is about conservation or stock rebuilding. But in the case of the weekend and public holiday bans that hit garfish, whitebait and estuary trawl, biology was never the starting point. The fish do not stop breeding on Saturdays and they do not stop swimming on public holidays.

The original reason was not about saving fish. It was about managing social conflict.

Yet that conflict is often framed in a way that hides what is really going on. The story is told as if it is "the public" versus "the commercial fisher". That is a false choice. The commercial fisher is the proxy for the public. We are the only way the vast majority of NSW families, who do not own a boat and do not have the time or money to go fishing themselves, can access their

own local seafood resource.

When you lock us out, you are not just stopping a business. You are locking out the seafood eating public.

To see how far the reality on the water has drifted from the story that was used to justify these bans, you only have to look at the Hawkesbury.

In 1999 there were more than sixty five licensed prawn trawl fishers working that river. Today there are fewer than twenty five. The fleet has more than halved. There are fewer boats, fewer crews and fewer nights worked than there were when the weekend closure was first sold as the only way to calm a crowded river.

The same thing has happened on the coast. Off Patonga Beach there were once several hauling crews chasing sea mullet, whitebait and other schooling fish. Those crews were part of the daily rhythm of the place. Today that number has dropped to almost zero. The rules were written for a world where commercial fishing effort was dense and highly visible. That world no longer exists, yet the same old closures are still being held up as if nothing has changed.

The pressure on space has not come from a growing commercial fleet. It has come from a shrinking one. The weekend and public holiday bans that were introduced to manage conflict in the 1970s and 1990s are now being applied to a modern fishery with a fraction of the boats, tighter quota, stricter gear rules and massive chunks of water already carved away into Recreational Fishing Havens. The conflict story stayed the same. The facts on the water did not.

The Ocean Story: From Beach Trucks to Back to Boat

To understand how we ended up with ocean hauling weekend bans that catch garfish and whitebait, you have to go back several decades.

On parts of the coast, the classic image of commercial ocean hauling was

utes and trucks on the sand. Crews would drive onto the beach, row the net out through the breakers, then use vehicles to haul the gear and the catch back in.

As tourism grew, beaches became busier. Families were trying to play cricket where commercial crews were once driving trucks. The obvious pressure point was not the fish, it was the shared space.

According to long time operators, industry figures actually tried to solve that conflict in good faith. They offered a voluntary summer arrangement for the worst of the holiday crunch. Keep trucks off the sand at the peak times. Work early and late. Give the tourists room to swim.

That was the inch.

Instead of keeping that agreement narrow and targeted at the real problem, the department took that inch and turned it into a mile of permanent regulation.

The beach story was converted into blanket rules for "hauling nets". Those rules were then pushed out across methods that never touched the sand in the first place. In many cases the same style of weekend ban now applies to "back to boat" haulers who shoot nets from a boat and work entirely off the beach. Crews can be fishing well offshore, hauling garfish and baitfish in deep water, and they are still banned by a rule that was originally written to deal with a truck on a crowded surf beach.

The science has moved. The rule has not.

Eastern Sea Garfish is now under a conservative quota. DPI reports show the stock has rebuilt to a sustainable level and fishing mortality is below natural mortality. DPI has even admitted in its own TAC papers that the old garfish weekend closure is now "under review" and may no longer be justified.

Yet while they quietly question the garfish weekend ban, the same style

of weekend closures on whitebait hauling nets remain untouched and unexplained. There is no whitebait specific harvest strategy and no recent stock review that says those lost days are still needed for the biology of the stock. The rule survives because it is convenient, not because it has been freshly proven.

The Estuary Story: The Weekend Takeover

On the Hawkesbury River and in other estuaries the story is different, but the pattern is the same.

The Hawkesbury is one of the closest working estuaries to Sydney, so it has always been highly visible to both recreational fishers and commercial trawlers. When the original weekend closure was brought in, it was targeted at the lower river where there was perceived conflict with recreational traffic. Upstream of the Juno Point closure line, trawling was still allowed on weekends, because even the department accepted that there was little or no conflict in those reaches.

Something changed in the early 2000s. Rather than reassessing the actual level of conflict, the weekend closure was simply extended downstream of Juno Point and pushed across the rest of the Hawkesbury Estuary Prawn Trawl grounds. The line that once separated the busy lower river from the quieter upstream reaches was effectively erased, and a rule designed for one stretch of water was rolled over the top of all of it.

For the Estuary Prawn Trawl fleet, the weekend closure was never about sand or surf. It was about recreational fishers and other water users wanting the river to themselves at peak times. The original argument went like this. Commercial trawlers should not compete for space with recreational boats on busy weekends. Take the trawlers off the water for those days and the conflict goes away.

Even if you accept that logic in the 1970s, it completely ignores what has

happened since.

Over the last few decades the government has already forced a massive reallocation of space through Recreational Fishing Havens. These were not voluntary deals. They were compulsory acquisitions. Vast areas of productive water were stripped from the commercial sector and handed exclusively to recreational fishing, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

You would think that would have settled the "space" argument. Commercial fishers were expelled from entire systems in the name of resolving conflict.

But that was not enough.

After taking exclusive space through RFHs, the system then moved to take exclusive time in many of the waters that remain. In the Hawkesbury and other shared estuaries, prawn trawlers have now been locked out of weekend and public holiday fishing across almost all of their grounds, including areas upstream of Juno Point where there was never any proven conflict to begin with.

Give An Inch, Lose A Mile

It is the same pattern as offshore. Give an inch, lose a mile. You give up whole areas to try to keep the peace. Then in the areas that are supposed to be shared, you are told to stand aside again, this time by the clock.

The imbalance runs one way. On a Saturday, a recreational fisher is free to launch a boat, tow a wakeboard, anchor on a prime spot, and catch fish for private use. A licensed commercial fisher, working under quota, bycatch reduction devices and export accreditation, is banned from catching fish for the general public in the very same water.

We have adapted our gear, our methods and our work patterns to stay out of the way.

In the ocean, many operators have shifted to "back to boat" hauling that never puts a tyre on the sand.

In estuaries, most professional work is done at night, at dawn, or outside the times of peak recreational traffic.

The industry has given ground on effort, on areas, on gear, on seasons and on mesh size. Yet the weekend and public holiday bans inserted decades ago for social and political reasons remain largely untouched and are now wrapped in the language of "sustainability" and "ESD", even when DPI's own stock assessments no longer support that story.

We are repeatedly told that NSW commercial fisheries are some of the most tightly managed and sustainable in the world. If that is true, then it is time to ask why legacy weekend closure rules for garfish, whitebait and estuary trawl are still treated as sacred.

Because every time a working boat is tied up on a Saturday for an outdated rule, more imported frozen seafood fills the gap. And it is not the tourist with the 4WD or the owner of the ski boat who carries that cost. It is every family that relies on someone else to bring local fish to their plate.

REGULATED BY NATURE

In the corporate world, there is a certain predictability to the work week. You might have a demanding boss, tight deadlines, or difficult clients, but generally speaking, the environment is controlled. If it rains on a Tuesday, the office doesn't close. If the wind blows at 30 knots, the factory line doesn't stop moving. You clock on at 9:00 AM, you clock off at 5:00 PM, and your income is a direct reflection of the hours you put in.

In the world of commercial fishing, that predictability is a fantasy.

We operate in an environment where we have zero control over the conditions of our workplace. We don't choose our hours; the environment chooses them for us.

We have two bosses. One is the NSW Department of Primary Industries, which strictly regulates our licenses, our gear, and our calendars. The other is Mother Nature. And frankly, Mother Nature is the far more brutal tyrant of the two.

The central failure of the weekend and public holiday ban is that it assumes we can simply "reschedule" our work. It assumes that if we miss a catch on Saturday due to a closure, we can just pop out on Monday and make it up.

Anyone who has spent a life at sea knows this is nonsense. In our industry, a lost day is often lost forever.

The Phenomenon of the "Glass-Out"

There is a specific kind of psychological torture known only to commercial fishers: The Weekend Glass-Out.

Picture this. It has been blowing a gale all week. A southerly buster has churned the ocean into a washing machine, or a westerly has made the river choppy and unworkable. We have spent Monday to Friday tied up at the wharf, watching our bank balances drop and bills pile up. We are desperate to work.

Then, the forecast clears. Saturday morning dawns. The wind drops to zero. The swell flattens. The water turns to oil. It is a "glass-out"—the perfect, safe, productive fishing day. The prawns are running in the river; the garfish are schooling on the surface.

But because it is Saturday, we are legally grounded. We have to sit on the wharf, coffee in hand, and watch the perfect day burn away.

Then comes Monday. The bureaucratic gate opens. We fire up the diesel, untie the lines, and head out. But as we clear the heads, the wind swings. A 25-knot northeasterly kicks in. The window is gone.

This isn't just bad luck; it is a systemic failure of regulation. By locking us out on specific calendar days, the government forces us to miss the safe days.

When the Barometer Drops: The East Coast Low

To understand why we need flexibility, you have to understand the violence of an East Coast Low.

On the Hawkesbury, these systems are not just "bad weather." They are events that dismantle our entire operation. When the barometer crashes and the forecast turns purple, the priority shifts instantly from "earning a living"

to "saving the boat."

When an East Coast Low hits, the exposed moorings become death traps. The swell surges up the river, and the wind screams down the valleys. We don't just stop fishing; we have to evacuate.

We band together, untie the fleet, and make the run for Refuge Bay.

Refuge Bay is exactly what it sounds like—a deep, sheltered pocket of water surrounded by high sandstone cliffs in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. It is one of the few places where a trawler can hide from a cyclone-strength southerly.

We take the boats in there and drop the heavy anchors. While we don't stay on board for days, the anxiety never leaves us. We have to make dangerous runs back and forth in tenders—rain, hail, or shine—to check the boats. We are constantly monitoring the lines, checking for anchor drag, and ensuring our livelihoods aren't being smashed against the rocks.

This isn't a hypothetical fear. It is a memory burned into our minds. Years ago, not long after we had finished a major rebuild of the Lyndy, we woke to the phone call every skipper dreads. She had broken off her mooring in Refuge Bay during a violent storm and crashed onto the rocks.

That is the reality of our workplace. We are fighting to keep our assets afloat.

When the low finally moves off to the Tasman Sea, the work doesn't just restart instantly. The ocean is a mess. The river is churned up. It might take another three days for the conditions to settle enough to shoot a net.

If that recovery period lands on a weekend, we are extended by another two days. A three-day storm becomes a nine-day financial disaster, simply because the government refuses to let us work the recovery days.

The Flood Years: When the Chemistry Changes

Then there is the rain.

In recent years, the NSW coast has been battered by repeated, catastrophic flood events. For a farmer, a flood ruins the crop on the land. For a fisher, a flood changes the chemistry of the water itself.

Prawns and squid are highly sensitive to salinity. They need a specific mix of salt and fresh water. When a massive flood turns the Hawkesbury into a torrent of fresh, chocolate-milk water, the target species don't just hang around waiting to be caught. They run.

The fresh water pushes the prawns and squid out of the estuaries and towards the ocean, or into deep, specific holes where the saltwater wedge remains.

This creates two problems:

1. Inaccessibility: Sometimes, the flood pushes the stock into areas we are not allowed to fish—zoning restrictions, marine park boundaries, or rocky grounds where trawling is suicide for the gear.
2. The Timing Mismatch: Often, the "run" of prawns fleeing the freshwater happens fast. It might last 48 hours. If that run happens on a Saturday and Sunday, we miss it entirely. By Monday, the prawns are gone, washed out to sea and lost to the fishery forever.

We have watched millions of dollars of sustainable, high-quality seafood wash out the heads because we were forbidden from catching it during the critical 48-hour window when the salinity shifted.

The Ocean Reality: The South Coast Struggle

Down on the South Coast, fishers face the same battle, but with the added variable of the open ocean swell.

The garfish fishery is a surface fishery, but it relies on the ability to spot the fish and safely maneuver the boat. You cannot haul a net when the swell is standing up on the reefs.

Correspondence from the South Coast sector highlights exactly how

these natural variables conspire with the weekend ban to wipe out a season. Records show a period around Easter where the "Double Regulator" effect destroyed the catch.

Here is the timeline of a disaster:

- The Lead Up: The fish were running, but the "Thursday before Good Friday" rule meant the fleet had to stop fishing to avoid spoiling the catch over the long weekend.
- The Closure: Then came the four-day Easter lockout. The boats sat idle.
- The Market Delay: Then came the delay in market reopening.
- The Blow: By the time the legal and logistical window opened again, an East Coast Low rolled in with big seas.

The season was effectively over. The fish had moved on or the conditions remained unfishable. The "effort days"—the days we were entitled to work—remained unused.

This is the key point the bureaucrats miss: Unused days do not roll over. We cannot bank a sunny day. We cannot save a school of fish for next month. If nature allows us to catch them, we must catch them then. If the calendar says "no," that income is incinerated.

The Invisible Hazard: Debris and Gear

Let's assume the stars align. The weather is good, it's a Tuesday, and we are working. There is still one more variable that the office workers in Sydney don't have to account for: The unseen hazard.

Following the floods, the river and the ocean floor are littered with debris. We are talking about massive gum trees, washing machines, rusted car bodies, and shipping containers that have been washed downstream and settled in the mud.

You can be having a great night. The prawns are coming in clean. Then,

bang.

The winch screams. The boat lurches. We've hooked a submerged gum tree that wasn't there last week.

In seconds, a $5,000 net is shredded. The trawl arms are bent. The gear is a tangled mess of wire and muddy timber.

The night is over. We have to winch the mess up, limp back to the wharf, and spend the next two days repairing the gear.

If that breakdown happens on a Thursday, we spend Friday fixing the net. We are ready to go again by Friday afternoon. But guess what? The weekend ban kicks in. We are now grounded for another 48 hours.

A simple snag on the bottom turns into a four-day loss of income. If we could fish weekends, we could repair the gear on Friday and be back out on Saturday to salvage the week. The ban takes away our ability to recover from mechanical and environmental bad luck.

The Safety Argument: "Go Fever"

There is a darker side to these closures, one that involves the safety of human life.

In aviation, they call it "Go Fever"—the psychological pressure to land or take off despite bad conditions because you are running out of time. The weekend ban creates "Go Fever" for fishers.

If we know that we are locked out of the river on Saturday and Sunday, and we see a marginal forecast for Friday afternoon—maybe the wind is a bit too strong, maybe the swell is a bit too high—we feel immense pressure to go anyway. We need to pay the mortgage. We need to pay the insurance. We can't afford to lose the whole weekend, so we push the limits on Friday.

This is how accidents happen. This is how boats get in trouble.

If the ban was lifted, the pressure valve would release. If it's blowing a gale on Friday, we can stay safe at the wharf, knowing that we can work on

Saturday when the weather drops out.

Removing the weekend ban isn't just an economic reform; it is a safety reform. It allows professional skippers to make decisions based on seamanship, not based on a government calendar.

The Verdict

We are already regulated by wind. We are regulated by swell. We are regulated by floods, debris, and the migration patterns of wild animals.

We accept these regulations. They are part of the job description. We respect the ocean, and we respect the power of nature.

What we do not accept is the artificial, arbitrary regulation of a calendar that ignores these realities. When Mother Nature gives us a window, the government should not slam it shut.

THE 3-DAY WEEK

The government doesn't impose a 9-to-5 roster on commercial fishers. We don't punch a clock. Instead, they impose a rigid, industrial operational window: Midnight Sunday to Midnight Friday.

Within those hours, we are technically "free" to work. But the seafood market doesn't operate on a government roster. It is a dynamic, living system driven by supply, demand, and shelf-life.

By forcing us to adhere to a strict Midnight-to-Midnight weekly cutoff, the regulations are fighting against the reality of the market. The result is a "Market Mismatch" that forces operators to tie up their boats even on days they are legally allowed to fish.

Here is how the weekend ban effectively squeezes a five-day working week into just three days.

The Garfish & Bait Problem: Why We Don't Fish Fridays

In the Sea Garfish sector on the South Coast, the "weekend" does not start on Friday night. For a viable business, it effectively starts on Thursday.

The reason is simple logistics. There is no wholesale market on Friday

night, Saturday or Sunday. The Sydney Fish Market auctions do not run over the weekend for general fresh product in the same way they do on weekdays.

If we go out and catch a tonne of garfish on a Friday, that product has nowhere to go. It has to sit in an ice slurry on the boat or in the cool room through Friday night, all day Saturday and all day Sunday, before it can finally hit the auction floor on Monday morning.

Garfish are a delicate species. They are not like heavy reef fish that can handle days on ice without issue. They degrade quickly. Holding them for 72 hours over the weekend is bad business; the quality drops, and the price drops with it.

So, what is the rational business decision? We opt out.

Many garfish haulers simply choose not to fish on Fridays. It is not worth the fuel and the effort to catch a product that will sit in a crate for three days before it can be sold.

Because the government bans us from fishing Saturday and Sunday, days where we could catch fresh fish for a Monday market, we are forced to sacrifice Friday as well.

The same issues are consistent for fishers who chase whitebait and other baitfish. Their product is just as time sensitive, the markets are just as quiet on the weekend, and the combined effect of weekend closures and market shutdowns pushes more professional boats to stand down on Fridays too.

The Prawn Problem: Why We Don't Fish Mondays

In the Hawkesbury Prawn Trawl fishery, we face the opposite problem. Our "dead zone" isn't the end of the week; it's the start.

Prawns are a "celebration" food. The demand curve for prawns spikes later in the week as retailers and restaurants stock up for the weekend trade. Everyone wants prawns on Thursday and Friday.

Nobody wants prawns on a Monday.

Monday is traditionally the quietest trading day for prawns. Retailers are recovering from the weekend, restaurants are closed, and the public isn't buying seafood. "Monday prawns" are notoriously hard to sell, and they often command the lowest prices of the week.

So, what is the rational business decision for a prawn trawler? We opt out.

Many of us choose not to put the nets in on Monday because the market simply isn't there to justify the cost.

The Three-Day Week

This is the hidden cost of the weekend ban.

- The Government bans us from working Saturday and Sunday.
- The Biology stops the Garfishers and Baitfishers working Friday.
- The Market stops the Prawners working Monday.

We are left with a "Squeezed Week." We are legally entitled to work from Midnight to Midnight during the week, but the combination of regulation and market reality often restricts us to just Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

We are trying to run viable small businesses on a three-day roster.

The Saturday Solution

This is why opening up the weekends is critical. It isn't just about getting "more days"; it's about getting the right days.

If the Hawkesbury fleet could fish on a Saturday, we would be perfectly aligned with market demand. We could supply fresh product directly to the weekend trade or hit the early-week market with a high-quality catch, rather than fighting to sell into the Monday slump.

For the South Coast fleet, flexibility is everything. If the weather is bad on Wednesday but perfect on Sunday, being able to fish Sunday allows them

to land a fresh catch for Monday morning, rather than holding old stock from Friday.

The current system forces us to fight the market. We are banned when demand is high, and forced to work when demand is low.

Removing the weekend ban would allow us to align our fishing effort with the reality of when people actually want to buy fish. It would turn a broken, squeezed week into a viable, logical business model.

THE GHOST FLEET

Throughout this series, we have unpacked the absurdity of the NSW commercial fishing weekend ban. We have looked at the broken history, the "Double Regulation" of Mother Nature, and the market distortion that forces you to eat older seafood.

But if you strip away the biology, the economics, and the meteorology, you are left with one burning question: Who exactly is the government trying to control?

The weekend ban was designed in the 1980s to manage a booming, chaotic industry. It was a tool to control a fleet that was visible, loud, and everywhere.

But that industry no longer exists.

Today, the NSW Department of Primary Industries is regulating a Ghost Fleet. They are applying "crowd control" measures to an industry that has been decimated by decades of reform, buy-outs, and attrition.

The Vanishing Armada

To understand the scale of the change, you have to look at the numbers.

Thirty years ago, the NSW coast was dotted with commercial boats. In the 1980s, you could stand on a headland on the South Coast and see "Beach Haul" crews working multiple beaches. You could look out over the estuaries and see a thriving fleet of small family trawlers.

That world is gone.

Through successive waves of government reform—including the "Commercial Fisheries Business Adjustment Program"—the fleet has been slashed.

- In the Ocean Haul Garfish sector: There are not hundreds of boats. There is no "armada." According to industry data, there are only 3 or 4 major dedicated operators left in the entire state who hold enough entitlement to work the season properly.
- In the Hawkesbury: The prawn trawl fleet is a shadow of its former self, reduced to a core group of professional, multi-generational families.

The Death of the Clarence Fleet

The situation is even more dire in the north. The Clarence River, once the powerhouse of the NSW prawn industry, has just been dealt a fatal blow.

After struggling through a two-year shutdown due to White Spot disease detections, the fleet has now been hit with a new five-year biosecurity control order. This order effectively sinks the remainder of the fleet.

These were family businesses that supplied a massive volume of NSW's fresh prawns. Now, they are gone. The few boats that remain are locked in a bureaucratic stranglehold that makes viability impossible.

So when the government says they need weekend bans to "manage conflict" with the fleet, we have to ask: What fleet?

The reality is, on most weekends in winter, you could scan the entire horizon of the South Coast and not see a single commercial boat. Yet, the few of us who remain are legally banned from working, just in case we cause a "conflict" with a ghost that isn't there.

The Great Wall of Red Tape

The weekend ban implies that without it, we would be running wild, doing whatever we want.

This is the most insulting myth of all. The weekend ban doesn't exist in a vacuum; it sits on top of a mountain of other restrictions that already dictate every move we make.

We are hemmed in by three rigid walls: Gear, Geography, and Effort.

1. Hemmed in by Gear

We don't just use any net we find. Our gear is scientifically designed to be selective and low-impact.

- Mesh Sizes: We are strictly regulated on the size of the mesh to ensure juvenile fish escape.
- Net Lengths: We are limited in how much gear we can put in the water.
- By-Catch Reduction: In the Hawkesbury, our trawls are fitted with sophisticated exclusion devices to ensure we catch prawns, not fish. We cannot simply "fish harder." Our tools are capped.

2. Hemmed in by Geography

The public often thinks we can fish anywhere. In reality, the map of NSW is a minefield of "No Go" zones.

- Marine Parks: Vast tracts of the best fishing grounds are locked away in sanctuary zones (Bateman's Bay, Port Stephens, Jervis Bay).
- Recreational Fishing Havens: As we discussed in Part 2, huge areas of productive water (like Lake Macquarie, St Georges Basin, Botany Bay) have been stripped from us entirely to create exclusive playgrounds for recreational fishers.
- Biosecurity Zones: As the Clarence River disaster proves, entire river systems can be wiped off our map overnight.

- Zoning: We are often restricted to specific regions. A South Coast garfisher can't just steam to Sydney if the fish move.

3. Hemmed in by Effort

This is the big one. The Ocean Haul fishery is "Effort Managed." This means we are strictly limited in the number of days we are allowed to work in a year. We purchase "effort days" or "shares" that entitle us to a specific amount of time on the water.

This system was designed to be the primary control. The logic was: "If we limit the days they can work, we limit the catch, and the stock is safe."

So, if we are already limited by the number of days we can use, why does the government also dictate which days we can use them?

If I have 50 effort days on my license, it makes zero biological difference whether I use one on a Saturday or a Tuesday. The impact on the stock is identical. The only difference is that by banning Saturday, the government forces me to burn my effort days during bad weather or poor markets, rather than when the job actually pays.

The Final Straw

When you stack these restrictions up, the weekend ban is revealed for what it is: A redundancy.

- We are limited by Gear (so we can't catch too much at once).
- We are limited by Geography (so we can't fish sensitive areas).
- We are limited by Effort (so we can't overwork the year).
- We are limited by Nature (so we can't work in bad weather).

Adding a calendar ban on top of this is not management; it is harassment. It is a "belt and braces" approach where the government is wearing a belt, braces, using a piece of rope, and holding its pants up with its hands, just to be sure.

The Proposal: Let Us Work

We are not asking for a revolution. We are not asking to roll back Marine Parks or scrap by-catch devices. We accept the need for sustainability. We are the custodians of the resource, and no one has a bigger stake in the health of the ocean than we do.

We are simply asking for the removal of a dinosaur regulation that serves no purpose in 2025.

The Solution is clear:

1. Scrap the Blanket Ban: Remove the statewide weekend and public holiday closures for the Ocean Haul and Estuary Prawn Trawl sectors.
2. Target the Conflict (If it exists): If there is a specific beach or a specific bay where conflict is still a genuine issue, close that specific spot. Do not punish a garfisher 50km out to sea because of a jet-ski problem in a river mouth.
3. Trust the Management: Let the Effort controls and Gear restrictions do the job they were designed to do.

Conclusion

The NSW seafood community is resilient. We have survived floods, East Coast Lows, fuel hikes, and market crashes. But we cannot survive a government that refuses to let us open our doors.

We are the people who bring the ocean to your plate. We are the families who maintain the heritage of the working coast.

The fleet is small. The catch is sustainable. The environmental footprint is minimal.

It is time to unlock the calendar. It is time to let us go to work.

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