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Submission on the South Australian Sardine Fishery agency application 2026

To: The Director

Sustainable Fisheries Section

Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water

Vegan Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the South Australian Government's application dated 3 September 2026 for Commonwealth approval of the South Australian Sardine Fishery under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act). We oppose approval as a wildlife trade operation, inclusion of fishes taken from the fishery on the list of exempt native specimens and accreditation of the management arrangements. Our opposition rests on the rights of individual fishes, as well as questions raised by the application about ecological management and interactions with protected animals [2].

Vegan Australia is a national organisation advocating for veganism and the recognition of the fundamental rights of all animals. We envision a world in which our fellow animals live free from human use and ownership. Our position is based on justice for individuals, including their interests in and their rights to their own lives, bodies and freedom.

The lives of individual fishes matter

Animals are not ours to use. Sardines are living, sentient vertebrates, not merely units of biomass or commercially available resources. Each sardine has an interest in continuing their own life and avoiding harm. The commercial capture and killing of these individuals is a violation of those interests, irrespective of how many sardines remain in the sea.

Ecological sustainability and justice are different questions. A fishery may maintain a population above a management threshold while deliberately killing very large numbers of its members. Maintaining a population for future commercial use does not provide an ethical justification for taking the lives of individuals. We would not accept population stability as a justification for the routine killing of humans. Species membership alone cannot justify applying a fundamentally different standard to fishes.

The 2024 New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness recognises at least a realistic possibility of conscious experience in all vertebrates, including fishes, and says that such possibilities should not be ignored in decisions affecting animals [1]. Recognition of individual animals does not depend on demonstrating human-like intelligence or social

behaviour. Sentience and the interests of the individual are sufficient reasons to take their lives seriously.

The assessment framework overlooks the individuals being killed

The current process asks whether the fishery satisfies requirements for ecologically sustainable management and protected-species interactions. It does not directly ask whether humans should be permitted to kill sardines for commercial purposes. This is a fundamental limitation of the framework rather than evidence that the interests of individual fishes are irrelevant.

The terms “harvest” and “specimens” obscure what is at stake. The decisions concern the systematic capture and killing of free-living animals. Government assessments should accurately describe the activity and acknowledge its impacts on the animals whose lives are taken, not consider them solely as populations or commodities.

Vegan Australia calls for a transition away from commercial fishing, with an orderly process supporting affected workers and communities to move into livelihoods that do not depend on exploiting animals. The appropriate long-term objective is to end the taking of fishes, rather than make the killing more efficient or indefinitely sustainable.

Ecological relationships and uncertainty

The application proposes a 2026 total allowable commercial catch of 50,000 tonnes of sardines and states that sardines are used primarily as feed for farmed southern bluefin tuna. It reports that the 2025 spawning biomass estimate was 556,957 tonnes, the highest recorded since 1995, and classifies the stock as sustainable [2, pp. 7–8, 19]. These figures highlight the distinction between a population-level assessment and the interests of individual fishes. A stock can be classified as sustainable while very large numbers of individuals are deliberately killed, predominantly to sustain the exploitation of other fishes.

The application describes an ecosystem risk assessment undertaken in 2021, categorising impacts on trophic structure as “Low”, and expressly states that “There are no current decision rules that trigger management actions related to ecosystem management” [2, pp. 16, 27]. The Department should explain how these arrangements protect the ecological relationships of sardines with seabirds, marine mammals and other predators, particularly in the context of environmental changes, including the 2025–26 algal bloom. It should identify the evidence supporting the risk ratings and explain what would prompt a timely management response to emerging ecosystem impacts.

Dolphin interactions and independent monitoring

The application records serious historical dolphin interactions, including an estimated 377 dolphin deaths in 2004/05, when 1,728 dolphins were encircled [2, p. 23]. It also reports more recent improvements: in 2025, 55 encirclement events involving 184 dolphins and three recorded dolphin deaths, with observer coverage of 20.7% of net sets. The application states that analyses for 2024 and 2025 found no apparent observer effect or evidence of under-reporting, unlike concerns associated with earlier years [2, pp. 26–27]. We acknowledge this reported improvement, while emphasising that the encirclement and

killing of individual dolphins remain serious harms, regardless of their effect on population abundance.

Important uncertainty remains in the application itself. Its discussion of the 2025 common dolphin population study acknowledges that the potential biological removal appropriate to the total fishery area is unknown because of limitations in population modelling, estimates of fishing-related deaths and deaths from other human activities [2, pp. 22–23, 29–30]. Despite these gaps, the application concludes that no further monitoring methods are needed at present, although observers are absent from approximately 80% of net sets [2, p. 31]. The Department should independently assess whether this conclusion is justified, publish its reasons and explain how uncertainty is addressed before accreditation.

These concerns about dolphins do not diminish the primary objection: the deliberate killing of sardines is itself an animal rights issue. Fewer unintended deaths would not make the intended killing justifiable.

Recommendations

1. Do not approve the South Australian Sardine Fishery as a wildlife trade operation, include its catch on the list of exempt native specimens or accredit its management regime.
2. Examine and publicly explain the latest evidence on dolphin encirclements, deaths and observer coverage, including why the application considers further monitoring unnecessary despite acknowledged uncertainties in estimating population-level effects.
3. Examine the absence of ecosystem management trigger rules, the currency of the 2021 ecosystem risk assessment and the implications of the 2025–26 algal bloom; and recognise that ecological sustainability does not establish that taking the lives of individual sentient animals is ethically justified.
4. Begin policy and legislative reform to recognise the fundamental interests and rights of individual animals, including fishes, and develop a just transition away from commercial animal exploitation.

Conclusion

A fishery does not become just because enough animals remain available to be killed in future years. Vegan Australia urges the Commonwealth to refuse the proposed approvals and to move beyond a framework that treats free-living sentient individuals as resources for human use. Sardines, dolphins and all our fellow animals deserve respect for their own lives, bodies and freedom.

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References

- [1] New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness (2024).
<https://sites.google.com/nyu.edu/nydeclaration>
- [2] Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (2026), Application for assessment of the South Australian Sardine Fishery for approval under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, 3 September 2026, especially pp. 7–8, 16, 19, 22–23, 26–27 and 29–31. Consultation: <https://consult.dcceew.gov.au/south-australian-sardine-fishery-agency-application-2026>
- [3] Primary Industries and Regions South Australia (2023), Management Plan for the South Australian Commercial Sardine Fishery.
https://pir.sa.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/439252/management-plan-sa-commercial-sardine-fishery.pdf
- [4] Kirkwood, R. and Goldsworthy, S.D. (2026), Assessment of dolphin interactions, effectiveness of Code of Practice and fishing behaviour in the South Australian Sardine Fishery in 2025, SARDI Research Report Series No. 1295 (cited in the 2026 application).