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Joining forces for Sand Flathead recovery in Tasmania

World-leading fisheries science, governments and the recreational fishing sector in Tasmania have joined forces to fill the scientific knowledge gaps about Sand Flathead's biology, movement and growth, to recover this much-loved species for future generations to enjoy.

The University of Tasmania's Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) has recently been awarded a $3.29 million research grant supported by the Australian Government's Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, with a $900,000 cash investment from the Tasmanian Government's Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania.

"Our new research will focus on improving the stock health of this popular fish to acceptable levels, as quickly as possible," said fisheries scientist Professor Sean Tracey, who will lead the project at IMAS.

Sand Flathead accounts for 68% of all recreational fish taken from Tasmanian waters caught by around 70,000 recreational fishers each year. This recreational catch accounts for about 98% of the total catch of the species in the state.

"They have been the 'bread and butter' species for recreational fishers in Tasmania for decades, but their popularity and ease of capture has led to them becoming 'depleted'," Professor Tracey said.

"The current level of fishing mortality (fish removed by fishing) is around four times the natural mortality rate, which has driven the biomass to low levels. The biomass will not begin to recover until the fishing mortality rate is below the natural mortality rate – and that requires a significant reduction in catch."

IMAS researchers have also found that fishing pressure appears to have resulted in stunted sub-sections of the population in some areas, so recovering the larger, fast-growing individuals in the population is an important focus.

"These bigger fish are genetically 'fitter', produce more eggs and provide a higher meat yield and a better fishing experience for anglers. Gaining a better understanding of how prevalent these fish are in the population structure will provide greater clarity on the recovery for the biomass as a whole," Professor Tracey said.

"The primary objective of the project is to develop models to predict and measure the recovery trajectory of the stock around the state. This will reveal how long the biomass will take to recover towardsa6710 54pp400Biomass wiU Tceyreco is around four times tim0 g0 400ill

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Through the project,