



North-East Shipping Management Plan (NESMP)

Final Report

Introduction

Released in 2014, the North-East Shipping Management Plan (NE SMP, or ‘the plan’) identified existing, new and strengthened management measures to ensure shipping in the Great Barrier Reef, Torres Strait and Coral Sea operated to the highest standards possible. A review in 2019 indicated good progress with the plan’s 63 action items.

Subsequent annual updates indicated that most action items were either complete or had become ‘foundational’ (business as usual) for the lead agencies involved.

In August 2024, the Executive-level meeting of the North-East Shipping Management Group (NE SMG) agreed the plan could now be closed. The group also agreed to continue operating to maintain cross-agency visibility - focusing on identifying and managing emerging maritime risks, as well as aligning their activities with broader initiatives such as the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan.

This final report aims to summarise the plan’s accomplishments, reflect on lessons learnt, and outline next steps as the plan reaches its conclusion.

Background

The NESMP was established with the primary goal of mitigating the environmental and safety risks associated with increasing shipping activities in the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), Torres Strait, and Coral Sea. In the early 2010’s, there were community concerns regarding the growing export of coal and liquified natural gas from Queensland ports and the consequent increase in the number of large international vessels calling into ports and transiting through these environmentally sensitive waters.

The NESMP sought to ensure that shipping operations in this sensitive region were conducted safely and sustainably. The plan addressed a range of concerns, from pollution and ship groundings to biosecurity risks and the protection of cultural and social values.

In October 2014, the NE SMG comprising of senior executives from State and Commonwealth Government agencies, released the NE SMP. Developed over two years, the plan went through a two-month public submission process and consultation with key government and industry bodies. The NESMG played a key role in driving the development and implementation, providing guidance on scope, risks categories, and control measures for the region.



Objectives

The plan had two key aims:

“To describe measures currently in place to manage the safety of shipping in the sensitive marine environments of Australia’s north-east region and propose additional protective measures to further minimise the environmental impacts of these activities in the short, medium and long term.”

“To inform the Great Barrier Reef Region Strategic Assessment and the Reef 2050 Great Barrier Reef Long-term Sustainability Plan of the current and proposed measures in place to mitigate known and potential impacts of shipping affecting the Outstanding Universal Value and integrity of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area and other Matters of National Environmental Significance.”

(NE SMP, Section 1.1, Aim)

Scope

The NESMP was designed to address maritime risks within the North-East region, including the Particularly Sensitive Sea Areas (PSSA) of the GBR and Torres Strait, the inner and outer shipping routes, and the Coral Sea (within Australia’s EEZ). The plan focused on various risk categories, including:

- Collision and Grounding
- Operational and Illegal Discharges
- Invasive Species
- Physical Impact (e.g., noise, light, cetacean strikes)
- Cultural and Social Risk

The following were not included in the scope

- Vessels not under SOLAS requirements.
- Non-shipping-related impacts such as coastal developments, environmental impacts from climate change, and tourism.

The original 2014 plan can be found on the AMSA website at the following hyperlink [North East Shipping Management Plan](#)

Project Performance Assessment

Consultation

The NE SMP was developed with input from a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, industry representatives and environmental organisations. This consultation was critical to ensuring that the plan addressed the specific needs and concerns of the region, while balancing the operational requirements of the shipping industry.



Key Achievements

The Plan has largely achieved what it set out to do in terms of improving navigational safety and protecting the GBR environment. (Refer to the tables on page 6-10 for full details.) Some highlights include:

Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) Extension

One of the plan's most notable achievements has been the extension of the IMO-designated GBR and Torres Strait Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) to include a portion of the south-west Coral Sea. This designation resulted in the establishment of additional protective measures. They were IMO-adopted ship routing systems (i.e. an area to be avoided and two two-way routes), designed to keep transiting ships away from the numerous reefs and shoals in the region, thereby reducing the risks of maritime incidents.

Vessel strike on cetaceans

The National Strategy for Reducing Vessel Strike on Cetaceans and other Marine Megafauna was completed. The strategy identifies species at highest risk of ship collision, specifies areas with the greatest likelihood of vessel strikes, and outlines mitigation measures to reduce impacts on marine megafauna.

Pollution Response Fund

A pollution response fund was established with financial capability of \$50 million. The purpose of the fund is to support AMSA's rapid response to major pollution incidents and to meet the costs of incidents not recoverable from the ship owner or insurer. The fund was built through a temporary increase to the Protection of the Sea levy and is backed by a high liquidity investment fund.

Marine Biosecurity Initiatives

The management of biosecurity risks associated with ship arrivals was strengthened. The Australian government introduced regulatory reforms to reduce the risks of marine pests and the diseases they can carry, from entering, establishing and spreading in Australian waters. It also introduced the Marine Pest Plan, which aims to improve marine pest prevention, strengthen surveillance, enhance emergency response capability, support research and development, and strengthen stakeholder engagement.

Ballast water management

A range of measures have been introduced to improve ballast water management. The Australian government ratified and implemented the International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments (BWM Convention), introduced requirements for ballast water management, and applied a ballast water exchange exclusion area within 12 NM of the outer boundary of the GBR Marine Park. Further, the government indicated it was developing biofouling management requirements to address biosecurity risks associated with biofouling on ships coming to Australia.

Lessons Learned

As the actions of the NE SMP were progressed, several important lessons were learnt:



Importance of collaboration

The NE SMP fostered close and effective collaboration between the various agencies and stakeholders. These included AMSA, GBRMPA, MSQ, DCCEEW and industry bodies. This collaborative approach not only addressed shipping-related risks in the GBR but also established ongoing relationships and clarity about roles and responsibilities.

A prime example of this was the establishment of the North-East Water Space Management Group (NE WSM WG), set up to coordinate diverse maritime activities and the use of the common water space in the GBR, Torres Strait, and Coral Sea.

Stakeholder Feedback

Stakeholders welcomed the NE SMP's initiatives, as they led to increased maritime safety and environmental protection. Regular feedback was sought. It highlighted the importance of continuing to address emerging risks, such as the growing traffic volumes and an increase in size of vessels calling at Queensland ports.

Adaptability

The NE SMP evolved over time to keep pace with the region's changing risk profile, including the growth of shipping activity and updated environmental regulations. The AMSA commissioned shipping study by Braemar Sea scope in 2016 guided the 2019 review, allowing the plan to incorporate new data, address increases in vessel traffic, and embed effective measures into BAU operations.

Governance and Decision Approvals

Key milestones during the NE SMP included:

- 2012: Formation of the North East Shipping Management Group (NESMG) and agreement on the plan's structure and objectives.
- 2014: The NESMP was formally launched, with a focus on enhancing shipping safety and environmental protections.
- 2019: The NESMP underwent a major review, which led to the closure of several action items with their underlying practices or policies embedded into routine operations across responsible agencies.
- 2024: The NESMP reached its conclusion, with plans for ongoing risk monitoring and the development of new governance frameworks.

Progress post 2019

Since the last review in 2019, a significant number of foundational, medium-term, and long-term actions have been completed. Some actions have been transitioned into routine business-as-usual (BAU) activities, while others were closed after meeting their objectives. Noteworthy actions include:

Emergency Towage Measures

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) adopted enhancements for emergency towing arrangements, which have been integrated into Australian legislation.



Risk-Based Approaches

Collaborative risk frameworks, such as the Reef VTS risk assessment framework, have been successfully implemented.

Marine Biosecurity

Actions related to marine biosecurity surveillance and management, including best practices for detecting marine pests, have been completed.

2019 Action Items Summary Table

Below are two tables outlining both the Revised Foundational Actions (2019) and the Revised Actions (2019) as they relate to the original 2014 actions, including their status and closure context.

Revised Foundational Actions

Original Actions (2014)	Revised Actions (2019)	Description	Lead Agencies	Supporting Agencies	Status / Closure Context
1	F1	AMSA to continue to work through the IMO to improve standards for ship propulsion reliability, redundancy, and emergency towing.	AMSA	None	Closed: Integrated into routine AMSA operations, with AMSA actively contributing to IMO discussions on propulsion standards and emergency towing.
3	F2	Initiatives focused on reducing risk by addressing human element contributions to shipping incidents.	AMSA	None	Closed: AMSA published bulletins on fatigue and navigation safety, conducted inspections, and closed action as ongoing through AMSA compliance efforts.
5, 8	F3	Promotion of high-quality ships operated by competent crews via compliance with IMO port state control standards.	AMSA	None	Closed: Embedded into AMSA's Compliance and Enforcement policy, ensuring continuous monitoring of ship and crew quality.
9	F4	Technical cooperation on maritime safety and environmental protection with neighbouring countries, especially PNG.	AMSA	None	Closed: AMSA continues routine cooperation with PNG on port state control and environmental protection as part of standard operations.
12	F5	Collaboration with Australian Hydrographic Office for improved	Australian Hydrographic Office	None	Closed: Became part of the HydroScheme Industry Partnership Program, addressing



Original Actions (2014)	Revised Actions (2019)	Description	Lead Agencies	Supporting Agencies	Status / Closure Context
		hydrography and oceanographic observations in the region.			ongoing survey needs in GBR and Torres Strait.
6, 7, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 22, 27, 34, 55, 59, 61	F6	Risk-based management of shipping-related risks in response to changing density and profile of ships.	AMSA, MSQ	None	Closed: Integrated into the Reef VTS Governance framework, with risk management overseen by the Reef VTS Governance Board, supporting the joint AMSA and MSQ decision-making processes
17	F7	Consultations with navigation stakeholders and practical access arrangements for maintenance within environmental guidelines.	AMSA	MSQ	Closed: Routine consultation with aids to navigation maintenance contractors whose activities are governed by AMSA's environmental management system in accordance with ISO14001.
23	F8	Effectiveness reviews of Under Keel Clearance Management (UKCM) in Torres Strait and GBR as needed.	AMSA	GBRMPA	Closed: UKCM effectiveness regularly reviewed as part of BAU processes.
32	F9	Improvement and usage of waste facilities in line with IMO guidelines at Queensland ports.	AMSA	MSQ, GBRMPA	Closed: Guidelines on recycling and waste facility improvements will be promulgated in the completed national framework. Activities otherwise fall within the scope of AMSA's routine operations.
44	F10	Sharing of habitat restoration lessons from shipping incidents, covering coral, seagrass restoration, and marine pest control.	GBRMPA	Australian Reef Pilots	Closed: The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority will continue to share lessons learned as the Douglas Shoal environmental remediation project progresses. With allocated funds for long-term monitoring to evaluate the effectiveness of the remediation.



Original Actions (2014)	Revised Actions (2019)	Description	Lead Agencies	Supporting Agencies	Status / Closure Context
52	F11	Assessment of Hazardous and Noxious Substances (HNS) cargo information for REEFREP and potential amendments for mandatory reporting.	AMSA	Torres Pilots	Closed: AMSA incorporated HNS assessment protocols, in MO 63 and 41. With AMSAs domain awareness system additionally having the capability to filter vessels carrying dangerous goods based on the information contained in vessels' AIS.
53, 54, 56	F12	Ensuring adequate response assets, emergency towage capabilities, and training for search and rescue and pollution response.	MSQ	AMSA, Queensland Port Authorities	Closed: Adequate response assets confirmed through regular drills and training; embedded as standard operations.
63	F13	Promote the communication of accurate and factual information about shipping activities and relevant initiatives in the Great Barrier Reef.	All NE SMG Members	None	Closed: The Australian and Queensland governments are updating the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan ensuring the plan remains current and addresses emerging issues and is equipped with the latest knowledge and science.
New	F14	Implement marine biosecurity best practices and early detection surveillance for marine pests at key Queensland ports.	DAF	Queensland Ports Association	Closed: Action completed with Queensland Marine Pest Program implementing surveillance and biosecurity measures at ports.
New	F15	Maintain communication with agencies regarding high-risk ships transiting Torres Strait and Coral Sea without calling at Australian ports.	AMSA, MSQ	None	Closed: Established as BAU, with AMSA and MSQ continuing regular updates with stakeholders on high-risk vessel transits.

Revised Actions

Original Actions (2014)	Revised Actions (2019)	Description	Lead Agencies	Supporting Agencies	Status / Closure Context
4	NE SMP1	Work through the IMO to introduce a Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS) for the global shipping industry.	AMSA	None	Closed: AMSA submitted a discussion paper to IMO, supporting international standards for fatigue risk in global shipping.
11	NE SMP2	Investigate and implement systems that reward ships for high safety and environmental standards at Queensland ports.	Queensland Ports Association (QPA)	MSQ	Closed: QPA determined that incentive programs would be challenging to apply uniformly across diverse ports; action closed after review.
18	NE SMP3	Monitor the use of AIS on non-SOLAS commercial ships operating in the GBR to ensure compliance and safety.	AMSA	MSQ	Closed: Monitoring AIS compliance is now part of routine AMSA operations within the Reef 2050 Plan.
26, 29	NE SMP4	Assess benefits of expanding REEFVTS and mandatory pilotage for increased shipping density in the GBR.	MSQ, AMSA	GBRMPA	Closed: AMSA and MSQ through the Reef VTS Governance Board continue to monitor traffic densities in the region. And ensure Reef VTS continues to provide appropriate and proportionate navigation support for shipping in this area.
28	NE SMP5	Investigate impacts of ship anchorages at major commodity ports.	QPA, GBRMPA	MSQ, DCCEEW	Closed: The Project has yielded useful data and revealed several findings that warrant further investigation. QPA will consult stakeholders on next steps.
39	NE SMP6	Maintain risk assessments for ship strikes on cetaceans in the northeast region and develop safeguards as necessary.	DCCEEW	AMSA, MSQ, GBRMPA	Closed: DCCEEW using spatial risk profiles for cetaceans to inform potential mitigation measures.



Original Actions (2014)	Revised Actions (2019)	Description	Lead Agencies	Supporting Agencies	Status / Closure Context
41	NE SMP7	Study wave energy from passing ships and its impact on coastal erosion in Torres Strait.	AMSA	Torres Strait Regional Authority	Closed: Completed with no significant erosion impacts found; study shared with Torres Strait stakeholders.
42	NE SMP8	Continue research into sediment resuspension from ship traffic and its socioeconomic impacts in GBR.	AMSA	GBRMPA, DCCEEW	Closed: Ongoing sediment studies with results expected to inform Reef 2050 mitigation strategies by 2025.
45, 58	NE SMP9	Develop funding mechanisms for rapid restoration of reef habitats following ship groundings.	DCCEEW, Parks Australia	QPA, MSQ	Closed: Parks Australia developed a framework for and effective Commonwealth response to marine incidents and environmental damage, including establishing emergency response funding.
New	NE SMP10	Expand cetacean strike risk assessment in the GBR to areas offshore Capricorn and Bunker Group.	MSQ	None	Closed: Murdoch University risk assessment concluded that the Capricorn Bunker Group had a lower relative ship strike risk than other areas of the Great Barrier Reef.
New	NE SMP11	Evaluate safety and environmental benefits of Vessel Arrival Systems (VAS) at ports where ships anchor for extended periods.	AMSA	MSQ, QPA, Queensland Resources Council	Closed: AMSA has no regulatory role established for VAS, but remains engaged with stakeholders and has provided a concept paper.



Ongoing and Future Considerations

With the NE SMP's goals largely achieved and its practices now embedded in regulation and day-to-day management, the region's navigational safety and environmental outcomes have significantly improved. Nevertheless, emerging risks, such as alternative fuels and larger vessels, and a changing marine environment due to climate change, require continued attention.

Members of the North-East Shipping Management Group advocate continuing the NE SMG under a revised remit that focuses on cross-agency visibility, alignment with the Reef 2050 plan, and a strategic approach to maritime safety.

Next Steps

The NESMP has successfully met its primary objectives, but continued vigilance and collaboration will be essential as new maritime risks emerge in the region. With the following steps recommended:

Dissolution of the North East Water Space Management Working Group (NE WSM WG)

The NE WSM WG, which was established to coordinate the diverse maritime activities and the use of water space within the GBR, Torres Strait, and Coral Sea, has completed its objectives.

Revision of the NE SMG Terms of Reference

A new Terms of Reference (ToR) will be developed to guide the NESMG's future role, with a focus on addressing emerging risks, including alternative fuels and larger vessels. The new ToR should align with broader frameworks, such as the Reef 2050 Long-Term Sustainability Plan.

Ongoing Risk Monitoring

The NE SMG will meet biannually to maintain oversight of BAU activities, adapt to emerging maritime challenges and align with broader initiatives (Reef 2050).

Conclusion

Since 2014, government agencies and industry have made significant strides in mitigating shipping-related risks in the GBR, Torres Strait and Coral Sea. The positive outcomes achieved through the plan now serve as a foundation for future collaborative efforts in managing maritime safety and environmental protection in this highly sensitive region.

With the NE SMP's successful completion, the focus now turns to maintaining cross-agency collaboration and vigilance in managing new challenges, ensuring the region's ongoing maritime safety and environmental protection goals remain at the forefront.