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RESTRICTED - Expedition Report: Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems identified from direct observations within the Central Lord Howe 2024 temporary suspension of bottom fishing VME Encounter Area

Greenpeace

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Expedition Report: Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems identified from direct observations within the Central Lord Howe 2024 temporary suspension of bottom fishing VME Encounter Area

Restricted Observer Information Paper¹

Greenpeace

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¹ This information paper is being submitted to Members of the SPRFMO SC DWWG in a restricted form and is not to be circulated to any non-members or published on the SPRFMO SC public accessible webpage.

Summary

This information paper builds on the initial voyage report submitted and discussed at the SPRFMO Scientific Committee (SC) Deepwater Working Group in September 2025. The analysis reported on in this paper confirms vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) are present within the temporary suspension of bottom fishing 2024 encounter area within the Central Lord Howe Bottom Trawl Management Area. Direct observational data collected during the Greenpeace Seamount Expedition in 2025 from three transect dives was analysed using a standardised protocol to identify VMEs from imagery. The Baco et al. (2023) protocol operationalises the five FAO Deep-sea VME criteria. According to the FAO Guidelines only a single criterion needs to be met for an area to be designated as a VME. The results confirm that the study area meets multiple FAO VME criteria, specifically Criterion 3 (fragility), Criterion 4 (life-history traits) and Criterion 5 (structural complexity). These direct observational findings are intended to inform the SC review of the 2024 VME encounter to ensure all SC management recommendations to the Commission are based on the best available scientific information.

This Restricted Observer Paper should be read in conjunction with Greenpeace's Northwest Challenger expedition findings. Both papers represent the best available direct scientific information from these two locations for the Scientific Committee.

Please email kgoddard@northtec.ac.nz or ellie.hooper@greenpeace.ac.nz if you would like to request a copy of this restricted observer paper, access will be assessed on a case by case basis.