An overview of global lobster production and international trade: 2026 edition

February 2026

Western Rock Lobster

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About us

Western Rock Lobster (WRL) is the peak body for the Western Rock Lobster industry, representing the interests of commercial licence holders as well as the industry more broadly. WRL's mission is to support a confident, sustainable and well-respected Western Rock Lobster industry. For more information about WRL, its objectives, and its activities, please visit the WRL website (www.westernrocklobster.org).

About this document

This report was prepared for the WRL Total Allowable Commercial Catch (TACC) Committee by Daniel Fels (WRL Economist) and Chris King (WRL Data Analyst). The report provides an overview of global lobster production and international trade, with a focus on the international customers and competitors for Western Rock Lobster. It is intended that this report will support informed decision making within industry, as well as influencing future research priorities.

Acknowledgements

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WRL would like to thank members of the TACC Committee for their input during the preparation of this report. The TACC Committee brings together representatives from along the Western Rock Lobster value chain, including fishers, processors, and international marketers, fisheries scientists and managers, and independent experts.

WRL would also like to sincerely thank former WRL Market Analyst & Economist, Chris Price, who assisted in past iterations of this report.

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Executive summary

A broad range of lobster species support significant and high-value fisheries all around the world. Owing to its high market value as a sought-after food, lobster makes up a disproportionate share of the value of the world's seafood.

Global production of lobster is dominated in volume terms by American lobster, while spiny lobster is generally a higher value product (especially live). Spiny lobster production is also more globally dispersed and more species diverse.

Exports from Northern America dominate international markets with the rise in production of American lobster over recent years. Wild-caught spiny lobster production and trade, meanwhile, is smaller and has not increased over time, while aquacultured spiny lobster production and trade has increased dramatically over the past few years. Spiny lobster supply is dominated by wild-caught product, as aquaculture confronts and conquers the issues of puerulus collection and transport, complicated larval cycles, and water quality and disease management in culture systems. In the case of Australian and New Zealand wild-caught live rock lobster, long term and significant price premiums apply over live American lobster, and live spiny lobster of other origins, into the major export market: China.

Demographic factors and economic development have seen China emerge as the major destination for the international trade in lobster. China has accounted for much of the growth in international trade over the past decade or more, and accounts for a particularly large share of the global market for live spiny lobster – it is the largest and highest-paying market. China's political tensions with trade partners resulted in trade sanctions and other actions being implemented across a range of commodities from various nations over recent years. The impact on lobster imports from Australia, in particular, was severe, with no live product in the product mix, and import volumes and unit prices significantly lower than the period before COVID-19 and disruption to Market access in October 2020. The Australian live lobster trade was instead mostly diverted to various countries in the China region from late 2020 until the resumption of the live trade in late 2024. China's trade restrictions on Australian lobster created more favourable market conditions for lobster from a range of alternative sources to compete in the China market, which has seen notable increases in imports of Vietnamese farmed lobster over the past few years.

The main competitors for live spiny lobster from Australia and New Zealand are farmed Vietnamese and other Asian sourced Tropical Rock Lobsters, and Caribbean and Florida sourced spiny lobster. The logistical challenges of supplying live spiny lobster from the waters off the Americas and Southern Africa have, to date, prevented meaningful volumes being transported by air to China. How quickly and significantly live supplies from these regions develop will depend on a range of factors including trade agreements, within-country processing, transport, infrastructure and regulatory constraints, as well as quality and species-specific issues. Export trends of wild-caught Caribbean-sourced spiny lobster merit ongoing monitoring, as do developments in lobster aquaculture technology and husbandry, notably in South-East Asia.

Other competitors in the live crustacean space include snow crab from the northern Pacific Ocean, where Russia's exports to China have increased significantly in volume and value over the past decade.

Beach prices of Australian lobster will continue to reflect the volume and price points of competitor products with access to the direct China market. With caveats including a return to "normal" global economic conditions including a warmer political relationship between Australia and China, the longer-term outlook for the lobster trade remains positive.

1.0 Introduction

This report provides an overview of global lobster production and international trade, with a focus on the international customers and competitors for Western Rock Lobster. It is intended that this report will support informed decision making within industry, as well as influencing future research priorities.

The data and analysis underlying this report are maintained by WRL, and it is intended that this report be updated on an annual or biennial basis. This will provide opportunities to incorporate refinements as well as introducing topical issues as appropriate.

1.1 Content and structure of this report

The contents of this report have been based on a review of previous studies and existing resources,[1] insights uncovered through data analysis and through qualitative investigation, and knowledge contributed by industry participants.

There is an emphasis within the body of this report on identifying themes and developing ideas, rather than providing a comprehensive, data-based profile of global lobster production and international trade. Readers with a specific interest in detailed statistical information may wish to refer to the sources noted.

The remainder of this introductory chapter clarifies the scope of analysis. Thereinafter, dedicated chapters provide, in turn:

- an overview of global lobster production
- a summary of international trade in lobster
- a profile of rock lobster in Australia and New Zealand; and
- trade flows of the Western Rock Lobster industry - including recent developments in trade with China, resultant changes in trade flows, and an introduction to some alternative markets for Western Rock Lobster.

1.2 Scope of analysis

Types of lobster

The scope of this report is framed with an emphasis on global economic relevance rather than taxonomical completeness or consistency. In general, the report's focus is on two commercially significant lobster groupings:

- **Homarid lobsters (hereinafter generally referred to as clawed lobster or as American/European lobster)**, being lobster of the *Homarus* genus within the *Nephropidae* family. The only two extant species of homarid lobster are *H. americanus* (American lobster) and *H. gammarus* (European lobster).[2]
- **Spiny lobsters (sometimes also referred to as rock lobster)**, being lobster of various genera within the *Palinuridae* family – chiefly Jasus, Palinurus and Panulirus. Global production of spiny lobster is more widely dispersed and more diverse than is the case for clawed lobster.

[1] This report is intended for industry stakeholders rather than an academic audience, and so the academic standard for referencing has not been observed. A list of selected resources may be able to be provided on request.

[2] *Homarus* spp. once also included Cape lobster (*H. capensis*) but this is now considered to form a separate, monotypic genus (*Homarinus*).

Homarid lobster and spiny lobster together account for around 80 per cent of global production reported for all species falling within the definition of lobster under the International Standard Statistical Classification of Aquatic Animals and Plants.

Lobsters other than the species described above are excluded from this report. The overwhelming majority of what remains is accounted for by Norway lobster (*Nephrops norvegicus*) - often referred to as scampi (along with the closely related *Metanephrops* spp.), these are true lobsters in the sense that they are members of the *Nephropidae* family. However, Norway lobster and other scampi are typically considered as being in a separate market category to that of American/European lobster or spiny lobster. Certainly, Norway lobster does not directly compete on international markets with a premium product such as Western Rock Lobster. By a similar rationale, the scope of this report also excludes other species within the *Nephropidae* family, slipper/fan lobster of the *Scyllaridae* family and assorted other minor species of various genera and families.

Economic scope

The focus of this report is on commercial production of lobster via fishing and aquaculture, and international markets. Future work as part of the 'Understanding the Markets for Western Rock Lobster' initiative will extend the analysis to consider more components of the value chain. Note that any lobster being traded internationally is likely to have been produced as part of a commercial enterprise but also that it is not always possible to clearly demarcate commercial and non-commercial production. This is especially so when it comes to cases of artisanal, small-scale fisheries and subsistence production.

Timeliness

As a practical matter, this report generally considers the latest available period for which relevant data are available (as well as any significant trends of recent years). Obviously, the availability lag for 'official' statistics can be considerable, especially when it comes to globally comprehensive datasets collated by international organisations.[3] For certain cases within this report, data are presented for selected countries (sourced directly from the relevant national agencies) even though comprehensive global statistics are not yet available for the same period. Further, this report includes some more timely information, based on anecdotal evidence from market sources.

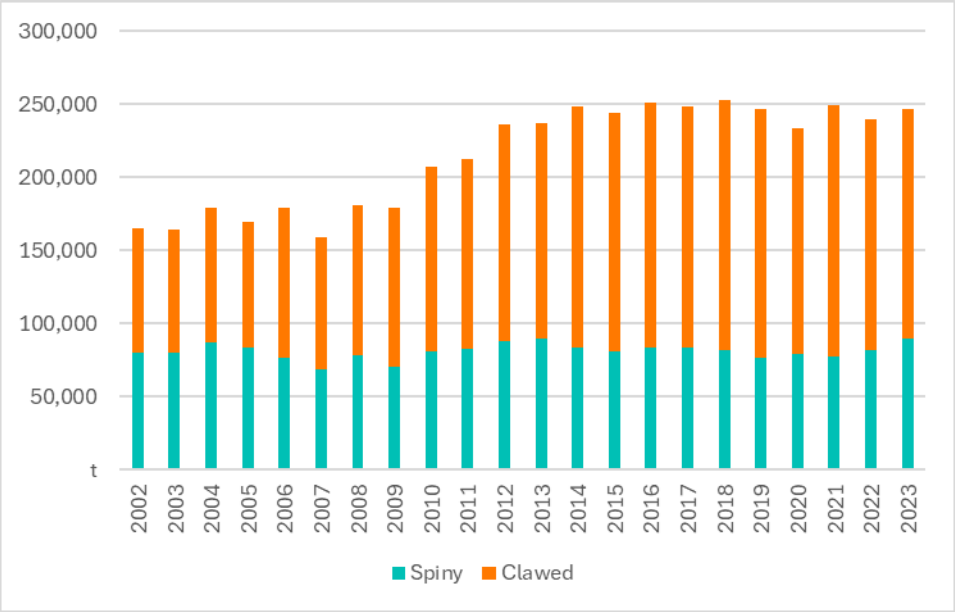
[3] For example, consider that comprehensive global production data for 2022 are the latest available from the FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) at the time of publishing this document.

2.0 Overview of global production

2.1 Global production is dominated by American lobster

Global production of lobster is dominated by catches of clawed American lobster (*Homarus americanus*) along the Atlantic coast of Canada and the north-east of the United States. This relatively small area accounts for more than 60 per cent of the global production of lobster and has accounted for essentially all of the observed growth in such over an extended period of time.

Figure 1: Global lobster production by type, 2002–2023



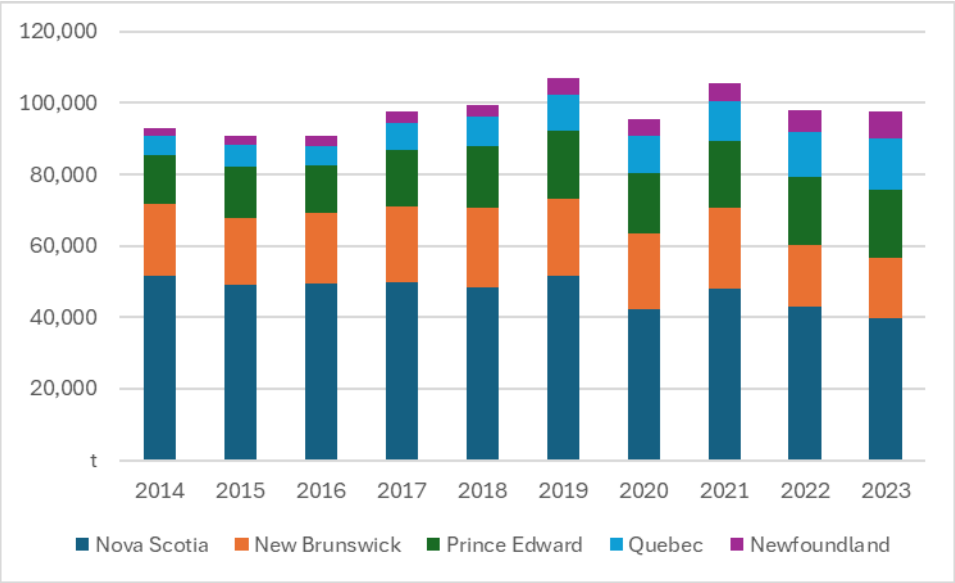
Source: FAO FishStatJ

Canada accounts for over half of the American lobster catch, with the largest lobster populations found around Nova Scotia and the southern Gulf of Saint Lawrence. For the US, lobster abundance increases from south to north, with almost all of the catch attributable to Maine and the rest of the New England region. However, landings have been recorded as far south as North Carolina. The commercial fishing of American lobster is almost entirely through the use of baited traps.

The significant increase in the American lobster catch during the late-2000s and early-2010s was attributable to a combination of factors. The collapse of groundfish stocks (particularly cod) in the 1990s provided the potential for a gradual increase in lobster biomass, while more recent warming of waters in the Gulf of Maine has bolstered populations throughout much of the fishery (even as the same phenomenon has led to more disease and lower populations for southern New England and Long Island Sound).

The continued warming of waters over the has resulted in the “centre of gravity” of lobster catch shifting northwards into Canada – and is expected to result in significant declines in American lobster populations in the longer term. Indeed, over the past decade Canada’s northern provinces (Quebec and Newfoundland) lobster catch has increased over time, while southern provinces (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) catch declined.

Figure 2: Canadian lobster production by province, 2014-2023



Source: Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Differences in the timing of catches throughout its range support the year-round availability of American lobster. Canada generally prohibits lobster fishing between July and September and catches usually peak in December and again during April–June. In contrast, the US allows year-round fishing in the major fishing areas, but catches are generally low during the winter and spring followed by an abrupt shift into a period of high landings in early summer. The existence of lobster holding pounds further supports the year-round availability of live American lobster, with hard shell lobster able to be held for considerable periods of time.

2.2 European lobster contributes relatively little to global production

European lobster (*Homarus gammarus*) is the other extant species of clawed lobster. It is substitutable with American lobster to a considerable degree, through European lobster is usually at a significant price premium (especially within Europe). This price premium is attractive enough to spur re-seeding efforts and the development of aquaculture systems capable of commercially cultivating the species.

In contrast to the globally dominant position of American lobster, European lobster accounts for just 2 per cent of global lobster production, and relatively little of this finds its way to markets outside of the general region of production.

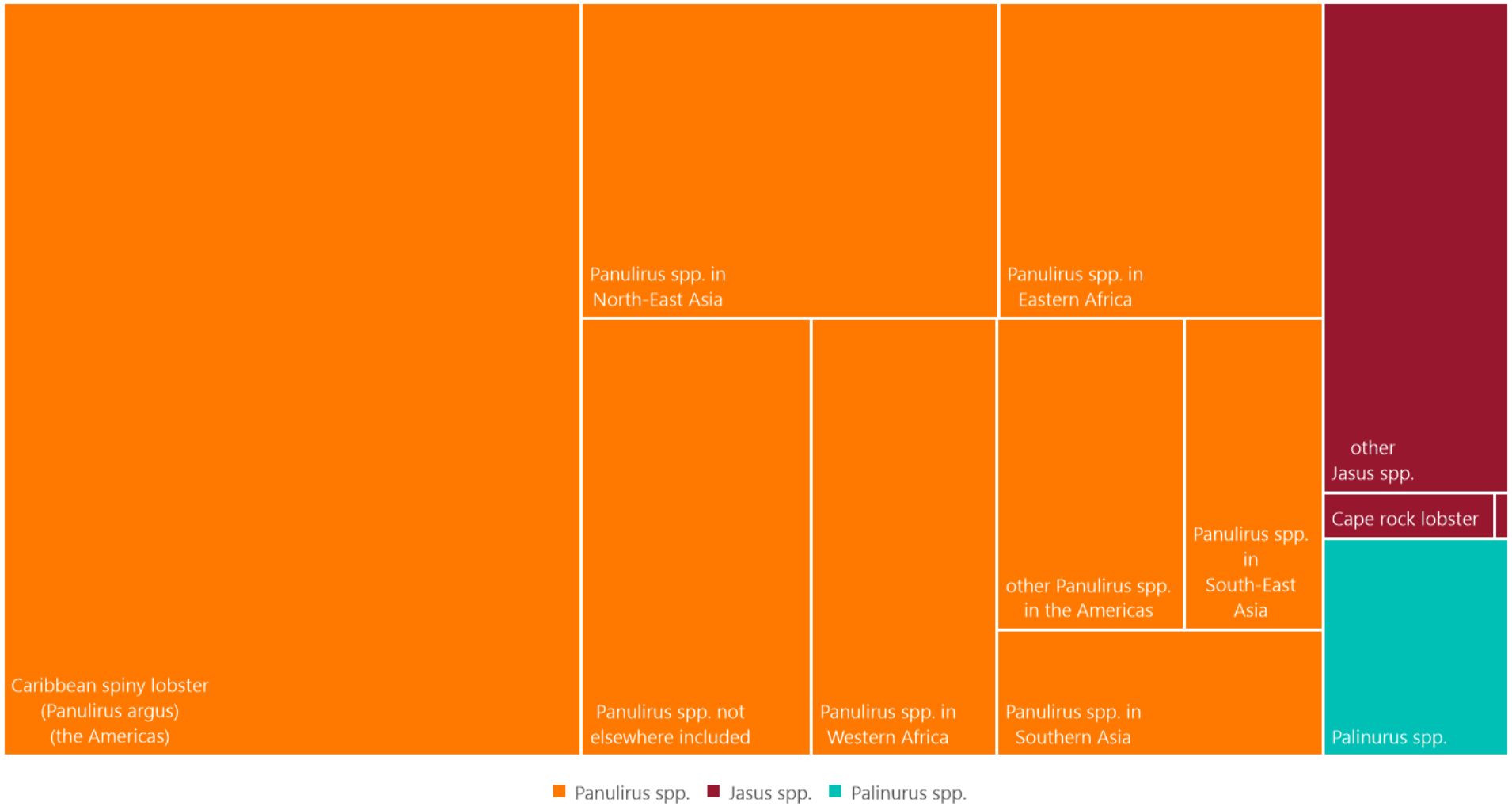
The range for European lobster extends along coastlines of the north-eastern Atlantic, from north-western Norway, south to the Azores and the Atlantic coast of Morocco and also includes parts of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. However, the majority of the commercial catch is attributable to the United Kingdom, Ireland, and France.

2.3 Spiny lobster production is widely dispersed and diverse

While most of the respective catches of American and European lobster are relatively concentrated geographically (particularly in the case of American lobster), spiny lobster production is much more widely dispersed, occurring in many tropical, sub-tropical and temperate seas around the world. There is considerably greater biological, environmental and technological diversity among spiny lobster fisheries than is the case with the clawed lobster fisheries.

Caribbean spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) is easily the most commercially significant species of spiny lobster by volume, though there are many other species of importance. These include Western Rock Lobster (*Panulirus cygnus*) along the coast of Western Australia, and Southern/red rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*) off south-eastern Australia as well as New Zealand. There is also substantial spiny lobster production through much of South-East Asia (e.g. *Panulirus ornatus*, *Panulirus pencillatus, Panulirus homarus*) and along various parts of the coastline of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Figure 3: Global production volume of spiny lobster by type and/or region, 2023



Source: FAO FishStatJ

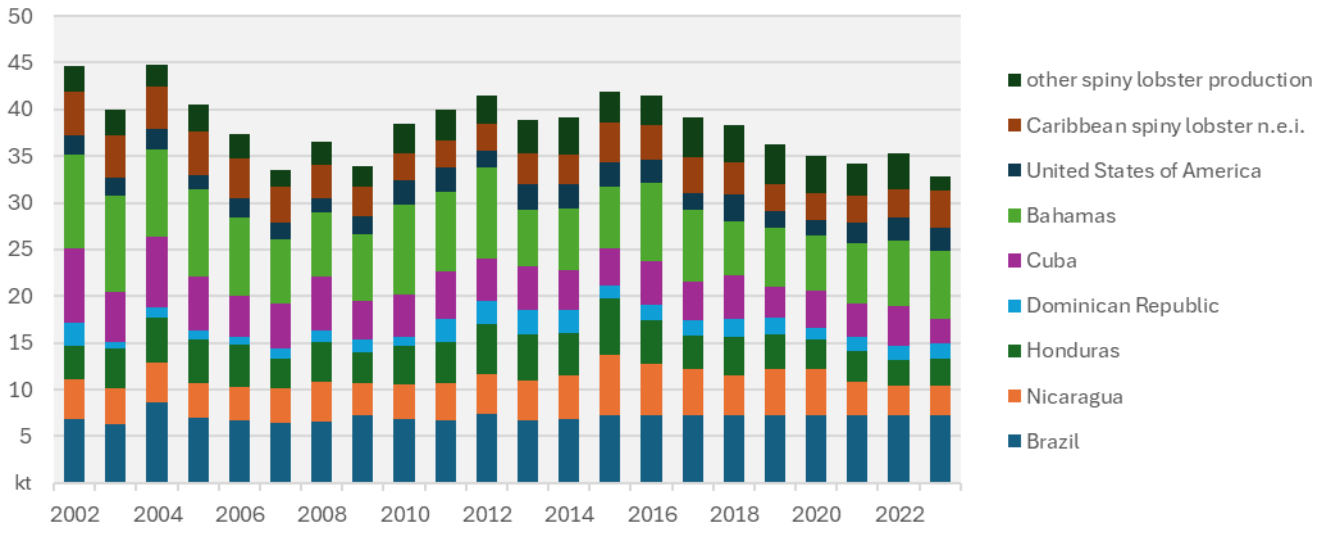
Caribbean spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*) is fished practically throughout its range, which extends well beyond the Caribbean region—including the entire Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, and extending as far north as Bermuda and the east coast of the United States at North Carolina, and along the South American coast to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Caribbean spiny lobster accounts for more than 40 per cent of global spiny lobster production and around 90 per cent of spiny lobster production within the Americas.[4]

The main producing countries of Caribbean spiny lobster are Brazil, Cuba and Bahamas. The Caribbean lobster fisheries are generally artisanal or small-scale, with the exception of Honduras, Nicaragua and Cuba, where the fisheries are mainly industrial. Globally, there are an estimated total of 60 000 professional fishers in addition to over 100 000 recreational fishers. In some areas, the lobster fisheries are the key economic livelihood of communities in the Caribbean, who have no other means of subsistence. The average production per year of lobster per commercial fisher in this part of the world is as low as 500 kg per year.

Figure 4: Distribution of Caribbean spiny lobster

Source: FAO Aquatic Species Distribution Map Viewer

Figure 5: Caribbean spiny lobster and other spiny lobster production in the Americas, 2002–2023



Source: FAO FishStatJ

As is the case with clawed lobster, many species of spiny lobster are commercially caught with baited traps. However, some of the tropical species are taken by diving or by use of artificial shelters (sometimes referred to as 'casitas') which are used to concentrate the lobsters typically living in shallow seagrass habitats. Nets

[4] The sub-tropical waters of the Eastern Central Pacific account for most of the remaining production. California spiny lobster (*Panulirus interruptus*) is particularly significant, although blue spiny lobster (*Panulirus inflatus*) and other species are also fished on a commercial basis.

are used to take the lobsters sheltering under casitas, when they are lifted or disturbed and the lobsters leave their shelter. Spiny lobster species are also taken by trammel netting and sometime as trawl bycatch.

Note that the method of capture will reflect a confluence of biological, environmental and economic factors, which in turn affect the economics of fishing; and together with the supply chain affect the potential international competitiveness of lobster from a particular fishery. These fisheries range from artisanal or small-scale fisheries, with labour-intensive fishing, sometimes on a subsistence basis, to fisheries that are operated on a very much commercial and industrial basis.

2.4 A note regarding Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification

The MSC is the world's most respected independent fisheries sustainability certification standard, which reviews fisheries based on stock assessment and harvest strategy, the impact of the fishery on the wider ecology, and management and consultation arrangements. Third-party accreditation can be an important point of differentiation in international markets.

The major American lobster fisheries have been MSC certified, however, the Gulf of Maine lobster fishery had its MSC certification suspended for a period until being reinstated effective September 2021. The MSC had determined that the fishery was potentially jeopardizing the survival of the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale.

Relatively little of the global production of spiny lobster production comes from fisheries that have been MSC certified. The Western Rock Lobster fishery was the first fishery in the world to achieve MSC certification, in 2000, and has maintained the certification through periodic reviews since. Other significant spiny lobster fisheries to achieve MSC certification include the California spiny lobster fishery of Mexico Baja California (2004) and the Caribbean spiny lobster fishery of the Bahamas (2018).

2.5 Aquaculture briefing

One of the more significant long-term threats to the wild-caught lobster business may be aquaculture. Over the past decades, aquaculture of fish, molluscs and crustaceans has expanded hugely in volume and value globally, with China a major producer. The table below illustrates.

Figure 6: Aquaculture production – some key categories

2023 Aquaculture volume and "farmgate" value of production		
	Global	**China**
Fish	64 million tonnes, worth USD192bn	30 million tonnes, worth USD80bn (mainly carp, tilapia, but a broad range of species)
Molluscs	19.5 million tonnes, worth USD37bn	17 million tonnes, worth USD30bn (mainly clams, oysters, scallops, abalones)
Crustaceans	13.7 million tonnes, worth USD108bn	7.4 million tonnes, worth USD75bn (mainly shrimp, freshwater crayfish, and crabs)

(source: FAO)

Most of the expansion in crustacean aquaculture production has been in freshwater and brackishwater environments. While shrimp aquaculture is well known with globally distributed production, higher value crustaceans are now being successfully farmed in large volumes.

Two examples (both from China) serve to illustrate the increases in production of relatively high value crustaceans:

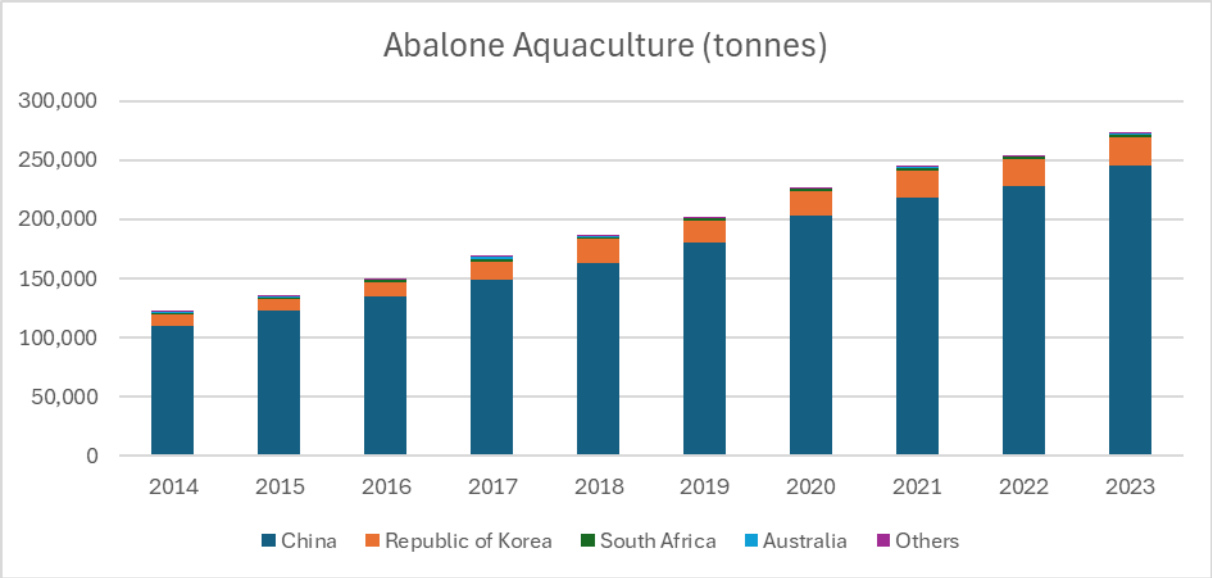
- **Red swamp crawfish.** From the mid-1980's when the USA produced around 40,000 tonnes per year, China began farming the species and produced over 1 million tonnes in 2017 according to FAO statistics. In 2023 Chinese production of red swamp crawfish reached 3.2 million tonnes with an average farmgate vale of USD10.20/kg, for an overall farmgate value of USD32.3 billion.

- **Chinese mitten crab.** Chinese production reached 890,000 tonnes in 2023, with an average farmgate value of USD14.92/kg, for an overall farmgate value of USD13.3 billion.

The markets for wild-caught products may be impacted by rapid increases in aquaculture production. Recent developments in the **abalone** market illustrate how:

- Global aquaculture production of aquacultured abalone in 2023 was 272,000 tonnes worth USD 3 billion at farmgate, compared to 122,000 tonnes worth USD 1.25 billion ten years earlier.
    - 2023 farmed production was dominated by China which accounted for 245,000 tonnes worth USD 2.4 billion in 2023.
    - South Korea is the next biggest player, with 2023 production of 24,000 tonnes worth USD 415 million.
    - Australia, with farmed production at 627 tonnes worth USD 14 million farmgate in 2023, is a very small player – not visible below in *Figure 7: Global aquaculture production of abalone*.
- The increases in global production saw the per-kilogram value of South Korean production erode sharply, from USD 33/kg in 2018 to USD 17/kg in 2023.
    - During 2025 abalone prices have fallen further in response to global oversupply.
    - The South Korean sector has experienced severe stress, as have Australian abalone farms and the local wild catch industry.
    - All size classes of abalone are affected by the increased competition, though anecdotal evidence suggests that smaller sizes may be affected more.

Figure 7: Global aquaculture production of abalone



(source: FAO)

The closest competitor to wild-caught lobster will be farm-grown lobster, which has been subject to significant development effort over the past couple of decades. Although the complex and delicate larval stages have made domestication difficult, production systems based on wild-caught pueruli have been adopted successfully.

While FAO aquaculture production shows that Vietnam's lobster production has been between 2,000 and 3,000 tonnes per year for the 5 years to 2023, another reliable data source (China's official import statistics) suggests that production may be far higher. In the last 4 months of 2024 China imported over 6,000 tonnes of live spiny lobster from Vietnam, and 23,601 tonnes in 2025. This means that Vietnam is, in 2025, the largest single source of lobster for China's import market. This theme is explored further below, in *Section 5.3.1 Increasing competition from farmed lobster.*

Given that some Vietnamese production is likely be consumed domestically, this suggests that aquaculture production potential is currently well over 20,000 tonnes per year. The main species farmed are *Panulirus homarus* and *Panulirus versicolor*, with some *Panulirus ornatus*.

The Vietnamese cage-culture system, located in embayments on a relatively small strip of the Vietnam coast, is vulnerable to weather (wind, storm surge and rapid changes in salinity) as became apparent with media coverage in November 2025 describing damage to lobster farming systems from flooding estimated at over USD 100 million.

If and when other countries suitable for rock lobster aquaculture increase their production, the competition to wild-caught product can only be expected to grow.

3.0 Summary of international trade

3.1 Patterns of trade in part reflect seasonal availability and logistical considerations

Seasonal availability and market demand, and logistical constraints inform the observed patterns of trade, particularly for exporting countries such as Australia which focus heavily on the trade in live lobster. Lobsters can be kept alive, out of water, in a high humidity environment for well over 24 hours (depending on the species and the method of export packing & handling). Current experience is that once handling and transport time increases beyond 24 hours, the mortality risk increases and can increase significantly as this time increases. However, ongoing R&D means that transport protocols continue to evolve and improve, so this “safe” time horizon continues to extend. Countries/producers with better management and production systems and access to reliable transport and processing systems to manage exports/imports are best placed to deliver live product to export markets in good condition. These factors impact the pattern of global trade as presented below. Caribbean lobster producers are most notably affected by some of these issues. Depending on their locations they have access to advanced transport systems out of the US (Florida) or are restricted to shipping frozen lobster due to a lack of suitable handling and air freight options.

3.2 Canada and the US are the most significant exporters (including for extra-regional trade)

Given the global dominance of American lobster production, it is not surprising that Canada and the United States are far and away the largest exporters of lobster in the world. However, a significant proportion of their respective exports are imports into the other (rather than exports to destinations outside of the region). This pattern of trade reflects the significant size and preferences of the respective domestic markets, as well as certain seasonal and logistical factors. In gross terms, the United States and Canada are the largest and third largest importers of lobster in the world - but most of these imports come from their neighbouring country.

In 2024:

- Lobster exports from Canada to USA were 19,658 tonnes of live lobster, and 15,640 tonnes of frozen lobster
- Lobster exports from USA to Canada were 15,140 tonnes of live lobster, and 719 tonnes of frozen lobster

The combined 51,156 tonnes traded between the two neighbours (as outlined above) had an export value of USD1.24 billion.

Global trade from Canada plus USA combined in 2024 was 112,147 tonnes of live and frozen lobster. Exports to the rest of the world represented 60,990 tonnes with an export value of USD1.03 billion. As the highest volume exporters, changes in American lobster production and export conditions affect lobster markets worldwide.

Even excluding intra-regional trade, Northern America is still the world’s main origin for the international trade in lobster. Extra-regional exports increased as production increased during late-2000s and early-2010s, with greater exports to China being of particular note. Other major destinations include the rest of North-East Asia as well as Europe.

3.3 Europe is a minor producer and net importer of lobster

Relatively little European lobster production finds its way to markets outside of the general region of production. That having been said, there is considerable international trade in such within Europe. Lobster supplies in Europe are bolstered by significant large volumes of imports of American lobster and spiny lobster. Since the entry into force, in late-2017, of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between Canada and Europe, most of the American lobster imports have been from Canada rather than the United States.

Lobster imports are dominated by clawed lobster; with live imports around 12,000 to 16,000 tonnes per year, and frozen imports around 7,000 tonnes per year.

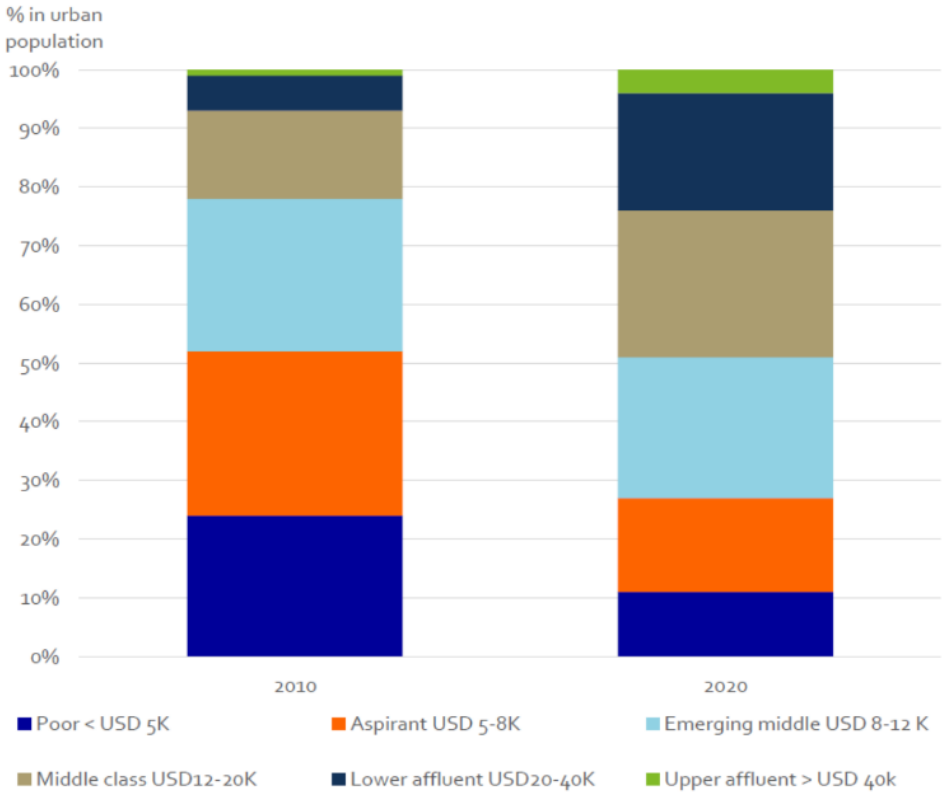
Of the spiny lobster imported into Europe, typical live volumes are around 1,000 - 1,500 tonnes per year mostly sourced from African or countries within Europe, while frozen volumes in the past decade show relatively large fluctuations around the 4,000 to 8,000 tonne levels, mostly sourced from Africa, Europe and Northern and Latin America. The relatively small volume of live spiny lobster imports from areas outside Europe command relatively low unit prices, while the frozen market appears to be reasonably price sensitive. These factors indicate that European markets have relatively limited potential to absorb significant volumes of high-value western rock lobster.

3.4 China is the major destination for extra-regional trade

3.4.1 Demographic factors and economic development have driven an increase in demand

As urban populations and incomes rise, China has emerged as the major destination for the international trade in live lobster over the last decade. Chinese consumers, particularly the relatively affluent urban on the east coast, regard live imported seafood as luxury social symbols. The size of this demographic is increasing rapidly.

Figure 8: China urban population by income group, 2010 and 2020

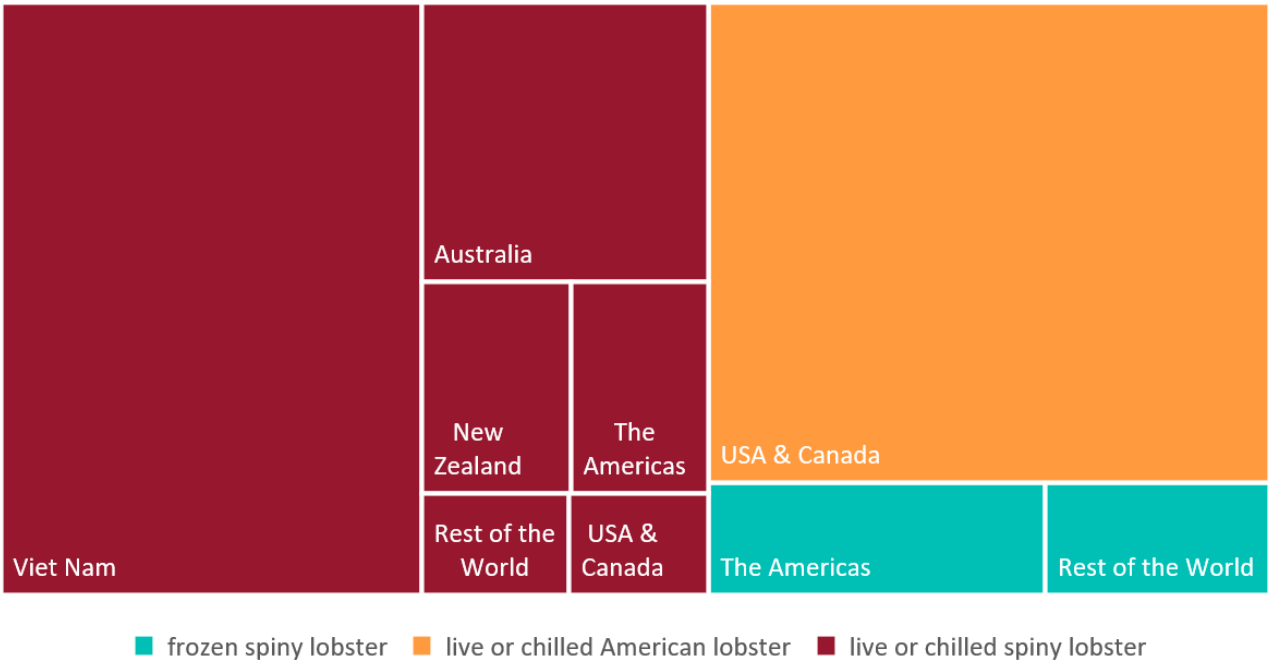


Source: Nikolik 2019

3.4.2 China continues to prefer live lobster

The Chinese market shows a strong cultural preference for live lobster rather than frozen. In 2025, frozen lobster made up 8% by volume of total lobster imports.

*Figure 9: China imports of live or frozen lobster, value by product type and origin**



Source: GACC * some smaller product types excluded or grouped together

3.4.3 The China market is really many markets

China is the market of choice for live/fresh/chilled spiny lobster because it is the largest and highest-paying option. That is not to suggest, however, that China is a single, homogenous market - China is in fact a collection of peoples with considerable cultural and economic diversity. Regarding the demand for lobster, there may be differing preferences in respect of price point, size, appearance, taste, cooking style, packaging, and origin.

Chinese demand for seafood has historically come from the coastal regions of the country. Southern rock lobster tends to be consumed more by the northern coastal provinces. Western Rock Lobster has traditionally flowed into China via the southern borders with Hong Kong and Vietnam, and in turn the market for Western Rock Lobster has been centred around the south-eastern region of China—particularly the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian. Other major centres of demand for imported lobster are the municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai, though traditionally these have been more oriented towards other spiny lobster species (e.g. Southern/red rock lobster). Vietnamese live rock lobster is mainly routed through the closest southern provinces – Guanxi, Sichuan and Guangdong.

Growing wealth in inland cities and supply chain improvements are gradually resulting in increased demand for seafood in those regions.

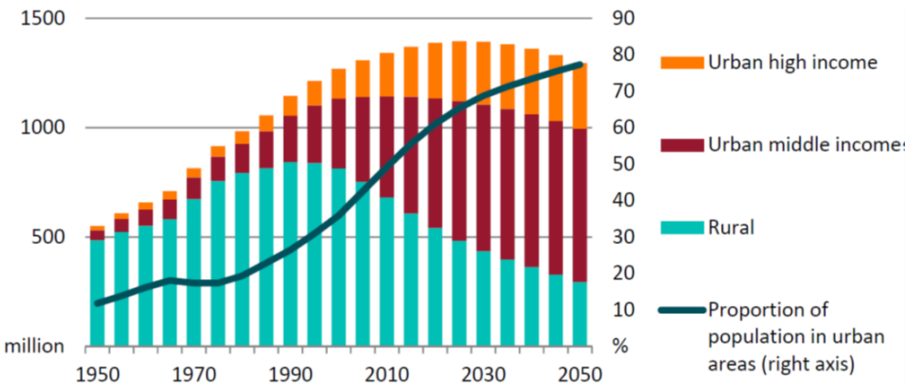
Figure 10: Map of China with administrative divisions

Source: Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administrative_divisions_of_China)

3.4.4 The long-term outlook for demand in China is generally positive, structural challenges notwithstanding

The long-term outlook for lobster demand in China remains broadly positive, although several structural challenges could temper growth. Urban populations are expected to continue expanding over the coming decades, even as the country's total population begins to decline. Rising incomes among these urban consumers should also support ongoing demand for lobster and other premium seafood products, though future growth is likely to be slower than in the past decade. At the same time, China faces a number of economic headwinds—including domestic deflation, a shrinking and aging workforce, significant leverage in the real estate and construction sectors, and the complex transition from an export-driven to a consumption-led economy. These issues present notable downside risks to China's longer-term economic outlook.

Figure 11: China urban and rural population and income groups, projection to 2050



Source: Hamshere et al. 2014

3.5 The Americas is a significant source of spiny lobster from international markets

Overall production volumes of spiny lobster in the Americas have been broadly steady over recent years, and there is probably little opportunity for further exploitation of the constituent fisheries. Consistent with this, export volumes have been largely unchanged in absolute terms and have declined as a share of global trade, and this is likely to remain the case in future years.

The general reputation of Caribbean spiny lobster on international markets is as strong, sweet lobster that is reasonably priced and widely available. In particular, the Americas is the most significant source of frozen spiny lobster for international markets. However, there are a large number of producers and options in this market, and competition can tend to be on the basis of price rather than consistent preferences for a particular origin.

While the higher returns available for live exports are obviously attractive, and Florida lobster in particular has had some success with live trade, many producers in the Americas have historically been constrained by a range of production, processing, transport and regulatory factors. Time in the air is not necessarily the main limiting factor – particularly significant in many cases is the lack of reliable access to the intermediary storage and transport infrastructure necessary for delivering live lobster to distant markets in good condition. Depending on their locations they have access to advanced transport systems out of the US (Florida) or are restricted to shipping frozen lobster due to a lack of suitable handling and air freight options (e.g. Brazil). More direct flights, and increasingly coordinated supply chains, are likely to enhance the viability of live trade into China. These matters justify ongoing monitoring, as Caribbean and other competitors invest in infrastructure and R&D to help grow their share of the live spiny lobster market in China.

3.6 Trade for other spiny lobster producers tends to be more concentrated

Taken together, Australia and New Zealand exports represented about 20% of the total value of global lobster trade in the years before COVID-19. Australian and New Zealand trade swung overwhelmingly towards live exports to China in the decade to 2019 as no other market has been able to absorb the volume at the attractive prices commanded in China. This necessarily entailed reducing the volumes exported to other traditional markets, notably Japan, Taiwan and the USA. Concurrently, free trade agreements saw the China trade become more direct, rather than relying on trans-shipment through Vietnam, Hong Kong or Macau. Reliance on a single market entails some risk, the 2020-2024 trade hiatus for Australian lobster into China bringing this into a stark light. One mitigation strategy for Australian lobster appears to be to diversify the trade, which would necessarily encompass some element of re-embracing previously significant markets. It is important to realise, though, that diversification is a form of self-insurance that comes with its own set of costs. These matters are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Vietnamese production and trade has been difficult to quantify in the past, but the aftermath of COVID-19 seems to have brought about tighter border controls with China and concomitant customs information collection; statistics show significant trade from Vietnam into China – explored further below, in *Section 5.3.1 Increasing competition from farmed lobster*. Rather than being wild-caught or trans-shipped product, it is thought that most is aquacultured product, raised in sea-cages in embayments along the Vietnamese coast.

After Brazil and Nicaragua (see the Americas section above), South Africa is the next most significant exporting country by trade value, at about 1.5% of total global trade value. The South African trade has trended towards a live trade, especially into China. Trade from other African countries together is less than South Africa's exports.

4.0 Australia and New Zealand rock lobster

Australian and New Zealand rock lobster represent only a relatively small portion of global supply, but are major sources of supply in the increasingly significant and competitive market for live lobster in China and typically attract a premium price. As such, Australian and New Zealand rock lobster production and trade is of global significance. Looking inwards, the Antipodean rock lobster fisheries are among the most valuable wild-catch fisheries in Australia and New Zealand and support many regional communities.

4.1 Western Rock Lobster accounts for the majority of production

A diverse range of rock lobster species exist in the waters of Australia and New Zealand but only four species (distributed across eight different management jurisdictions) support significant fisheries:

- Western Rock Lobster (*Panulirus cygnus*), caught along the west coast of Western Australia
- Southern/red rock lobster (*Jasus edwardsii*), caught predominantly along the coastline of (south-eastern) South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, and New Zealand
- Eastern/packhorse rock lobster (*Sagmariasus verreauxi*), caught mostly along the coasts of New South Wales and (northern) New Zealand
- Ornate Rock Lobster (*Panulirus ornatus*), caught mainly in the Torres Strait Ornate Rock Lobster Fishery and northern Queensland).

The production of Western Rock Lobster, a species endemic to Western Australia, accounts for the majority of the volume of Australian lobster production. Next most significant is Southern Rock Lobster, while Eastern and Ornate Rock Lobster catches are relatively minor by comparison.

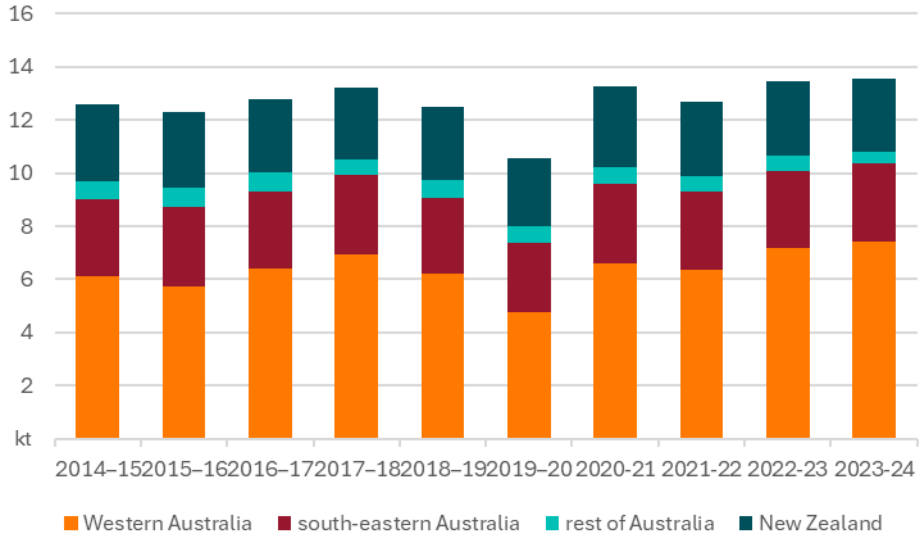
Despite typically trading at a discount to most other commercial species of Australian lobster, the productivity of the Western Rock Lobster fishery has translated into Western Australia producing the majority of industry value in almost all years for the past decade.

The timing of commercial catches in the Western Rock Lobster fishery reflects the combined influences of seasonal patterns in catchability and demand. Periods of high catchability include the ‘whites’ phase of the fishery (December/January), as well as March–April, when large numbers of undersize lobsters moult into legal size and are relatively catchable. Periods of high demand normally include the Chinese New Year celebrations (January/February) and other ‘lucky’ Chinese days/weeks. Catches are generally lower from June, reflecting factors including lower demand in China, more rough weather days, lower catchability, and many females starting to mate and thus becoming illegal for capture.

Under normal circumstances, the timing of commercial catches reflects the combined influences of seasonal patterns in catchability and demand, albeit with some variability in timing between years and between zones.

Production from the Australian and New Zealand rock lobster fisheries has been broadly steady over recent years, perhaps owing to the widespread implementation of quota limits in place of effort controls. Prices over recent years have continued to be at levels higher than was the case of a decade or more ago. The average landed price for Australian lobster has increased significantly, from approximately A$24–32 per kilogram in the period 2004–2008 to over A$60 per kilogram in the period 2014– 2019, with New Zealand lobster achieving a premium over Australian Southern and Western Rock Lobster. Higher prices continued to be achieved by New Zealand rock lobster after trade disruption interrupted the direct trade of Australian lobster to China – while Australian prices have reverted to levels almost approximating those experienced in the 2004-2008 period.

Figure 12: Lobster production in Australia and New Zealand, by state/country, 2014-15 to 2023-24



Note: Data for Australia and New Zealand are based on annual periods with balance dates of 30 June and 31 March, respectively.
Sources: ABARES; Fisheries New Zealand

4.2 There are significant differences but also interdependencies between fisheries

There is a high degree of price integration in domestic lobster prices. Southern Rock Lobster and Eastern Rock Lobster production in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales rarely show price variances between sources of more than a few dollars per kilogram. The Western Rock Lobster consistently trades domestically at A$10–15 per kilogram discount to these other Australian lobster products.

Eastern Rock Lobster is generally not marketed to China because of colour disadvantage in that market, and as a result Eastern Rock Lobster tends to achieve higher domestic market prices than export prices.

The pricing trends, correlations and discrepancies among Australian lobster product are largely a reflection of international export prices worked back up the supply chain.

A number of factors in export markets are understood to contribute to this price differentiation between Australian lobster product, including:

- Different levels of engagement with the market
- The fact that Southern Rock Lobster (and notably New Zealand Southern Rock Lobster) entered the China-direct market earlier than Western Rock Lobster
- Southern Rock Lobster demonstrates higher survival rates in the live export markets than Western Rock Lobster and attracts a colour premium in China markets; and
- Anecdotally, some provincial seafood markets in China exhibit a strong and persistent preference for a particular species.

4.3 Industry prosperity has been driven in recent years by live exports to China

4.3.1 China is the largest and highest-paying market

China is the market of choice for live lobster from Australia and New Zealand. This is because China is the largest and highest-paying market. Historically, relatively few lobsters are sold in other forms or to other markets, given the differences in price and margin.

For much of recent history the traditional focus of the Western Australian trade was markets in Asia including Taiwan and Japan. However, the emergence of China as a global economy with increasing consumer purchasing power had a major impact on trade patterns for lobster. Locally the emergence of China as a premium export market for live lobster resulted in virtually all exports of Western Rock Lobster being sold as live product to China. This followed, with time lags, a similar pattern already evident for Southern Rock Lobster caught in the Eastern States and New Zealand.

The vast majority of Australian lobster exports were live lobster shipped direct to distribution centres in China and Hong Kong. Historically, Australian lobster exports to China were mainly distributed through Vietnam and Hong Kong. However, with the advent of the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement, China became the main export destination and distribution centre. But in late 2020, a hiatus in the trade occurred – see Section 5 for discussion of these events.

4.3.2 Preferential trade agreements have supported increases in direct trade with China

The staged reduction (starting late-2015) and then elimination (from 1 January 2019) of tariffs on Australian lobster, under the China–Australia Free Trade Agreement, has resulted in a significant increase of direct trade into China. Lobster from Australia is now treated consistently with that from New Zealand, in not being subject to a tariff.

The NZ–China FTA signed in 2008 reduced tariffs such that all New Zealand exports of seafood products were tariff free by 2012. This resulted in more direct imports into China—by 2016 China imported 99 per cent of New Zealand's rock lobster exports. 2019 upgrades to that FTA include a new commitment to expedite customs clearance to six hours for perishable goods (such as fresh seafood, including rock lobster and salmon). This enhances supply chain integrity for New Zealand exporters of fresh high value food products that need to get to market quickly.

4.4 The importance of air freight capacity for export markets

Airfreighting seafood reduces time in transit, which is important for preserving the quality of fresh and live seafood and hence maximising returns on the product. Australia's live rock lobster export industry is a leading example of the importance of airfreight in Australia's seafood export industry. The establishment of live trade required the industry to develop solutions to managing lobsters from the point of capture to the point of final delivery to the customer. This has involved considerable investments in building holding infrastructure close to airports and developing efficient air transport packaging and delivery logistics.

The importance of airfreight capacity and availability became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Constraints to air freight capacity rapidly became apparent and freight rates escalated significantly when passenger flights were curtailed as travel restrictions came into effect. With the reduction in scheduled flights, exporters became more reliant on dedicated freight charter flights to shift cargo. While the air freight situation has alleviated considerably, freight rates remain higher, with less flights per week to key export destinations, than prior to the pandemic.

The effects of COVID-19 and China trade disruptions, covered in more detail in Section 5, have meant that more Australian lobster was sold into the domestic market in 2020, and following years than in the years previous. Nevertheless, despite increased consumption of local product in Australia there are still significant volumes of lobster imported (836 tonnes in 2022 and 829 tonnes in 2023 - a significant volume albeit around 30% less than the average 1200 tonnes per year observed between 2013 and 2018). Major sources for imported lobster include Canada, the United States, Brazil, and the Bahamas. The overwhelming majority of imports are of frozen product, including both whole lobster and lobster tails.

While lobster imports include some small amounts of re-exports (i.e. lobster transiting Australia on the way to other markets, such as the case of lobster from the Papua New Guinea part of the Torres Strait Rock Lobster Fishery transiting Cairns airport), the volume of re-exports in 2023 was minimal – this product has largely found another way to market, and the vast majority of imports are destined for domestic consumption.

Lobster consumption within Australian is further supported by recreational catches and other non-commercial fishing, although lobster taken under such arrangements are not readily available to all in the same manner as a commercially caught lobster (whether domestic or imported).

That most of the commercial lobster catch in Australia (and New Zealand) is exported as a premium product while a significant amount of lower-valued lobster is imported from elsewhere in the world is consistent with economic principles. The patterns of trade and consumption reflect differing consumer preferences around the world.[5]

The general consistency of observed market outcomes with economic principles does not necessarily mean that there are no imperfections in markets or that there are no impediments or obstacles to the local supply and consumption of lobster. Increasing the availability and accessibility of Western Rock Lobster for local consumption is a worthwhile objective, shared by industry and the WA Government. In support of such, initiatives such as the Local Lobster Program (2016–2020) and then the Back of Boat lobster sales mechanism (introduced 2020) have permitted fishers to sell directly to the public, and to local restaurants and other businesses under certain conditions.[6]

[5] Of course, the observed patterns of trade and consumption are also influenced by supply dynamics and logistical/trade matters.

[6] It is of note that the cheapest Western Rock Lobster (to the consumer) will usually be that which has been sold directly from the back of the boat; and some customers may consider there to be value in the experience of visiting a fishing boat harbour and interacting with a fisher.

5.0 Trade flows of Western Rock Lobster

This chapter discusses the general drivers of trade flows for the Western Rock Lobster industry, in the context of geopolitics and macro developments in markets. The chapter begins at the point of the 2020 COVID-19 disruption and discusses changes to the trade to the current point in time.

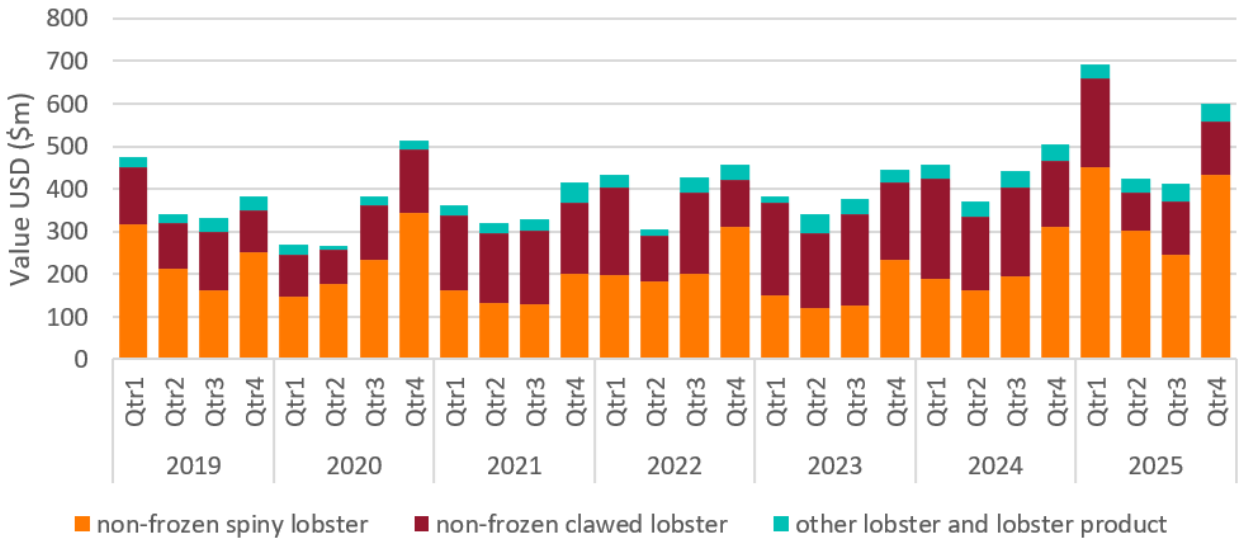
5.1 COVID-19 and recovery

In recognition of the accelerating spread of COVID-19 in China, authorities introduced a range of travel and other restrictions during January 2020, and actively discouraged the large gatherings traditionally held during the Chinese New Year period. As a consequence of these measures, and the general apprehension among the populace, there was an extraordinary reduction in the demand for high-value seafood such as live Australian rock lobster (during what would normally be a high-demand period). Imports of Western Rock Lobster and many other premium seafoods had effectively ceased by the final week of January 2020.

In response to decreased demand in China and elsewhere, global lobster production slowed significantly, and effectively came to a halt for a time in many quota-based fisheries, especially those that focus on trade in live lobster, such as is the case with Western Rock Lobster. Notably, the cessation of fishing for Western Rock Lobster was the first time that such an outcome had been driven by industry rather than mandated by government.

Many sectors of the economy reached or surpassed their pre-outbreak volumes of activity within a few months. In most respects, the economic recovery through to late 2022 surprised on the upside. From 2023, lobster imports increased to over 50,000 tonnes, then rose further to 58,000 tonnes in 2024, and further again to 68,000 tonnes in 2025.

Figure 13: China imports of lobster, value by product type, quarterly



Source: GACC

5.2 Geopolitics and trade disruption

While the COVID (and post-COVID) story continued to unfold, towards the end of 2020 a compounding event impacted on Australian lobster exports. During the final days of October 2020, many shipments of live Australian rock lobster became subject to significant delays in the customs clearance process. Rates of inspection were reported to have been increased to (at least) 50 per cent of consignments, and there was also some uncertainty regarding the nature of testing being applied. Information available at the time suggested that elements of the new process related to health and compliance checks, with subsequent speculation relating to concerns about trace amounts of metals within the rock lobster. Notably, the new measures were reported to only be applying to live rock lobster from Australia; lobster from other origins, and fresh and frozen Australian lobster were not affected.

The delays in customs clearance for those consignments arriving during the final days of October 2020 raised the very real prospect of lobster dying in transit, or of quality being otherwise adversely affected. The risk and uncertainty that this created had an immediate effect on both exporters and importers, and Australian lobster fisheries largely ceased operations at the beginning of November. The hope at the time was that clarification and import permits from authorities in China would be forthcoming and that the live trade could resume with the necessary confidence - the trade finally resumed in late 2024.

From mid-November 2020 Australia's lobster prices reflected the reality of lobster marketing and trading selling into alternative markets (both international and domestic). International trade data in the period to end-2024 showed a significant decline in Australian lobster exports, with the cessation in direct shipments of live lobster to China being only partially offset by increased exports reported for destinations such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and South Korea. The fact that historically large volumes of Australian lobster were diverted to Australian consumers, concentrated over the high-catch summer periods since 2020, demonstrate the importance, and the limitations, of the domestic market at a time of difficult international trading and logistics conditions.

Trade and production statistics show that apart from periods of peak domestic demand, most Western Rock Lobster production was traded internationally during that time. A similar pattern was apparent with Southern and Ornate Rock Lobster exports. While there are indications that those marketers and exporters managed, in a relatively short time, to create alternative export channels capable of absorbing significant volumes of lobster, the major proportion of Western Australian trade (and this also applies to Southern Rock Lobster trade) was directed to China-adjacent markets, while Queensland diverted almost all its live trade to Thailand. Numerous articles in the international press suggested that a significant proportion of this Australian product made its way into China via grey or other trade channels. The additional supply-chain complexities, costs and constraints of this trade acted to significantly depress export and consequently beach prices.

Of the western rock lobster that was exported during the period of trade disruption, a significant proportion was frozen, either whole or as tails. The following figures show that volumes of these export products reverted to very low levels in 2025 - similar to the status quo before trade disruption.

Figure 14: Western rock lobster processing, cumulative percentages by Year, Tails

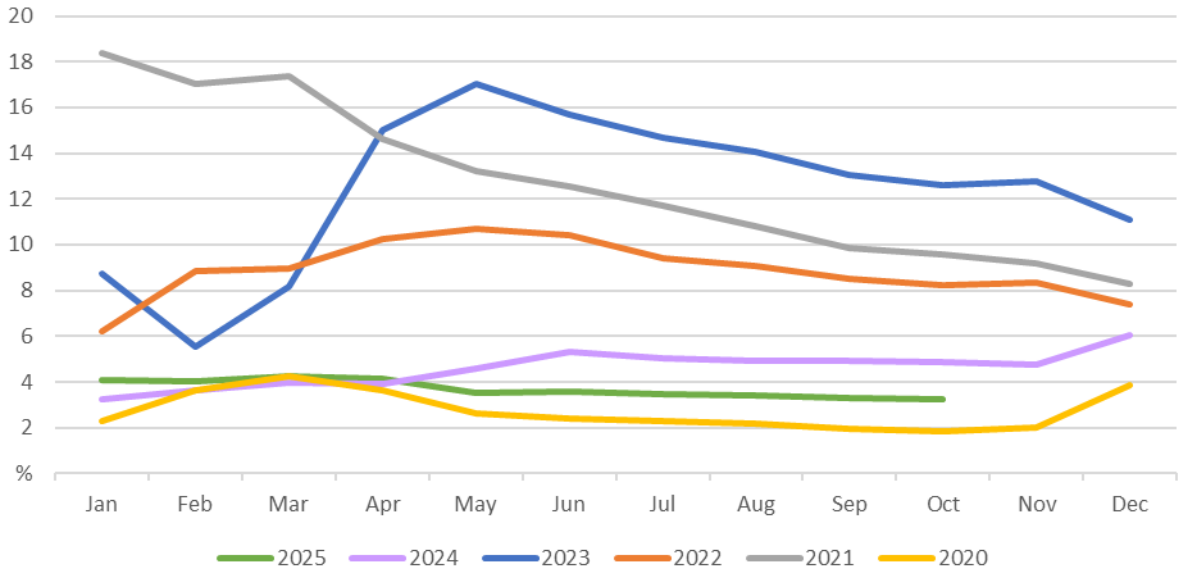


Figure 15: Western rock lobster processing, cumulative percentages by Year, Whole Cooked

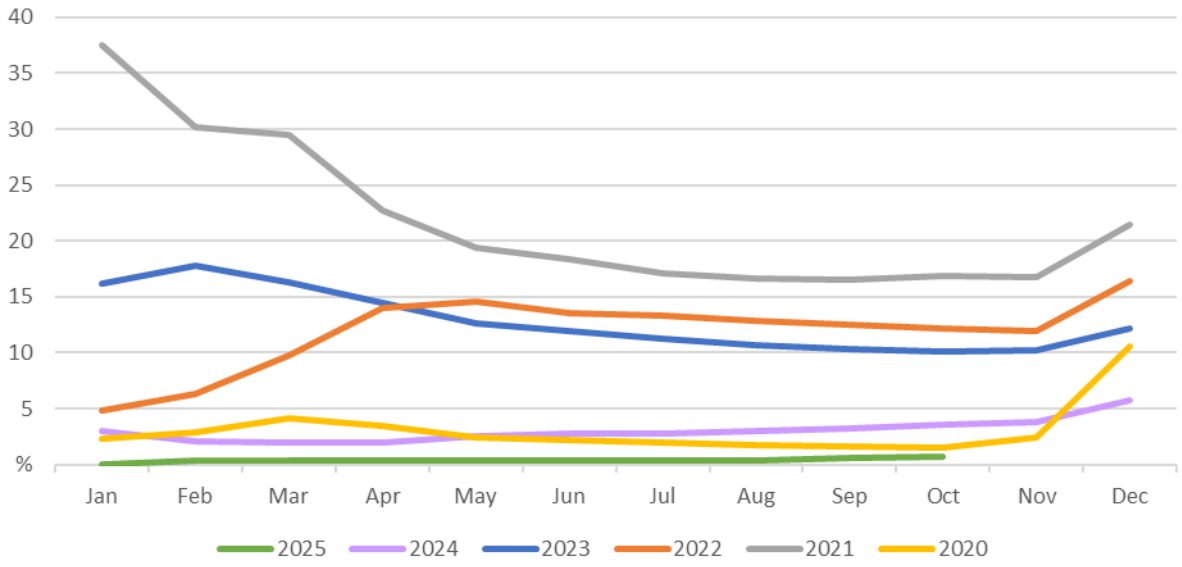
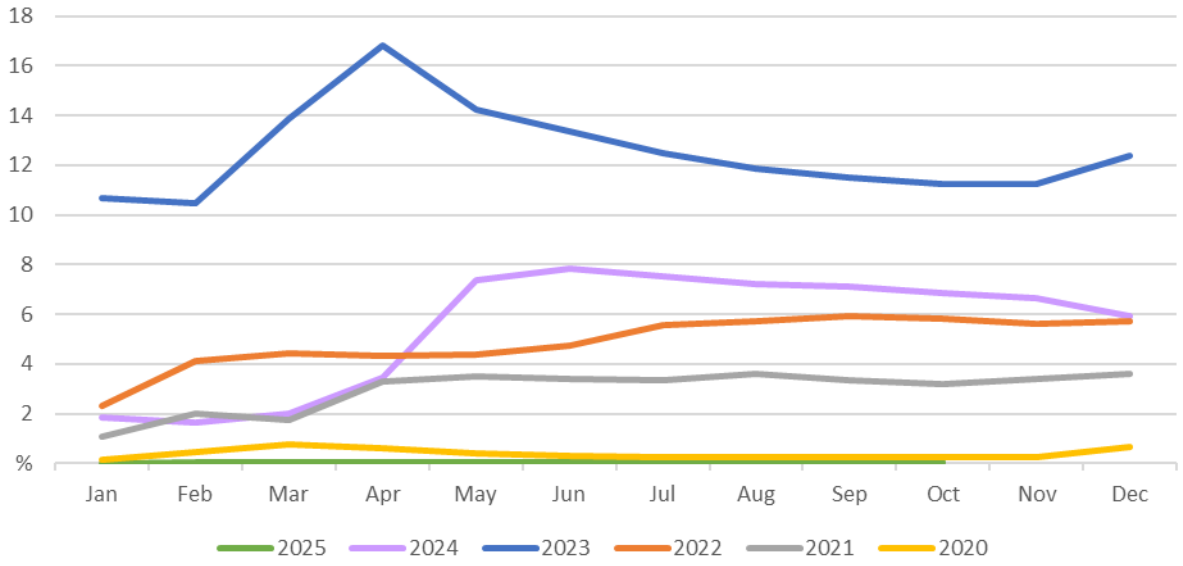


Figure 16: Western rock lobster processing, cumulative percentages by Year, Whole Raw



The combination of more product being exported frozen and more product sold into domestic markets had an influence in reducing overall average beach prices. The additional impost of ongoing higher supply chain costs further impacted the beach prices achieved by fishers through 2024, until the resumption of the direct live trade in late December saw the majority of production being once more directed to China and beach prices begin a recovery.

5.3 Changes in trade flows into China

The resumption of Australia's direct live trade into China has occurred in a similar time frame with two large shifts in the Chinese lobster market – record volumes of Vietnamese live rock lobster imports, and the imposition of a 25% tariff on Canadian clawed lobster that saw Canadian live imports drop sharply (2024: 24,887 tonnes from Canada; compared to 2025: 14,408 tonnes). Taken together, these factors have generated a very different import picture for the China market in 2025.

Live clawed lobster is no longer the highest volume lobster category imported into China:

- 2024: imports of 31,441 tonnes being 53% of total volume, worth USD771 million being 43% of total import value
- 2025: live clawed lobster imports of 23,089 tonnes being 34% of total volume, worth USD550 million being 25% of total import value

Most of the decline in live clawed volume is due to due to reductions in imports from Canada, which still dominates the market for live clawed lobster into China with double the volume of imports from the USA. Unit prices are very similar for both origins. USA volumes have increased from the low point of 2019, driven by a tense trade situation under the then-President, but have not recovered to the levels observed in 2017 and earlier when USA and Canada exports to China were essentially on par.

Live spiny lobster is now the highest volume category imported into China.

- 2024: imports of 19,153 tonnes being 33% of total lobster import volume, worth USD858 million being 48% of total lobster import value
- 2025: live spiny lobster imports of 38,092 tonnes being 56% of total lobster import volume, worth USD1,501 million being 61% of total lobster import value

The uptick in live spiny lobster volumes into China in 2025 has been driven by two main factors: the significant escalation of imports of lobster from Vietnam and to a lesser extent the return of Australian product into the import mix.

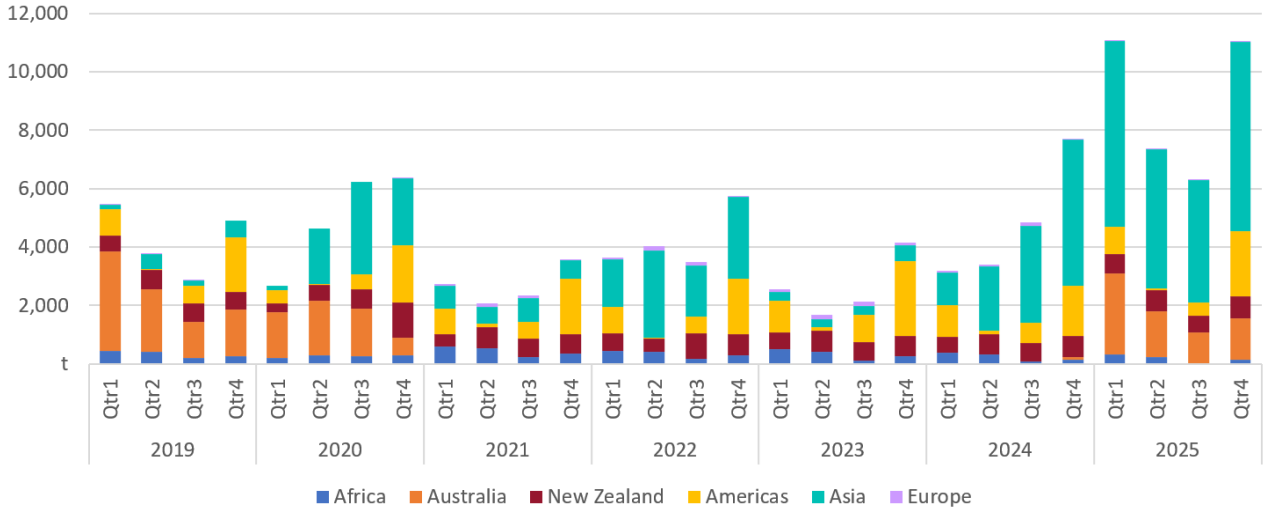
- Vietnamese live spiny lobster imports of 23,601 tonnes being 62% of live spiny lobster volume, worth USD764 million being 51% of live spiny lobster import value

- Australian live spiny lobster imports of 6,827 tonnes being 18% of live spiny lobster volume, worth USD380 million being 25% of live spiny lobster import value

Significantly, the average unit price of live spiny lobster imported into China has fallen from an average USD60/kg in 2023 to USD39/kg in 2025, reflecting the strong shift in import mix toward the Vietnamese product.

New Zealand continues to export almost all commercially caught rock lobster as live product to China – 2,716 tonnes in 2025 represented 99.54% of total NZ lobster export volume. (Another 12 tonnes - 0.43% of export volume - is sent live to Hong Kong). New Zealand product commands the highest unit price of all imported lobster into China – a pre-COVID average unit price around USD83/kg; USD101/kg in 2021, USD92/kg in 2022, USD95/kg in 2023, USD86/kg in 2024 and USD66/kg in 2025. This trajectory of prices demonstrates that even the New Zealand product's price has been affected by increased competition from lower priced live spiny lobster.

Figure 17: China imports of non-frozen spiny lobster, quantity by origin, quarterly



Sources: ABS; GACC; Stats NZ; WRL analysis

Figure 18: China imports of non-frozen spiny lobster, value by origin, quarterly

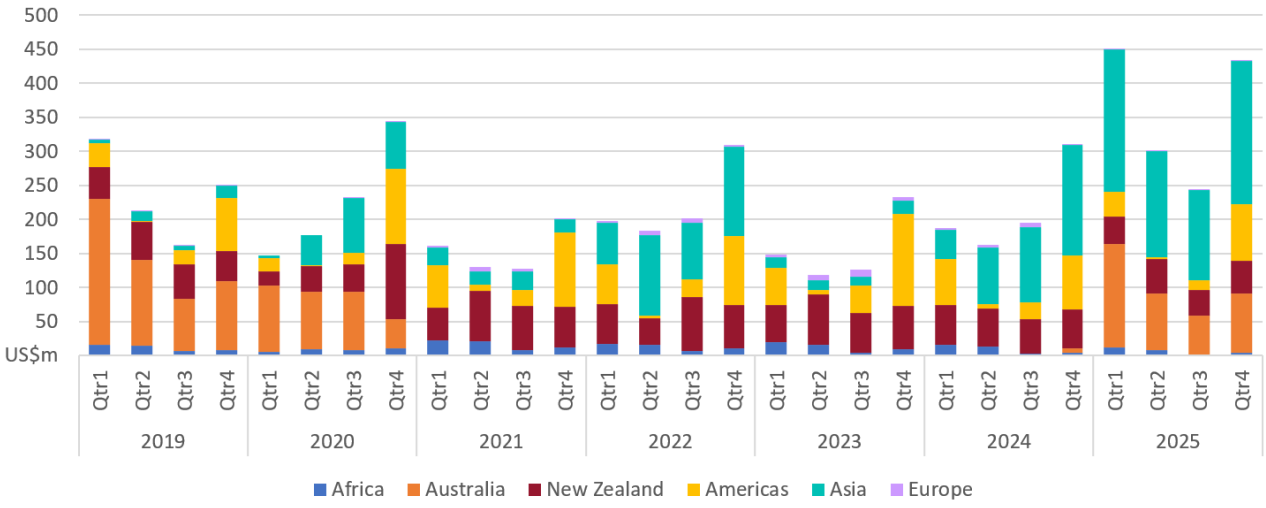
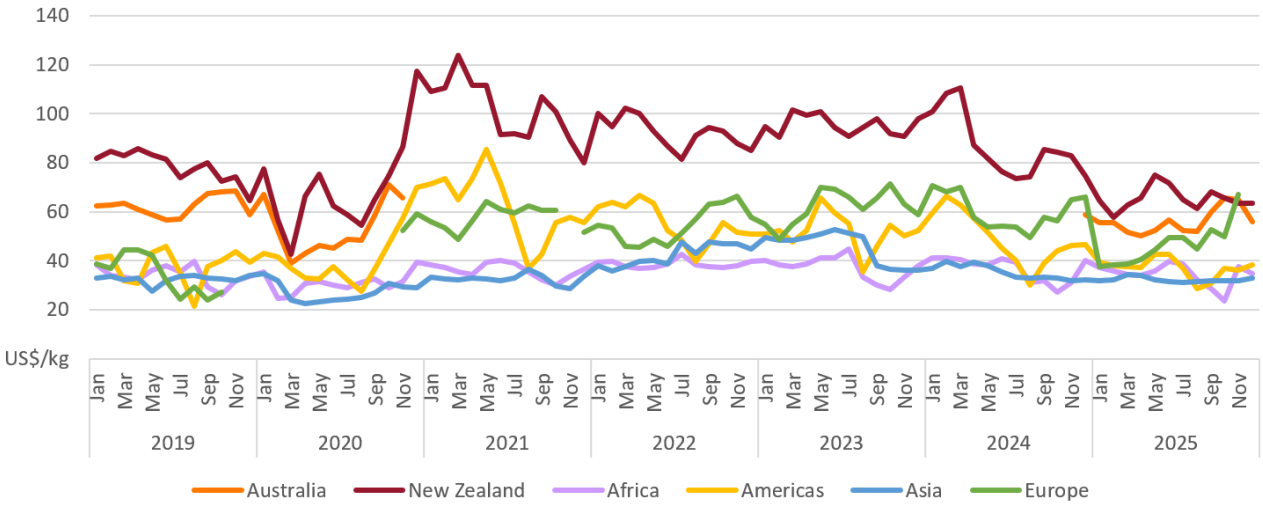


Figure 19: China imports of non-frozen spiny lobster, unit value by origin, quarterly



Sources: ABS; GACC; Stats NZ; WRL analysis

Volumes of **frozen** spiny lobster imports into China increased after COVID (2023: 5,335 tonnes with a value of USD103 million compared to 2019: 3,917 tonnes with a value of USD71 million). While priced significantly lower than live product, this market proved resilient in volume and in unit prices over the period with reportedly growing market acceptance from particular sectors of the market. However, the frozen sector's share of the spiny lobster market fell significantly in 2025, to 4,785 tonnes with a value of USD91 million.

5.3.1 Increasing competition from farmed lobster

The emergence of large volumes of product from Vietnam is worth particular attention and is noted in the aquaculture section of this document. China's GACC reported that imports of live spiny lobster from Vietnam increased more than ten-fold in 2020, to 6,452 tonnes, representing 32% of all live rock lobster imports in China that year – making Vietnam the largest supplier of rock lobster into China. China's imports of live spiny lobster from Vietnam reduced significantly in 2021 to 1,063 tonnes for the calendar year and again rose to 7,979 tonnes in 2022 (representing 47% of all live spiny lobster imports by volume and again placing Vietnam as the largest rock lobster supplier into China). Import unit prices in 2022 for Vietnamese live spiny lobster averaged USD43/kg – a marked increase over 2020, perhaps indicating an increasing level of market acceptance of the product. Volumes decreased again markedly in 2023 but have rebounded in 2024 and 2025. Indeed, China imported 23,601 tonnes of live spiny lobster from Vietnam in 2025, understood to be almost entirely aquacultured product, ranking Vietnam as by far China's largest live spiny lobster supplier representing over 60% of China's live spiny lobster imports.

Table: Imports of live spiny lobster into China from Vietnam (as recorded by GACC)

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
tonnes	6,451	1,063	7,979	270	9,890	23,601

With an average unit price of USD 32/kg in 2025 this Vietnamese product represented some of the lowest valued product imported into China. Despite this relatively low unit price for live spiny lobster, the trade value of USD $764 million in 2025 is around double the value of Australia's live trade (USD $380 million).

The assumption is that much of the Vietnamese trade is farmed (aquacultured) spiny lobster. The Vietnamese lobster aquaculture industry relies on wild-caught pueruli (juvenile lobsters) with a large percentage sourced from waters around Indonesia and exported to Vietnam by unofficial and unregulated channels. This represents a potential biosecurity risk given pueruli may be exposed to excessive stresses during transport, which can lead to expression of endemic viruses such as white spot. Furthermore, growout operations in Vietnam are typically located along a 200-kilometre strip of coastline, in relatively closed embayments with high densities of growout rafts and a high reliance on wild-caught feed, again leading to heightened risks related to water quality and disease – which manifests in high degrees of production volatility. This is the most likely cause for the "boom and bust" supply observed over the past several years.

5.3.2 Increasing competition from other high value crustaceans: Crab

Markets never stand still, and the live crab sector has emerged as a significant competitor for market share within the high value crustacean market in China, the highest volume and highest price market for live lobster. While South Korea and China have been the main consumers of significant volumes of live Russian snow and red king crab, the significant expansion in imports of Russian product into China can be expected to continue, driving large increases in the volume and value of that trade.

The value of live crab imports into China now approaches the value of live lobster imports. Between 2017 and 2025, Chinese live crab imports from Russia have increased in import volume (+30,000 tonnes) and value (+USD1,000 million).

In 2017, China imported:

- 23,445 tonnes of live lobster worth USD771 million (average unit price USD33/kg)
- 46,174 tonnes of live crab worth USD485 million (average unit price USD11/kg)
    - Of which 6,328 tonnes of live crab from Russia worth USD103 million (average unit price USD16/kg)

In 2025, China imported:

- 61,181 tonnes of live lobster worth USD2,050 million (average unit price USD33/kg)
- 115,341 tonnes of live crab worth USD1,847 million (average unit price USD16/kg)
    - Of which 40,234 tonnes of live crab from Russia worth USD1,130 million (average unit price USD28/kg)

Russian-origin live crab now achieves a similar price to live Vietnamese lobster, and higher price than American lobster, confirming its status as competing for the prestige consumer.

5.4 Alternative international markets for Western Rock Lobster

China, the most significant market for Australia's Ornate, Southern and Western Rock Lobster, reduced market access in November 2020. In order to address the industry's vulnerability to a single dominant customer, alternative markets needed to be developed. Processors and marketers launched investigations into export markets that are known to have taken reasonable volumes of lobster in the past. WRL developed an information package outlining the key potential markets prospectively capable of absorbing the expected lobster supply. The information pack characterizes each market in terms of the grade and type of lobster preferred, the form (cooked or live) and the typical unit prices paid over the past 20 years. WRL analysed available trade data with the aim being to highlight major alternative final markets and the volume and form of product they have historically preferred.

The most significant exports of Western Rock Lobster before 2010 were to Japan, United States of America, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam, Hong Kong and Macau and China. The most important fact to note is that while the first 5 of these may have been significant markets in the past, none accounted for meaningful volumes of Western Rock Lobster after the mid 2010's as the trade shifted to be almost entirely directed to China.

The historical trade figures for Vietnam, Hong Kong and Macau need to be treated with some circumspection because these destinations were, in the past, mostly staging destinations for product whose final destination was mainland China. The introduction of the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement brought about the reduction and eventual cessation of this indirect trade, as lobster were imported directly into China. This was set against the backdrop of China ever-increasingly being the final destination for Western Rock Lobster exports.

Since 2010 most product has been exported live, reflecting the increasing reliance on China as the major export destination. Before this time, "non-viable" product (whole cooked and raw frozen, and frozen tails), were the highest volume products exported. Of note, live product attracts a significant premium in particular markets, while non-viable product tends to command relatively lower prices.

Japan – has matured from once showing a preference for live product to now showing a preference for frozen or chilled product. Japan's total import of live rock lobster declined from 2,300 tonnes in 2002 to under 100 tonnes per year from 2018. Japan's imports of Australian live rock lobster declined below 200 tonnes per year in 2009 and have been less than 50 tonnes per year since 2014. In 2023 Japan imported 105 tonnes of frozen lobster and 110 tonnes of live lobster from Australia (this live product represented 96% of live spiny imports in Japan in 2023). While frozen and chilled rock lobster is still a reasonably-sized market in Japan at around 1300

tonnes per year in recent times, the unit value commanded by Australian product is not comparable with live exports into China, at USD 40 to USD 50 per kg.

Taiwan – similar to Japan, has evolved from a market with a preference for live product to now show a preference for frozen product. Of the small amount of non-frozen rock lobster imported, almost all was of Indonesian origin until 2021, at which point large volumes of Australian product entered the market at a reasonably consistent USD33/kg. Volumes have tapered off from the high of 2022, with 458 tonnes imported from Australia in 2024 to July. Taiwan's demand for frozen spiny lobster has increasingly been met by product of Caribbean origin, at prices typically USD5/kg less than Australian frozen product.

USA – as frozen product, Australian rock lobster competes in the same space as Caribbean spiny rock lobster. Rock lobster imports into the USA have declined over time, from 10,000+ tonnes per year in the late 2000's to around 7,000 tonnes per year in the late 2010's. Most is imported from the Caribbean (Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, Bahamas etc) and imports from these locations have in aggregate remained steady over the years. Imports from Australia declined over this period, from around 1,500 tonnes per year in the late 2010's to under 100 tonnes per year pre-COVID. It is conceivable that trade from the Caribbean may redirect into China, either as frozen or, as supply chains grow more sophisticated, as live product. This appears to have created some room for Australian lobster to compete in the USA market, with 206 tonnes exported in 2022 and 187 tonnes in 2023.

South Korea – for cultural reasons has never shown an affinity for spiny lobster. Has a preference for clawed lobster from the USA and Canada with some premium for live lobster. Exports of Australian spiny lobster to South Korea in 2021 totalled 67 tonnes with an export value of A$2.9m, or a unit value of A$43/kg – almost all of this was live product from Western Australia. Australian export volumes to Korea in 2022 and 2023 were lower than the 2021 figure.

Mexico - As an example of efforts to increase market access for Australian product to new markets, the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment negotiated new market access with Mexico for the export of frozen lobsters from Australia to Mexico. As noted above, since the onset of trade disruptions between China and Australia, Mexico increased export volumes of high value live product to China. In essence, then, access to the Mexican market means that Australian frozen lobster may act to fill the gap in Mexico's local supply created by increased exports.

Notwithstanding the existence of alternative markets to the China live export trade, it is clear that these markets have limited ability to accept any meaningful volume of Australian product, in addition to being lower priced markets. Developing these alternative markets to accept larger volumes or higher prices will necessarily be a longer-term endeavour, entailing considerable costs. With access to the direct China trade reinstated, it appears that Australian traders and marketers have not hesitated to re-commit a sizeable proportion of product into a single market as was the case before trade disruptions.

5.5 Changes to trade flows of Australian Lobster

Analysis of Australian export trade shows that, in the absence of a direct live export market to China from late 2020 until the end of 2024, all states experienced reductions in export volumes and export revenue. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that exports in during that time were sent to a much wider array of countries than in 2019, albeit at significantly lower unit prices.

With the resumption of the live trade to China, Australian lobster has once again largely been imported to China.

Total rock lobster export volumes and value for Australia overall in 2025 have recovered to be similar to pre-COVID times. In 2019 Australia exported 8,923 tonnes with an export value of AUD762 million) compared to 2025 (9,747 tonnes with an export value of AUD780 million).

A summary of Australian state export statistics follows:

- Total export volumes of **western rock lobster** from **Western Australia** appear to have recovered to pre-COVID levels, although export unit value is lower:
    - 2019 - 6,162 tonnes with an export value of AUD488 million; compare to
    - 2025 - 6,930 tonnes with an export value of AUD507 million.

- Total export volumes and value of **southern rock lobster** from **South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania** show a similar trend:

    - 2019 - 2,138 tonnes with an export value of AUD227 million; compare to
    - 2025 – 2,292 tonnes with an export value of AUD235 million.

- However, total export volumes and value of **tropical rock lobster** from **Queensland** have not recovered in either volume or value:

    - 2019 - 492 tonnes with an export value of AUD38 million; compare to
    - 2025 - 365 tonnes with an export value of AUD24 million.

Live exports continue to dominate Australia's lobster trade. In 2025, live, fresh or chilled exports represented 9,314 tonnes of a total 9,747 tonnes exported, or 96% of lobster exported from Australia.

Noting that prior to 2020 about 99% of Australian lobster exports were sent live, 2025 live exports represented:

- 95% of Western Australia lobster exports – 6,612 tonnes live, fresh or chilled of a total 6,930 tonnes
- 99+% of (South Australia + Victoria + Tasmania) lobster exports – 2,287 tonnes live, fresh or chilled of a total 2,292 tonnes
- 75% of Queensland lobster exports - 364 tonnes live, fresh or chilled of a total 484 tonnes

The major destinations in 2025 for the 8,383 tonnes of **live, fresh or chilled** product exported from Australia (noting that these figures do not include re-export volumes) were:

- China – 4,702 tonnes of WRL; 2,055 tonnes of SRL
- Hong Kong – 1013 tonnes of Western Rock Lobster; 186 tonnes of Southern Rock Lobster; 162 tonnes of Tropical Rock Lobster
- Taiwan – 391 tonnes of WRL; 2 tonnes of SRL; 9 tonnes of TRL
- Singapore – 176 tonnes of WRL, 31 tonnes of SRL, 10 tonnes of TRL
- Vietnam – 82 tonnes of WRL; 2 tonnes of SRL; 69 tonnes of TRL
- Japan – 103 tonnes of WRL
- Malaysia - 58 tonnes of WRL
- Thailand - 29 tonnes of WRL; 49 tonnes of TRL

Frozen and chilled exports from Australia have declined considerably compared to the 2020-2024 period and are now at similar levels to 2019. Major destinations in 2025 YTD for the 378 tonnes of frozen and chilled product exported from Australia (of which 284 tonnes came from Western Australia) included:

- USA - 116 tonnes - including 88 tonnes of WRL
- China – 76 tonnes – including 70 tonnes of WRL
- Taiwan - 45 tonnes - including 39 tonnes of WRL
- Japan – 44 tonnes of WRL - - including 41 tonnes of WRL

Volumes of frozen and chilled product recorded entering China have experienced a generally increasing trend - until 2025, when China imported significantly less frozen spiny and American lobster, and significantly more relatively affordable live Vietnamese lobster. In the longer term the proportion of frozen product imported could be expected to grow as more sophisticated consumers gain trust in China's increasingly sophisticated cold-supply chain.

5.6 Supplies of Western Rock Lobster for the domestic market

The disruption of trade with China in late 2020 resulted in an urgent focus on supplying Western Rock Lobster for local/domestic consumption (in addition to the pursuit of alternative international markets). Thankfully for industry, the immediate timing of this pivot to domestic markets somewhat aligned with the seasonal increase in demand leading into Christmas and the summer holiday period.

Processors with their own retailing operations significantly lowered prices and increased sales, and there has been an observed increase in the volume of Western Rock Lobster being directed to local/domestic consumers through wholesale channels.[7] The commercial sector also leant on domestic market demand to absorb this seasonal supply, reportedly processing 18% to 25% of monthly production for the domestic market during the Decembers of 2021, 2022 and 2023. Most was processed as cooked product. Indications are that an additional 25%-30% of December processing in these years was also cooked and sent to east coast markets. This translates to perhaps half of December production being consigned to the Australian market each year. This significantly (though ephemerally) increases the presence of Western Rock Lobster in the domestic market beyond Western Australia, inevitably competing with east-coast product on its home territory. Notably, since the disruption to the China trade, major Australian supermarkets have offered cooked Western Rock Lobsters in the <400-gram weight range at $20-$24 per piece during the holiday season.

To support an increase in local supplies and availability, and in recognition of existing levels of community engagement and demand, the limit applying to the Back of Boat sales mechanism was increased from 100 to 200 lobsters (per trip) for the period between mid-December 2020 and the end of January 2021. This daily limit was further doubled, to 400 lobsters per trip, for the corresponding period the following year and has subsequently been increased to 999 lobsters. Back of Boat sales generally require a buyer to "pre-book" their purchase with a particular fisher. Local demand is concentrated in the Christmas holiday period - December is by far the peak sales month and accounts for more than half of annual Back of Boat sales. Pricing is a matter for the individual fisher and customer, with reports suggesting typical prices a premium to fishers of $10/kg or more compared to prevailing beach prices over recent Christmas periods. Reported Back of Boat sales over the past five Decembers represented between 1.8% and 2.4% of landings in those months.

Outside of the Christmas holiday season, domestic demand within Western Australia and within the rest of Australia is relatively muted, leading to low domestic sales whether from Back of Boat or through commercial channels. Expectations need to be realistic when it comes to the willingness or ability of domestic markets to support meaningful volumes of Western Rock Lobster consumption, at prices competitive with export markets. There is no doubt that many more Australians have taken the opportunity to try Western Rock Lobster, and the profile of Western Rock Lobster has been increased as a result of the Back of Boat initiative. However the seasonality, price sensitivity and size of the domestic market are such that the long-term outlook of industry will continue to be dictated by developments in international markets.

[7] It should be noted that the pivot to domestic markets presented a challenge to processors in regards the requirement for a different (i.e. more diversified) product mix, and the need to manage the distribution of product in a changed market environment. Future required investment, should the current focus on domestic markets continue, will ultimately affect industry as a whole.

Outlook for Western Rock Lobster markets

Market diversification is unlikely to improve beach prices markedly over current levels, as the prices achieved in alternative markets are significantly lower than those prevailing in China for high-quality, live rock lobster. In this sense, market diversification can be thought of as a form of insurance, offsetting risks by imposing costs – a known lower set of prices. New Zealand's lobster industry appears to believe that the costs of market diversification outweigh the benefits – for years almost all of New Zealand's live exports have been sent to the China market. And the trade flows of Australian lobster (western and southern rock) since the resumption of the direct China trade indicate that Australian lobster exporters' beliefs are in line with this strategy.

Beach prices for western rock lobster are at close to pre-COVID levels, as the main proportion of production is once again exported live and direct to China. A commercial industry quota under the previous high of 7.3 million kilograms is likely to prove an additional insurance against erosions in beach prices.

Reliance on a single market that is targeted by every other major lobster exporter implies an inherent vulnerability to competitive pressure. That pressure is likely to be most significant from the emerging aquaculture sector, which supplied more live spiny lobster into China's markets in the period mid-2024 to late 2025 than the wild catch sector. High value live crab imports provide additional competition for tank and banquet table space.

Further uncertainty resides in exchange rates and trade policy settings. The foreign exchange rate outlook is mixed. Upward risk includes the eventuality that the Reserve Bank of Australia hikes interest rates while the US Fed cuts. Downward risks include weak Chinese growth and an escalation of China-US trade tensions. And increased volatility in world trade associated with rising protectionism and rapid policy changes (see the 25% tariff on Canadian lobster announced March 2025 and to cease March 2026) can only enhance that single-market vulnerability.

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