ON Christmas Eve — an ideal time to bury dubious policy — Richard Colbeck, parliamentary secretary for agriculture, announced that the government would prevent fishing vessels longer than 130m from operating in Australian waters.

The government offered no rationale for its decision other than citing “widespread community concerns” and acknowledging “ill-founded anti-fishing campaigns by activist groups”.

Rationalisations for the action would include fears of overfishing and by-catch of non-targeted species. Overfishing has prompted many governments to introduce regulatory measures that prohibit more efficient means of harvesting fish including restricted boat lengths and prescriptions covering gear and engine size. The US used to require Bering Strait fishermen to work without engines.

Such controls, which suppress productivity, have largely been replaced by fishing quotas that vest ownership of the resources in individual, tradeable rights. This allows property rights to bring about efficiency. The rights owner has an incentive to catch and market the fish at lowest cost or to sell the rights to someone who offers a good price for the quota because they can fish more profitably.

But regulatory pressures are seldom far from the surface and increasingly supported by social media-savvy green groups. Specious claims about harm to seals and dolphins feature in the campaign against super-trawlers.

In response to this pressure, the government reverted to Luddism, saying it “consulted widely and accepts the legitimate concerns of many in the community, including those involved in recreational and commercial fishing”. Apparently this overturns the need for a regulation impact statement, which almost certainly would demonstrate that super-trawlers have no effect on fish catch, a trivial effect on throwbacks, cause negligible oceanic disturbance and have little impact on non-target species.

This issue has been brewing for years. Regulatory approval originally was given by the commonwealth fisheries management to the Abel Tasman (renamed the Margiris), one of the new class of factory super-trawlers. The fisheries management recognised that approval had no effect on the catch because it was already limited by a fixed quota. However, two years ago the Labor government, spooked by a campaign spearheaded by greens and supported by less competitive rival fishermen, overruled the decision and implemented a temporary ban in commonwealth waters. Then the Victorian Coalition government banned super-trawlers in the state’s coastal waters.

The federal government ban was implemented on the advice of its Department of Agriculture now in the hands of those who would restrain productivity. But it was not always so disposed. Only three years ago its research agency, the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences, warned: “The public responds to information disseminated by NGOs, and repeats questions of sustainability and concern over the practices of our fishing industry without necessarily knowing the full story.”

Fisheries management has been the subject of voluminous reports in recent years. All have doffed their hats to red-tape reduction. Commonwealth and state fishing ministers ritualistically

repeat these deregulatory bromides while investigating additional measures that impinge on the industry's activities.

Australia ranks 54th in terms of fish catch yet has the third most extensive coastline. Our poor performance owes much to regulatory restraints and, as a result, we are a net importer of fish.

We seem intent on further undermining our advantages. The latest measures will not buy off activists. Indeed, green front group Stop the Trawler Alliance has called for the ban to be extended to smaller factory trawlers, doubtless a staging post to a total ban on commercial fishing.

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