

Forest & Bird media release for immediate use – 29 September 2009

Forest & Bird warning over commercial seaweed harvest

Extending commercial harvesting of seaweed around most of the North Island coastline risks damage to the fragile coastal environment, Forest & Bird says.

Fisheries Minister Phil Heatley today announced that commercial harvesting of seaweed cast up on beaches, banned up till 2005 and till now limited to just some areas of the North Island, would now be permitted around most of the North Island coast.

Forest & Bird marine advocate Kirstie Knowles says opening up most of the coast to commercial harvest risked damaging vulnerable coastal habitats.

“Large-scale commercial harvesting of seaweed may have significant consequences for food chains, including those which support New Zealand’s fisheries.”

While beach-cast seaweed might appear to be dead, it actually forms a habitat in itself, supporting myriad forms of life, such as tiny crustaceans and micro-organisms, and is a source of food, shelter and nesting material for other marine and coastal species, including dotterels, pipits, gulls and other birds.

It also provides a stabilising effect, protecting beach sand from erosion and assisting formation of dunes. Seaweed is swept on and off beaches by waves and tides – when washed back into the sea it is an important habitat for young fish and is eaten by species such as paua and kina.

Forest & Bird is not opposed to members of the public collecting seaweed for their own use, but opposes extensive removal of seaweed by commercial operators, which could have a significant impact. If not tightly controlled, commercial exploitation could strip beaches of seaweed and machinery used to gather it could also damage the coastal environment.

Kirstie Knowles says the Government should at least ensure commercial harvesting is carefully managed to reduce the environmental risks. Environmental risk assessments should be required before harvesting can go ahead, including research into the impact of commercial harvest in each particular area.

“In some areas so much seaweed could wash up that it could support a sustainable level of harvest, but in other more vulnerable areas that would not be appropriate.”

The minister has promised a more conservative approach to areas considered ecologically sensitive, but harvesting will begin in other areas by the end of this month.

Because the harvest of seaweed is not part of New Zealand’s fisheries quota management system, there are no set limits on the amount that can be taken.

“Before harvest can take place, we need to have much greater certainty about the ecological impact of that harvest, and assurances that adequate environmental protection measures will be in place.”

ENDS

Contact: Kirstie Knowles, 021 426 984