

UNDEMOCRATIC COLLUSION OF INDUSTRY AND MINISTRY UNDERMINES SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

August 2008

Amateur fishers, customary fishing interests and environmentalists are appalled at the undemocratic collusion used by fishing industry representatives and Ministry of Fisheries officials to force proposals through parliament next week that will continue to deplete New Zealand's fisheries.

Non-commercial groups have slammed the speed of the changes to the fisheries laws without wider public consultation and the unhealthy focus by the Minister and Ministry on the fishing industry's needs and opinions to the detriment of the people.

Proposals to amend section 13 of the Fisheries Act 1996 have been rushed through the parliamentary process allowing only a handful of interest groups to comment on the amendment. The Primary Production Committee is due to make its recommendations next week prior to any new legislation being passed by mid-September.

The New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council, mid north iwi Ngapuhi and Ngati Whatua, and lobby group option4 have serious concerns that a 'quick-fix' solution is being applied to the primary sustainability measure available under the Fisheries Act 1996, section 13.

Under the joint banner of the Hokianga Accord, these non-commercial groups advised the Select Committee that the Minister of Fisheries would no longer be entitled to take a precautionary approach if fisheries information is unreliable or uncertain, if the proposed amendment is enacted.

Richard Baker, President of the New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council, explained, "Earlier this year the High Court ruled that current fisheries management practices promoted by the Ministry of Fisheries and the Minister were unlawful."

"The proposed amendment will legalise future Ministers making decisions focussed on maximum harvest strategies in fish stocks where there is inadequate information, rather than promoting the current purpose of the Act, which is to provide for the wellbeing of the people."

"While the amendment is being promoted as just a technical change nothing could be further from the truth," said Paul Haddon, the Ngapuhi spokesperson of the concerned non-commercial group Hokianga Accord.

"Currently the Minister is obliged to manage fisheries sustainably to enable people to provide for their social, economic and cultural wellbeing. This amendment will completely change that focus. Instead of ensuring enough fish are available for people to catch and put food on the table, the Minister will be forced to set the highest possible commercial catch levels. We do not want to be depleting our fisheries in this way, particularly with food prices being so high," continued Haddon.

A new subsection, s13(2A), has been developed by the Seafood Industry Council (SeaFIC), Te Ohu Kaimoana (TOKM) and MFish policy staff. This new subsection would authorise the Minister to set the highest, justifiable total catch limits with or without comprehensive or reliable information.

Essentially s13(2A) will lower the sustainability threshold and permit aggressive fishing strategies on stocks with poor information. Less than four percent of the 629 fish stocks in the quota management system have estimates of their maximum sustainable yield level.

Traditionally the Minister has used section 13 to manage most of these fish stocks. The joint Hokianga Accord submitters suggested alternatives for the Minister to both allow sustainable use of the fisheries while rebuilding depleted fisheries to abundant levels.

option4's spokesperson, Scott Macindoe, said yesterday, "Advocates for this amendment, including the Minister, are stressing the urgent need to amend section 13. What is the hurry? The only stocks that require Jim Anderton's approval by October are Orange Roughy and Bluenose. Interim decisions can easily be made for these fisheries or deferred until next year, as he has done for kahawai."

"Most importantly the public need to understand what is being proposed and have the opportunity to comment on any amendment. It seems there has been little thought given to the consequences of rushing such fundamental legislation through.

"The public treasure their fisheries and their democratic right to have a say in how our natural resources are managed. They will not relinquish their freedom to access such a healthy food source easily. This amendment does nothing to improve management; it will deny people their traditional right to feed themselves. As for shutting out the public and Maori non-commercial fishing interest, it is a disgrace to democracy that will surely have decision makers questioning the integrity of the Ministry that provides such advice," ended Macindoe.

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For more information:

- Web page www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries_Mgmt/section13.htm
- Website www.nzbgfc.org.nz New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council
- Website www.option4.co.nz option4 lobby group
- Website www.HokiangaAccord.co.nz Hokianga Accord, mid north iwi fisheries forum.