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FISHERIES MINISTRY MOTIVES QUESTIONED AMIDST SUSTAINABILITY RISKS

Non-commercial fishing representatives, both amateur and customary, are raising concerns about the Ministry of Fisheries' motives in rushing legislation through Parliament before the election.

They have also expressed concerns about the Ministry's amendment process. An exclusive group of industry, Treasury and Ministry officials developed the amendment without input from environmental and non-commercial groups.

A significant change to section 13 of the Fisheries Act 1996 has been proposed, which will legalise Ministry practices of setting the total allowable catch for all fish stocks without first accurately knowing how many fish there are in the water. This practice has been held illegal by the High Court.

The total allowable catch of a fish stock is the primary sustainability measure set before non-commercial interests are allowed for, and prior to deciding any commercial allocation.

Demands were made at a recent Hui of the mid north iwi fisheries forum, the Hokianga Accord, for a more open and democratic process before making such a significant change to the Act.

After the Hui Accord spokesperson Paul Haddon said, "Ministry staff were left in no doubt that our fisheries resources are for all New Zealanders, yet commercial overfishing has put fish stocks at serious risk. There must be proper consultation before any changes are made that will adversely affect the public's fishing interests. Non-commercial fishing representatives will not be shut out from any Ministry-driven proposals for change".

President of the NZ Big Game Fishing Council, Richard Baker, added, "All New Zealanders were promised rebuilds in severely depleted fisheries at the introduction of the quota management system in 1986. Twenty-two years later we are still waiting for fish numbers to improve. It is unacceptable that the Ministry and our politicians now want to legalise setting maximum harvest strategies with minimal information".

Scott Macindoe, spokesperson for option4, has further doubts. "Our major fish stocks, including the prized snapper, have suffered through the use of poor information. Future managers will find themselves under unrelenting pressure to set maximum commercial catch levels at the expense of the Minister's statutory obligation of managing fisheries to enable people to provide for their social and cultural wellbeing. All New Zealanders are entitled to have access to adequate size and numbers of fish. This will only occur if the Minister puts sustainability first."

Non-commercial representatives are determined to work together to ensure sustainability, increase public awareness of this issue and avoid international condemnation of fisheries management in New Zealand.

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 fisheries