

option4 Update #128

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Dodgy principles in proposed commercial crayfish increases

Conservation-minded recreational fishers could soon be served an unpalatable increase in commercial crayfish catch limits while their allowances remain stagnant. All non-commercial fishers should be wary of these developments because the principles being applied maybe foisted on an important fishery near you.

Doubling the commercial crayfish catch limit in Area 4, from Hawke Bay to Wellington, might gladden the Ministry of Commercial Fisheries and quota owners, but it is a major setback for recreational fishers who have conserved their catch to assist in a rebuild. Adding fuel to the controversy is the truncated consultation period, which ended on Friday 5th February.

The National Rock Lobster Management Group has proposed two options for Area 4 crayfish. 'Option 1' will see the total allowable commercial catch increasing from 266 tonnes to 465 tonnes, an annual increase of approximately 250,000 crayfish. 'Option 2' retains the status quo.

Under both options the allowances for fishing related mortality, customary and amateur fishers remains the same.

Non-commercial fishers have harboured serious concerns about crayfish sustainability for years. In 2009 the Minister of Fisheries reduced the Area 4 commercial catch limit because of these worries.

As a conservation measure and a gesture of goodwill, the NZ Sport Fishing Council (formerly NZ Big Game Fishing Council) regional clubs voluntarily agreed to reduce their daily crayfish catch from six to four.

Despite the amateur sector's contribution the national Management Group has advised that the proposed total allowable commercial catch (TACC) increase does not exceed the level in place before the 2009 reduction, so "therefore it is reasonable for the commercial sector to receive the full benefit of this TACC increase up to the point of the historical catch level (the previous TACC was 577 tonnes)".

Conveniently, the Management Group fails to mention that it was these excessive commercial catch limits that led to the depletion in the first instance. And no amount of massaging will alter the historic catch figures!

The Management Group does not propose changes to the non-commercial limits, both customary and recreational, "because best available information suggests they are not taking their current allowances and there is no new information available to recommend adjustments to the current allowances".

This is outrageous. On the one hand maximum commercial catch levels are being used as a tool to suppress non-commercial harvest of crayfish. On the other, there is no proposed increase because the allowances are not being (voluntarily) taken.

Likewise, there are no proposed allowance increases for Area 3, the troubled Gisborne cray-fishery.

The Fisheries Minister is legally obliged to ‘allow for’ our non-commercial fishing interests. These interests encompass far more than just what we harvest in a particular fishery, especially in a depleted fish stock.

The Minister must manage fisheries sustainably, at a level that enables people to provide for their social, economic and cultural well-being.

The effort to achieve both of these obligations has been under-whelming.

Another statutory requirement is consultation. Stipulating a seven-week timeframe over the four-week holiday period is not adequate consultation. By the time you read this Update the February submission deadline will be long-gone.

These proposals are contrary to the principles agreed to a decade ago, including “preventing fish conserved for recreational use being given to the commercial sector”.

A slight increase in Area 4 crayfish abundance does not validate such a massive windfall for quota owners.

There is depletion in the northeastern cray-fisheries.

Furthermore, there has been insufficient publicity about the proposals and non-commercial interests have been denied the opportunity to rebuild the cray-fisheries.

There is no legal or moral justification for the Minister to implement measures that take fish from the public to satiate the outright commercial greed of quota owners.