

# New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council

(Incorporated)

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## YELLOWFIN TUNA

### Background

1. Yellowfin tuna are a key target species in the Bay of Plenty over spring and summer. The population centres and holiday destinations in the Bay of Plenty have 10 gamefish clubs affiliated to the NZBGFC with a combined membership of 15,000. Recreational fishing charter boats work out of many of the ports, with the largest fleets in Tauranga and Whakatane. Many fishers from Auckland, Waikato and the volcanic plateau travel to the Bay of Plenty to enjoy marine recreation and catch big fish.
2. Yellowfin tuna are also a highly regarded component of the catch in blue water fishing grounds on both the east and west coasts of the North Island. They are fast, strong swimmers and can be a real test of an angler's skill. Yellowfin are excellent to eat whether fresh or smoked.
3. New Zealand seems to be on the edge of yellowfin tuna distribution with availability varying greatly from year to year. Some years they form a significant proportion of the catch of NZBGFC affiliated clubs. A large number of unrecorded yellowfin are kept for food or released in some seasons.
4. In the 2000-01 fishing season yellowfin tuna was officially included in the gamefish tag and release programme. This is a collaborative research project between MFish, NZBGFC and fishers. Prior to this recreational and commercial fishers were asked not to tag yellowfin. Overall about 1000 yellowfin have been tagged resulting in 9 recaptures, all from the southwest Pacific (Gamefish Tagging Newsletter, December 2003).

### **Yellowfin catch**

5. The commercial catch of yellowfin appears to be consistently below that of other tunas such as albacore, bigeye and southern bluefin. Even the highest year of combined Japanese and Korean catch was 190 tonnes (MFish IPP data) and their boats were setting a lot more hooks each year than the domestic fleet does now. What is unknown is the number of yellowfin released or discarded because they were considered too small to be marketed.
6. The highest catch for the domestic fleet was 193 tonnes in 1995-96 season (MFish IPP data). Since that time the number of domestic surface longliners has expanded and then last season contracted. It seems that fishing has been hard and now that the catch history years for allocation of tuna quota have been established many surface longline fishers have left the fishery. We have also heard from several fishers who intend to switch fisheries as soon as tuna and swordfish enter the QMS. They do not want to buy swordfish and shark quota and pay the higher compliance costs that come with the QMS.
7. Surface longlining is a high risk fishery. It only takes one bad season to put a large number of owners in financial trouble, especially if they have borrowed to get into the fishery. An Australian report on swordfish concludes "*An important lesson from this review is the need to put into place a comprehensive suite of mechanisms to control fishing effort before geographical expansion and overcapitalisation commence.*" There has been no effort controls so far for domestic fishers in New Zealand. It is our view however, that the commercial fleet will be smaller next season than in the last 5 years.
8. Yellowfin are an important component of recreational catch but our catch is more variable than reported commercial landings. We are far more dependant on yellowfin arriving and staying in accessible waters. The best seasons have been when yellowfin stay in the Bay of Plenty and chase baitfish into 'meat balls' on the surface. When marlin fishers switched from slow trolling skip baits to lure fishing at higher speeds, around 1990, their bycatch of yellowfin increased.
9. Some years yellowfin represent a significant proportion of recorded catch by gamefish clubs. For example in the 1996-97 season 27 clubs reported weighing a total of 5282 fish of all species, 44% of these (2325) were yellowfin. The average weight for the Bay of Islands Swordfish Club was 24.8 kg that year. NZBGFC clubs generally have a rule that yellowfin must exceed line weight or 15 kg to be accepted into the records. Assuming a conservative average weight of 20 kg, the reported catch would be about 46.5 tonnes that season. A large number of yellowfin caught by non-members or smaller than 15kg or would have gone unreported that season.

### **International obligations**

10. The MFish proposal suggests that a new or exploratory fishery for bigeye and yellowfin could be developed in the Kermadec area. New Zealand is a signatory to the FAO 'Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishers'. The Code states that: "*In the case of new or exploratory fisheries, States should adopt as soon as possible cautious conservation and management measures, including, inter alia, catch limits and effort limits. Such measures should remain in force until there are sufficient data to allow assessment of the impact of the fisheries on the long-term sustainability of the stocks, whereupon conservation and management measures based on that assessment should be implemented. The latter measures should, if appropriate, allow for the gradual development of the fisheries*" MFish has allowed the rapid expansion of the surface longline fishery in the late 1990s and is now asking stakeholders to support issuing quotas in excess of the maximum catch.
  
11. The IPP also mentions "*international obligations to exercise reasonable restraint in the development of HMS*" (highly migratory species). This relates to resolutions passed by the Preparatory Conference for the Commission for the Conservation of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific. How can New Zealand ask other countries to show restraint in the development of their HMS species when it has been promoting the unconstrained expansion of tuna fisheries (except southern bluefin) and allowed the illegal expansion of the swordfish target fishery. The MFish proposal to set the TACC at 150% of the best reported catch is inconsistent with these obligations.

### **Conflict between commercial and non-commercial users**

12. There is potential for conflict in areas where longline fishing overlaps with sport fishing. This area of conflict is not something the QMS can fix. Voluntary agreements have been tried in the past but have failed as a flood of new entrants joined the commercial fishery in the 1990s. Recreational fishers have complained of having to fish around a number of longlines in the eastern Bay of Plenty in years when yellowfin were around (Bert Lee, Charter Skipper, pers comm). A more enforceable area separation is required as entry to the QMS will make yellowfin a longline target species.
  
13. There is also the issue of how many yellowfin are intercepted by New Zealand surface longliners before they reach the Bay of Plenty. Expanding surface longlining in the Kermadec fisheries management area as suggested in the IPP will result in many more yellowfin being

intercepted on their migration to New Zealand and fewer fish reaching the coastal waters.

14. The IPP acknowledges that there is potential for spatial conflict in this fishery unless it is managed (Para 17). We agree, as it has occurred in some seasons already. However the only solution alluded to in the IPP is "*the yellowfin fishery may require inter-sectorial spatial agreement if further expansion in commercial fishing is to occur*". This however is a totally inadequate response given that MFish is proposing a significant expansion in the fishery.
15. NZBGFC oppose the 263 tonne TACC as this will allow a significant expansion in the commercial yellowfin fishery prior to any consideration of the conflict with non-commercial fishery. The highest annual commercial catch in the last 5 years was 175 tonnes, however the average annual catch over the last 5 years was 100 tonnes and the average yellowfin catch over the last 3 years (as used in the shark catch histories) is 76 tonnes. Therefore MFish is proposing a 160% increase over the 5 year average catch, or a 250% increase in the average catch over the last 3 years, and only when commercial interests want to increase their catch still further would some form of spatial agreement be considered.
16. There are quite adequate mechanisms in the QMS to allow for the expansion of new or developing fisheries. Firstly, there is provision under Section 14 of the Act for an in season increase to the TAC if the abundance of yellowfin suggests more may be taken. Secondly an Adaptive Management Programme could be used to provide for the expansion in new and developing fisheries while making provision for data collection, other users and environmental impacts. Thirdly increases in TACC can be considered when they are required. There is no need to sideline other management considerations indefinitely by setting a TACC that is far higher than can be taken by the restructured domestic fleet.
17. The commercial sector should think carefully about how much quota they want issued. If there is an oversupply of tuna quota (say double what they are likely to catch) there will be very weak demand for the purchase or lease of that quota. This may suit the big companies who could gain control of this fishery at bargain basement prices. It will be the small independent fishers who need to sell up and exit the fishery that will loose out, yet again. Is it the Ministry's intent to drive down the value of yellowfin and bigeye quota?

18. Eventually MFish may be forced to allow foreign licensed vessels access to northern New Zealand if yellowfin and bigeye quota remain significantly under-caught.
19. The recreational sector are becoming increasingly frustrated that MFish continue to promote the expansion of the surface longline fishery and only pay lip service to our concerns. We have been told repeatedly that we would have to wait for the introduction of tuna and swordfish into the QMS before other management measures would be considered. The excessive allocation of commercial quota in this fishery will allow the fishing industry to ignore our concerns for the next 10 years or so until '*further expansion in commercial fishing*' is required.

### Summary

20. The main points of the NZBGFC submission on Yellowfin tuna are as follows:
  - Yellowfin tuna is an important component of the recreational catch for deep sea anglers and is the major target species in the Bay of Plenty.
  - The Bay of Plenty attracts fishers from a wide population base in the upper North Island and tourists from around the world.
  - The availability of yellowfin to recreational fishers varies from season to season and is reliant on fish being able to reach accessible areas.
  - There are reports of spatial competition and gear conflict between recreational fishers and commercial longliners in good yellowfin seasons.
  - NZBGFC clubs recorded 2325 yellowfin in 1996-97. Assuming an average weight of 20 kg that is 46.5 tonnes. Fish that were smaller than 15 kg or caught by non members would increase this total significantly.
  - **The Minister must allow more than 30 tonnes for recreational yellowfin catch in good years.**
  - New Zealand needs to exercise reasonable restraint in the expansion of HMS fisheries to meet its international obligations.
  - The TACC proposed by MFish of 263 tonnes is a 163% increase in the average catch over the last 5 years.
  - The number of domestic vessels in this fishery is declining and will go lower.
  - Setting the TACC too high will drive down the value of tuna quota, shift control to the big companies or eventually lead to pressure to allow access to foreign licence vessels again.
  - Setting an excessive TACC will mean that the issue of spatial conflict with recreational fishers can be sidelined until further expansion of the commercial fishery is planned.

- There are adequate provisions for in season adjustments to TACC and the development of new and exploratory fisheries that will allow controlled growth from a lower starting point.
- NZBGFC submit that the **TACC for yellowfin tuna should be set at 193 tonnes** which is the maximum historic catch by domestic vessels from the 1995-96 season
- **Increases in commercial swordfish and tuna landings should be dealt with using the Adaptive Management Programme.**
- The AMP would make provision for data collection, other sectors and environmental impacts.