

option4 Update #139

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Squealers, dreamers, and kahawai dealers

It's decided. Phil Heatley, the Minister of Fisheries has buckled under pressure and announced that nothing will change in most kahawai management areas, despite the unambiguous message from the public to reduce commercial fishing to bycatch levels only.

For people who access Area 1, the country's largest kahawai fishery, the news is even worse. Overall non-commercial allowances have been slashed by up to 60% while the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) remains.

This decision for KAH 1 applies between North and East Cape and takes in the Hauraki Gulf, where research shows it was taking up to eight hours to catch a single kahawai.

Given these appalling catch rates it is not surprising that recreational and customary fishers reacted strongly to the announcement made on 29 September and applicable from 1 October 2010.

Phil Heatley and his Cabinet colleagues have guaranteed that commercial interests, with their bulk-harvest purse seiners, are now the major stakeholder in this important food fishery. The first time this has occurred since kahawai entered the quota management system in 2004.

In Heatley's opinion this decision is merely a "technical adjustment" and nothing will change on the water.

He was referring to bag limits and regulations, but his statement could easily be applied to kahawai abundance levels. It is a major concern that kahawai numbers will not increase in the near future.

One difficulty is that non-commercial fishers, both customary and recreational, predominantly talk in numbers of fish. Conversely MFish and industry refer to biomass, the assumed overall weight of fish in the water.

The process used to determine fish stock biomass levels is highly speculative and based on a raft of assumptions that non-commercial interests have repeatedly rejected.

Even NIWA's chief fisheries scientist, John McKoy, recently conceded limited knowledge about fish population sizes, sustainable catch levels and that much of the research is guesswork.

Notwithstanding this uncertainty, MFish estimate current kahawai biomass in Area 1 is around 45% of its virgin, unfished state. By 2028 MFish project biomass will be increased by about 15% from current levels, to around 52% of virgin biomass. But who of us will know?

There is one certainty. Your eyewitness accounts of kahawai work-ups and the stories of schooling masses, told to you by your dad and granddad, must have been a dream. Wake up people!

This decision flies in the face of repeated calls for 'more fish in the water'.

In kowtowing to both MFish and commercials the Minister has contradicted his own government's Fisheries 2030 policy, of maximising the value of New Zealand's fisheries. Value is not only economic return; it encompasses social and cultural aspects too.

Heatley has accepted that KAH 1 commercial catch limits could not be reduced by 215 tonne because the potential loss of \$230,050 per annum was too high. For whom we ask?

In the Final Advice Paper to the Minister MFish discuss the implications of the various management options available. They make reference to the social, economic and cultural 'factors' associated with each option, as if 'factors' are a frozen carcass that can be plucked from a West Australian crayfish pot.

Truth is, the only ones being plucked by this decision are all those New Zealanders who value the 'people's fish' for more than just their bait or petfood qualities.

Kahawai are priceless, and for our kid's sake we want them back!

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