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Proportional shares eat into your fishing future

Plans to reform public fishing and representation have been released for discussion, one by a South Island trio and another by the NZ Recreational Fishing Council. Both anticipate forming a new national representative organisation with statutory powers, enabling this entity to charge all fishers an annual stewardship fee aka licence, which could be as much as \$50.

A restructure of recreational fishing rights will provide the fishing industry and the government the prime opportunity to promote changing our current recreational allowances to a strict, proportional share of the available catch.

Proportional shares means that the commercial and non-commercial sectors will be allocated an explicit portion of the total allowable catch, and the new organisation will be tasked with managing total recreational harvest within that limit.

If the initial allocations for recreational interests are later found to be inadequate then significant cuts to individual bag limits seem inevitable, because commercial quota owners will jealously guard their portion of the allowable catch.

Penalties for excess catch

Currently commercial and amateur fishing rights are quite different. Individual commercial fishers who take more than their share of the total allowable commercial catch have to land that catch and pay the “deemed” value as a penalty.

Non-commercial interests, customary and recreational, are not strictly limited by the quota management system in any single year. The allowances are usually estimated as a longer term average catch, as total amateur harvest can be quite variable. Regulations apply, but no individual or organisation incurs penalties if the overall allowances are exceeded.

Proportional share equals privatisation

Accepting a proportional share of the TAC will shoehorn the public’s fishing interests into the quota management system, an economic model for managing a precious natural resource which sees catching rights going to the highest bidder. Even with a few safeguards for the public this will complete the privatisation of New Zealand’s fisheries, and eradicate the last of the common law rights of access to our marine resources.

Commercial interests will benefit most from this privatisation because their quota shares would change from a variable shareholding, subject to environmental and public needs, to being a fixed proportion of the total fishery, irrespective of abundance. The Holy Grail for quota owners.

Prized public fishing

The reform proponents postulate that amateur fishers are losing ground to commercial and Maori interests, and that establishing a statutory body and licencing will lead to better fishing conditions for the public.

This talk of a weak recreational fishing right was exactly the excuse used for reform when the Ministry of Fisheries and NZRFC developed the Soundings proposals 11 years ago. The public saw through that proportional allocation model and rejected it outright.

A vast majority of recreational fishers still strongly oppose licencing and further amateur fishing restrictions just so commercial interests can be preserved.

Our recreational fishing rights are as strong as the people willing to stand up and defend them.

Any acceptance of proportional shares would be contrary to the hard-fought Supreme Court kahawai ruling, which recognised that the Minister has discretion to manage fisheries for the benefit of non-commercial fishers if he chooses.

So after 11 years of battles neither the reform proponents nor the government should mistakenly assume the public will forego their fishing freedom and accept proportional shares in New Zealand's fisheries.

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