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This is an introduction to Paper Four, "Defining the Target Biomass", offered to the Minister of Fisheries in The People's Submission, - as a solution to achieving abundant fisheries.

Using the QMS to achieve abundant fisheries

In 1986 the quota management system (QMS) was introduced in response to decades of unsustainable commercial fishing. The intention was to enhance New Zealand's depleted coastal fisheries and maintain viable commercial catches.

Ten years later the Fisheries Act 1996 was passed, including "sustainability" provisions based on environmental and information principles to achieve its purpose - ensuring abundance for future generations while enabling people "to provide for their social, economic and cultural wellbeing".

Current management

Section 13 of the Act directs the Minister of Fisheries to set a total allowable catch (TAC) for each stock at a level that moves the fishery toward a size at or above the biomass that produces the maximum sustainable yield (Bmsy).

The danger is that often there is insufficient known about a fish species to accurately set TACs.

Knowledge of the population is vital, e.g. breeding, longevity etc. If that detail is unknown, then there is a real risk of overfishing and mismanagement such as with the orange roughy.

In addition, any pressure by powerful fishing industry lobbyists on MFish may aggravate the overfishing.

Non-commercial fishers are usually the first to notice the impact of overfishing. Falling numbers and smaller fish due to prime breeding stocks being plundered are the initial signs.

MFish has clearly failed in its obligations to the sustainability provisions of the Act, which requires management "to provide for (the public's) social, economic and cultural wellbeing".

Consequently, all New Zealanders are being deprived the opportunity to exercise their non-commercial right to fish and provide for their wellbeing.

Lack of fisheries rebuild

Despite the QMS being touted as a 'world leading fisheries management regime' it has often failed. Many key inshore fisheries have not recovered from overfishing. Other fisheries such as orange roughy and hoki have been plundered to a state of collapse.

The failure of MFish to be conservative, wise and prudent has been a major factor in fisheries failures.

In addition, the QMS gives a property right to a public resource. This culture is fundamentally flawed. Any fishery should not belong to a private company through its quota; it should be regarded first and foremost as public property.

The private “property right” culture is further aggravated by the tradeable aspect. Powerful, moneyed companies will badger small commercial fishermen to sell quota. In this way a company accumulates quota and begins to dominate the resource.

The bigger share of the quota, gives greater power and muscle to influence a weak Ministry. This causes unnecessary tension between fisheries managers, corporate companies, smaller commercial operators and non-commercial interests, and seriously undermines the sustainability intentions and provisions of the Act.

Practical approaches and solutions are too often not used. For example, in the gurnard fishery current commercial fishing methods are capturing fish less than 28cm. The return on fish this small can be as low as seven cents a kilo. The answer seems obvious. An increase in mesh size and the use of square mesh cod ends would leave those juveniles in the water - a far better outcome for both the health of the fishery and future generations.

Target biomass

A key aim of the Act is to ensure the number of fish (termed biomass) never falls below the critical level where overfishing starts.

The obvious solution to enhancing and rebuilding many of our fisheries is to set a higher target biomass (i.e. more fish) to achieve the Act's purpose.

A larger biomass would mean more fish in the water, higher catch rates for all fishers and would ensure the critical line of overfishing is never approached. To achieve this the target biomass as prescribed by the Act - at or above Bmsy - must be applied correctly, meaning Bmsy should be the minimum target, not the *actual* target.

Then, the intention of the Act, to provide abundant fisheries for all New Zealanders would be achieved. Deliberately setting higher target biomass levels will result in:

1. Avoidance of overfishing and ensuring fisheries are sustainable and well managed.
2. Improved catch per unit of effort (CPUE) through shorter trips.
3. Less trawling due to improved CPUE thus minimising environmental impacts.
4. Better quality and value of fish through increased size.
5. Less juvenile mortality and improved yield due to a greater proportion of legal-sized fish in the fisheries.
6. Better delivery of the Crown's obligations to “allow for” customary and recreational fishing interests.
7. Reduced tension between fishing sectors.

An abundance of fish to provide for improved recreational fishing was a foundation principle upon which the QMS was built. It is now time for both our elected government and its administrators to deliver on those promises.

Further details on how the target biomass can be achieved are online at <http://www.option4.co.nz/sharedfisheries/peoplesubmission.htm>