

Crayfish plunder continues

By Trish Rea



For young and old crayfish are a taonga, a treasure, so recent Ministerial decisions to keep some stocks at all-time lows to meet export orders is abysmal. Nathan Guy announced his decisions for the future management of crayfish on March 20th and these have been effective since the beginning of April.

Crayfish can retail up to \$150 per kilo so many Kiwis do not buy crayfish. Our only alternative is to catch them ourselves but that task just got harder, especially off the east coast.

Management Area 2 includes the northeast coast, from Waipu through the Hauraki Gulf, the Barriers, Mercurys, Coromandel to the eastern Bay of Plenty. This is prime crayfish territory yet it has the lowest catch rates in the country – so low that recreational fishers can only take around 30% of their annual allowance. Not much will change.

In Area 3, from East Cape to Gisborne and Hawke Bay, recreational fishers catch on average the smallest fish, at 580g per crayfish. No improvement is expected as the quota level has just risen by 15%.

LegaSea was hopeful the Minister would be astute enough to ignore the commercially biased advice he was given and make a bold decision.

Nathan Guy had the opportunity to impose a meaningful quota cut and double the stock size in Area 2, while being conservative in Area 3.

Instead, the Minister only reduced Area 2 quota by 15% and increased Area 3 quota by the same margin; spurning any opportunity to improve recreational fishing and renegeing on the obligation to manage fisheries sustainably to meet the foreseeable needs of future generations.

Pressure on Bay of Plenty fishery

Recreational fishers and divers are reporting a steady decline in abundance where they fish, and a proliferation of commercial pots. Low catch rates are driving commercial effort into every nook and cranny of available fishing grounds.

The Minister's decisions will not dent the numbers of crayfish pots that are littering popular coastal areas.

Any hopes we had of restoring crayfish abundance in a reasonable timeframe have been dashed. The new Area 2 Management Procedure will be in force for the next five years, unless the fishery collapses – which we fear is a real possibility.

Gisborne woes continue

In Area 3 around Gisborne recreational prospects have worsened with the 15% quota increase. This is a fishery where commercial fishers have become dependent on undersize crayfish to fill their quota.

Increasing quota means more of these small crayfish will disappear offshore. It also means recreational fishers will struggle to find a legal size fish to take home.

Local recreational fishers despair that successive Ministers have sanctioned the loophole enabling commercial fishers to take sub-legal crayfish. This concession was granted in 1993 as a “temporary” measure to help commercial fishers survive after a severe quota cut was applied, because the fishery had collapsed under their fishing pressure.

After 21 years there is no justification for increasing quota or retaining the concession.

Bright spot on the West coast

There is a bright spot. The west coast fishery from the Kaipara to Westland in the South Island seems to be the healthiest fishery in the country. It has a reasonable number of large crayfish and these fulfil an important role in the marine ecosystem.

Congratulations must go to the commercial body, CRAMAC9, who have avoided maximum catch strategies, opting instead for higher abundance and catch rates. Other areas could take a lesson from this successful strategy.

LegaSea urged the Minister to set conservative catch levels. Nathan Guy's decision is pleasing and ought to maintain the fishery in a healthy state for the foreseeable future.

Fundamental change required

There is cold comfort from Mr. Guy's assurance that there are no changes to recreational fishing limits. For many east coast fishers the effort and expense of their dive or potting trip is often not rewarded, with fewer recreational pots set as success evaporates.

Crayfish, particularly the large ones, play an important role in the marine ecosystem, being active scavengers and predators, also producing huge numbers of eggs and juveniles. They were once a dominant species in rocky areas around the country. Managing each species for maximum yield takes no account of the services they provide in the wider ecosystem.

Nathan Guy has made his intentions clear when it comes to managing our crayfish. Commercial interests and export dollars are more important than rebuilding the fisheries or providing for our fishing interests, both now and in the future.

While this approach might earn the Minister for Primary Industries brownie points amongst quota owners, it does nothing to acknowledge the fragile state of most of our crayfish stocks or address the risks posed to the ecosystem.

Aside from the crayfish decisions, the new recreational snapper regulations also took effect on April 1st.

LegaSea is urging people to comply with the new snapper regulations even though many people believe they are unfair. The minimum size limit for snapper has increased from 27 to 30 centimetres and the bag limit has reduced from nine to seven.

Given the feedback to LegaSea since the crayfish decisions, many people will be looking closely at each party's fisheries policies and other decisions in the lead-up to the September election.

Make no mistake, the election is won and lost in the upper North Island where around two million people live and work.

Fishing and diving are popular activities shared by family and friends, with skills passed from one generation to the next.

You can take positive action. Etch April Fools Day in your memory now and then make your vote count in September.

ENDS

P: 0800 LEGASEA (534 273)

E: info@legasea.co.nz

W: www.legasea.co.nz

FB: www.facebook.com/legasea

LegaSea supports and promotes your interests for conservative management of our environment and precious fisheries resources. By making an affordable, monthly contribution of \$10 or more to LegaSea (that's a coffee and some bait) you provide the resources required to effectively lobby for better fisheries policy and management practices.