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Marlin saved, now snapper is under review.

By Mandy Kupenga

I'd like to begin by expressing a massive thank you to all the passionate fishos who united to save our marlin from commercial exploitation.

This result is heart-warming and confirms the LegaSea belief and mantra, that by "working together" we can make a difference to New Zealand's fishing future. Bloody oath we can.

On the 22nd of May, we launched a campaign to protect the recreational-only status of striped marlin. It was really important because we simply could not let another of our precious fish species fall prey to overfishing.

Within three days more than 3,000 letters were sent by fishing folk from around the country to the Minister for Primary Industries, Nathan Guy, saying "NO WAY". By Friday the 24th he publically confirmed there would be no changes.

This was a fantastic result! Your voice was heard – loud and clear!

Thanks to Nathan Guy, for having the foresight to make this decision.

And thank you to everyone (including NZ Fishing World) who made the stand with us. This year we made a real difference to marlin. Congratulations!

Snapper changes on the horizon

So with marlin currently under control we ask for your attention to our beloved snapper fishery. You and I may face changes to our snapper bag and size limits this year and I thought you'd like to know why.

In the Snapper 1 (SNA1) region of North Cape to Cape Runaway snapper populations were thought to be rebuilding, but this may not be the case. Early information shows that stock levels in the Bay of Plenty, in particular are at dangerously low levels.

Now personally it makes my blood boil that we find ourselves in this position. The last detailed research completed by the Government to keep a close eye on stocks in snapper 1 was 13 years ago. The recent research indicates concerning numbers.

The total number of snapper we've caught as amateur fishers over recent years is higher than the MPI planned for, possibly up to 40% higher! It's little wonder really given our numbers were set about 13 years ago. Since then a lot has changed. Our fishing gear has become more sophisticated, technology has advanced, our population has grown - as has the popularity of fishing.

A 13 year gap in effective research, assessments and planning for the largest recreational fishery in New Zealand is not a job well done. As elected 'guardians' of our fishing resources our Government must do a better job and its up to all of us to call for this action.

Under New Zealand law the Government has a responsibility to manage our fisheries sustainably. This may be a revelation for many of you, yet it's a powerful law that protects us, our rights and our marine environment. They are also supposed to "maintain the potential of fisheries resources to meet the reasonably foreseeable needs of future generations".

In this case our elected Government has failed to regularly assess the sustainability of this important fishery, and so failed us.

By the time this article is published the new stock assessment should be completed, and the decision making reviews well and truly in full swing.

Will commercial fishing also be affected by changes?

Fishery managers at MPI could implement any number of changes after the review. This could include bag limit decreases, minimum size increases, seasonal closures in some areas and more. These options had not been confirmed at the time of print, (but we will have the latest information on our website and Facebook).

We will be calling for the commercial sector to clean up their act and address destructive and wasteful fishing practices.

The shift from longlines, (which haul in live fish one at a time), to trawl and “Danish seine” fishing methods has resulted in increased waste as more undersized and damaged fish are being thrown back into the sea, dead. Add in the occasional dumping of legal sized fish (that should be landed) and there are hundreds of thousands of fish being wasted.

Now more than ever we must view snapper as a precious resource that is not infinite and stop killing and dumping hundreds of thousands of undersized fish each year. In our current environment this behaviour is untenable.

The commercial sector will aim to protect their quota, their profit and keep costs to a minimum. In other words they are not likely to volunteer to any meaningful changes. They will put the duty of rebuilding stocks on the hooks of leisure fishers.

We will argue to protect our interests, however we are realistic and know that we will need to make some changes to continue rebuilding snapper stocks - all of us. It requires urgent attention as Auckland's population is set to increase by 40% in the next 15-20 years - potentially 500,000 more fishing lovers.

This year LegaSea will be releasing educational initiatives, some of which are aimed at helping everyday fishers increase the survival rates of released fish.

On top of this we've already launched FreeFishHeads.co.nz – a new interactive service to encourage less waste and thoughtful use of the fish we catch, by connecting people with spare heads and frames with the wider community who want them.

One thing is clear though. We will have a real fight on our hands!

There are plenty of people in the fishing industry demanding tighter controls on recreational catch. Rather than be dictated to, recreational interests must be organised, so we can leverage off the best ideas and reject the rest.

In order to play our part we, as recreational fishers, will need to look in the mirror and ask, what are we willing to do?

What voluntary measures can we embrace to help rebuild stocks?

These questions and more will be raised on snapper this year. Be ready! We are well entrenched in the review process, so will keep our fingers on the pulse and bring you the latest developments.

If you haven't already please sign on to "Get Updates" at www.legasea.co.nz.

Even better, help us to resource the work that is needed and build a 'fighting fund' by making a monthly contribution to LegaSea. Options start at \$5, less than a bag of bait, or a cup of coffee – a month!