

NZSFC Fisheries Management Update 24

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New Zealanders love their marlin

Striped marlin has been a non-commercial species since 1991 yet commercial fishers continue to argue for a regulation change so they can take and sell marlin. The New Zealand Sport Fishing Council is vigorously opposed. Club records show that marlin fishing has improved significantly since the 1990s, effectively proving that commercial catch was impacting on the availability of fish to members and charter fishers who depend on them.

In mid-May the Ministry for Primary Industries suggested a range of management options for marlin, including introduction to the quota management system.

A joint stakeholder meeting was held on May 21st where the Council reiterated its objections to any regulation change or QMS introduction.

With no clear resolution from the meeting the Council and LegaSea swung into action with a 'Hands OFF our marlin' campaign, which generated thousands of passionate responses. Within three days MPI announced there would be no management changes.

For the yet to be initiated, this is how we roll. LegaSea is out there engaging with the public, raising awareness and funding, to enable the Council to get stuck into the grunt work of fighting for your rights. You can expect to see more of this double-teaming in the future. Please consider supporting us by visiting www.legasea.co.nz and making a regular monthly contribution. It is your fishing future we are fighting for so please, get involved!

Warning against complacency

Mark Connor, President of the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council is pleased with the outcome, but cautions against any complacency.

"The Council thanks the Ministry and Minister for Primary Industries, Nathan Guy, for their quick confirmation there will be no management changes. However, we remain alert to any relaxation of the regulations protecting our marlin."

There is a clear example of what can go wrong across the Tasman.

Striped marlin was a minor commercial bycatch species, but catches rapidly increased in the late 1990s. In east Australia over 8,000 marlin were being taken per annum, despite commercial fishers' claims they could not be targeted. Now marlin is a quota species, and a lot of resources have been spent trying to rein-in commercial catch.

Around the same time a similar scenario was evolving in New Zealand.

Broadbill swordfish "bycatch" increased rapidly and it inevitably became a quota species. It is now a target species for commercial fishers.

Then there is the demise of our yellowfin tuna. Once the most numerous species in club records, yellowfin has all but vanished, but not due to domestic commercial fishing. A declining western Pacific stock means yellowfin no longer make it to New Zealand.

Concern about stocks, and changing attitudes, has seen a switch to tag and release for sharks caught accidentally.

Consequently, our members are reliant on striped marlin as the mainstay of their summer fishery. Naturally fishers want to maintain the proven management rules to protect our marlin.

Marlin dumping

Fisheries observers on tuna longline vessels report that 75% of marlin are alive when brought to the boat and can be released.

Commercial fishers argue it is better to land a dead marlin than waste it by dumping it overboard. (Notwithstanding that thousands of sharks and other fish are dumped every year.) They want to keep a few high value species, like marlin, rather than thousands of low value fish such as sharks.

Ultimately, this debate is not about wasting marlin, but about foregone profit.

While the NZ Sport Fishing Council does not condone waste, we cannot agree to regulatory change. We have offered to work with the Ministry and industry on ways of reducing marlin mortality on longlines.

As we move into the next phase, the Council is encouraged by the heartfelt support for the LegaSea marlin campaign. The passionate response proves that New Zealanders' love for marlin lingers long after the season's end.

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