



Proposal to review minimum legal sizes for commercial fishers

How do we reduce the number of undersized fish that are caught and killed commercially?

It's a question being asked in Fisheries New Zealand consultation **Your fisheries – your say** that looks at proposals to reshape, improve and modernise how we manage our fisheries to encourage good commercial fishing practices.

A key focus is the rules around what fish can be landed or returned to the sea, including one option to potentially remove commercial minimum legal sizes for all finfish, meaning commercial fishers would have to keep and report all finfish they catch, regardless of size.

“The intention of this option is simplify the rules, and reduce the number of small fish being caught, by encouraging commercial fishers to use better, more selective, fishing gear and practices,” says Steve Halley, Inshore Fisheries Manager for Fisheries New Zealand.

Where a minimum legal size has been set, commercial fishers must return fish to the sea that are undersized whether they are alive and dead. The intention of this rule is to allow these small fish, when in good health, to continue to grow and breed. In reality, most fish brought to the surface in trawl or set nets are dead or dying.

This consultation proposes three options for what commercially caught fish must be brought back to port, and what fish can be returned to the sea.

1. Removing minimum legal sizes for finfish to restrict how many fish can legally be returned to the sea by commercial fishers
2. Increasing the number of fish with minimum legal size limits to give commercial fishers more flexibility to return fish to the sea
3. Retaining the status quo, with minimum legal sizes for 11 finfish.

“While removing minimum legal sizes for commercial fishers might appear counterintuitive, we believe it would incentivise the industry to improve their fishing practices; to catch only what they want and leave the rest untouched,” says Mr Halley.

“We know that some fishers already use innovative techniques to reduce the number of small or unwanted fish they catch, and we want to see this approach embraced by the entire industry.”

The first step in this process is making sure that all commercial catch, including undersize fish, is accurately reported. The new electronic catch and position reporting rules, will see commercial fishers required to report all fish they return to the sea (barring a few exceptions) but they will not be counted against quota.

Better information will help us understand how many small fish are being caught, but on its own may not provide an incentive to avoid catching them. Some of the options in this consultation are intended to increase the incentive for fishers to avoid catching these undersize fish.

Under option one, commercial fishers would potentially have to keep all fish they catch and they would be counted against quota; meaning the fisher would bear the full cost of their fishing practices.

The second option would provide more flexibility for commercial fishers to return small and unwanted fish by potentially increasing the use of minimum legal sizes across other finfish. This would allow the industry to maximise the value from their catch. It also would provide an incentive for better reporting as fish below minimum legal size could be reported and returned, but not counted against quota.

The third option would see no change.

“This consultation does not look at minimum legal sizes for recreational fishers; its focus is the commercial fishing sector.”

The consultation also proposes a review of offences and penalties, a proposal to streamline the process for setting catch-limits and some other fisheries management changes,” says Mr Halley.

Consultation is open until 17 March 2019. Find out more, attend a public meeting, and make a submission at www.fisheries.govt.nz/haveyoursay