

Illegal cray take a 'disaster'



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MPI recommends 23-tonne reduction in commercial rock lobster catch; locals concerned about annual illegal take.

GISBORNE crayfishermen support proposed cuts to the commercial rock lobster catch but are more concerned about the 89 tonnes estimated to be caught illegally each year.

Citing an estimated decline in rock lobster in the Gisborne fishery (CRA3) since 2014, the Ministry for Primary Industries has recommended a 23-tonne (9 percent) cut to annual commercial catch, from 261 to 238 tonnes. This is estimated to result in a \$1.7 million loss in revenue to the industry here each year.

Chairman of Tairāwhiti Rock Lobster Industry Association Gordon Halley, representing Gisborne's commercial rock lobster fishery, said they were "fine" with the cut.

"The aim is to maintain a high abundance level, so when the procedure signals a cut we are fine with that."

He agrees the loss to the industry would be around \$1.7m in revenue annually, though 23 tonnes at a gross rate of \$100/kg could be as much as \$2.3m.

"But that is OK. We are committed to the strategy of maintaining high abundance."

Mr Halley's main concerns are the estimated 89 tonnes of illegal take, which has not changed since 2002, and reporting of recreational take.

"Why is MPI still estimating 89 tonnes of illegal catch? To me that should be embarrassing but to them it seems OK. We're totally in the dark as to why.

"I suspect those involved have decided it's in the too-hard basket and have stopped looking for answers. But if you look at the market value of the illegal take, it's a disaster."

At the going market rate of about \$100/kg, 89.5 tonnes would be \$8.95m.

"Another one in the too-hard basket is recreational reporting," Mr Halley said.

"We have no idea of that catch. Scientists who do the modelling are frustrated by the large gaps in data. The minister needs to get more pro-active on that. It seems to be in the 'do-not-disturb zone' for any politician."

Moderate to high illegal take

MPI's director of fisheries management Dave Turner said there were still moderate to high levels of illegal take from the CRA3 fishery, though it was likely to be below 89 tonnes.

"Because of the illegal nature of poaching, it is not possible to provide an exact figure," Mr Turner said.

"However, we consider the estimate of 89 tonnes to be deliberately high, based on the moderate to high illegal take. MPI does not go into detail about its operational compliance activity because sharing this information would tip off offenders.

"Broadly speaking, we collect information from a combination of our own formal monitoring programmes, as well as wider compliance investigations and monitoring."

MPI regularly assesses the sustainability of various fisheries around the country.

Between 2012 and 2014 MPI increased the total allowable commercial catch (TACC) in the CRA 3 fishery by nearly 100 tonnes, from 164 tonnes in 2012 to 261 tonnes in 2014, citing improvements in stock levels.

MPI consultation document

This year's recommended commercial cut comes from an MPI consultation document released this month, which suggests CRA3 biomass, or the total weight of rock lobster stock, in 2016 is lower than biomass in 2014.

Based on 2013 catch levels biomass is projected to decline by 15 to 31 percent by 2017, and catch per unit effort (CPUE), or pot lift, which increased between 2008 and 2012, has since declined.

Recreational and customary catches in CRA3 are recommended to remain at 20 tonnes each, and other sources, including illegal takes, at 89 tonnes, bringing the suggested total allowable catch to 366.86 tonnes (down from 389.95).

Despite the projected declines Mr Halley said the fishery still appeared to be in good health.

"Speaking to Mahia and Gizzy fishers they say it has probably been a better summer than last year.

"But the commercial cut is based on data from last summer and winter, so it makes sense."

Ngāti Porou Seafoods CEO Mark Ngata said they also supported the proposed cut.

"Yes there will be an impact volume-wise, however, as long term owners in this sector we view this impact as beneficial in the long term for the fishery and our business."

Stocks doing well

Stocks were still doing well, however, and would be maintained for all sectors, he said. Of more concern to them was tail fan necrosis (TFN), which affected the quality of lobster.

Te Aitanga a Mahaki asset holding company director Ian Ruru said their commercial and customary interests also supported the proposed cut.

Their own research on the crayfish nursery in the Gisborne Harbour supported MPI's findings.

"Based on our stock assessment model it may take more than three years before we see any improvement. The quota cut will impact on the financial returns for Te Aitanga a Mahaki but it is more important that we safeguard the overall CRA3 biomass for future generations."

Rongowhakaata Iwi Trust CEO Alayna Watene said they supported the cut with the view of looking after the long-term sustainability of the fishery. Both iwi would suffer financial losses as they lease their quota to commercial fishers.



File picture

More information

More information about the proposals can be found in [MPI's consultation document](#) on its website.

MPI and the National Rock Lobster Management Group (NRLMG), which also worked on the document, welcome written submissions on any or all of the proposals.

All written submissions must be received by MPI no later than 5pm on Friday 10 February 2017.

Email submissions can be sent to FMSubmissions@mpi.govt.nz.