



FISHING CONFERENCE FEEDS GRASS ROOTS

BY R LEA CLOUGH

The imminent merger of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Fisheries will create problems with the public/private split of interests and costs. These will have to be worked on as the new unified ministry evolves, the Minister of Fisheries, the Hon Phil Heatley, said in his address as keynote speaker at the annual conference of the New Zealand Federation of Commercial Fishermen.

A reform of rules and regulations is to be carried out to reduce, consolidate and simplify these.

The annual conference was held at the Armitage Hotel, Tauranga from May 12-14. Welcoming delegates, the Mayor of Tauranga, Stuart Crosby, spoke of the progress of Tauranga and its dependence on the port. He then declared the conference open.

Brian Kiddie of the Bay of Plenty Fishermen's Association spoke about their port problems, primarily poor facilities for the commercial fishery. In common with many other fishing communities, issues were focused on actual or threatened lack of access to grounds, through marine protected areas, mataitai, aquaculture and oil exploration.

Heatley's speech was moderately upbeat. He indicated there was room for increases in some total allowable commercial catches. He also spoke on New Zealand's high-sustainability reputation, contrasting it with appalling European Union practices (a graphic illustration of these was the footage seen on television cook Rick Stein's programme – where the skipper of a British trawler was shown being forced to dump cases of headed and gutted monkfish because he could not get quota to cover it).

The minister touched on the "race for space" in inshore fisheries. He said he has to explain to his Cabinet colleagues the complexities of competing demands on coastal waters. He expects the burden of the observer programme to remain steady.

A petition seeking a review of crewing of foreign charter vessels is before Parliament. He stated unequivocally that foreign crewing of inshore vessels will not happen while he is minister.

The president of the federation, Doug Saunders-Loder, opened question time by noting the minister's comments on improving financial returns for the industry. He inferred from Heatley's remarks that he was willing to re-examine observer coverage of vessels. He put in a plea to look again at the attitude towards anecdotal evidence, citing the years of knowledge and experience of fishermen. "Everyone has a story to tell."

This writer took up the theme of anecdotal evidence, describing

it as a two-edged sword. If the words of those with their feet on the deck is to be dismissed, so should the words of those who worked in offices and had never set foot on a working deck. Alternatively, the words of those who knew what they were talking about should be accorded more weight.

Currently, there was a move to impose observer coverage on the Chatham Islands rock lobster fishery for the dubious purpose of quantifying shag mortality. It was based on very shaky grounds and would be resisted. The minister would not be drawn on these topics.

Another issue was the exclusion of fishermen from a rig fishery by the set net bans on the western coast of the North Island.

Heatley said there would be no compensation or subsidy, but he also indicated that an increase in snapper TACC would alleviate the problem. When it was pointed out that it would only make the quota owners richer and not help the catcher much, he replied, "The world is not perfect."

The minister made a significant announcement during discussion on mataitai. He has instructed his staff to stop sending back mataitai applications to iwi when the answer should clearly be "No!" They are not to try to get these applications modified into a more acceptable form, wasting time and resources. He wants his staff to concentrate on the difficult and complex applications.

Malcolm Pinkney, of Hokianga, asked about the set net ban versus other harmful activities such as seismic surveys, tidal power and ironsand extraction. Heatley replied that he could not do anything about those, but he could about set netting.

The chief executive officer of SEAFIC, Peter Bodeker, shared some observations after just under one year in the job. He compared the seafood industry with the other big export performers – dairy, kiwifruit, wine and meat – showing seafood had the worst factors, these being lowest cooperation, investment and returns, despite comprising 10 percent of world export trade.

Bodeker was followed by other SEAFIC speakers. Policy manager Nici Gibbs spoke on "Managing our own ship", exploring how the industry could increase its autonomy in managing fisheries. Science manager David Middleton spoke on "Fisheries science – our way". The last item was a video from Professor Ray Hilborn of the University of Washington. A frequent visitor and science provider to New Zealand, he had some controversial views on sustainability of fish stocks.



From an excellent conference turnout to the shipwreck action and fish and chips, these fishermen dug deep. Big Pete Dawson and his family were awarded the ENL Trophy for Service

The past-president of the New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council, Keith Ingram, did a hatchet job on the Ministry of Fisheries' new charter boat registration and reporting system. He agreed there was a need for better information to aid decision-making, but stated this system would not deliver.

Of 306 registered charter boats, about 150 will do over 120 days per year and 100 fewer than 60 days per year. Most are licensed to carry up to 12 passengers. Keith said the registration process was archaic and demanded more than the Privacy Act suggests MFish is entitled to. The reporting form was cumbersome and there were concerns about safety.

Many charter boat operators promote catch and release or restrict their clients to lower maxima than those dictated by amateur take rules – typically one kingfish per person and two or three hapuku, groper and bluenose, this being more than enough for an amateur catching for the table.

According to MFish figures, more than 1.4 million New Zealanders fish at least once a year, and about 20,000 do so under International Game Fishing Association rules for less than six months per year.

A NIWA charter boat diary survey in 2000 showed the amount of snapper caught on charter boats was less than three percent of the national recreational estimate (and hence allowance). As this was below the ministry's own three percent margin of error, it could not use the data.

There was a feeling aboard charter boats that the fishing industry was using the new reporting system to move attention from their own poor fishing practices and to make charter boats use allocated quota, Ingram told the conference.

"How would that work, when the amateur fisher is still entitled to his bag limit? Are we looking to emulate Spain, where a ban on amateur take of commercial species is planned?" he asked.

No-one was arguing with the need for better information. The ministry now had a tool called the fishery officer/honorary fishery officer non-commercial activity log to capture data from 100,000 amateurs per year. The log records their locality, date, prime and secondary target species taken, permits and other data.

However, the only data used is the number of people. MFish does not use the remainder, nor will it allow the Recreational Fishing Council to extract the data, citing privacy of those involved in compliance action. Ingram said the council believes the information may indicate MFish is underestimating the amateur catch, and questions why this data is not used.

The council is trying to create a recreational body with statutory recognition. It could still not support recreational licensing, but it could derive income from data-gathering and charging the ministry for it.

The evening of the first day of the conference was devoted to the traditional fish and chip dinner, which included the shipwreck auction and the presentation of the Electronic Navigation Ltd Shield. The federation executive awards the ENL Shield to a member who has shown selfless service to his fellow fishermen.

Over the years, a liberal interpretation of the basic rule has been

applied, and so it was this year, when the recipient was nominally Peter Dawson, the federation's chief executive. Firstly, he was not strictly a member, and secondly, he was not an individual. On the basis that the federation gets four for the price of one, the award was presented to the Dawson family, in recognition of the efforts during the year and at every conference of Peter, his wife Dee and sons Mike and Rob.

The popular Shipwreck Auction raised about \$26,500 for the Shipwreck Relief Society, not far short of last year's title. This figure tends to grow as late donations come in.

The society makes immediate payments to next of kin of professional mariners who die at sea. Many businesses contributed items, with one donor urging others to follow his lead and use the auction to dispose of unsuitable presents.

The second day of the conference featured a slide show and talk on seabirds by Kim Westerskov, followed by John Cleal, better known by his nom-de-plume of Admiral Albert Ross, who spoke on operational aspects of protected species mitigation. In the same vein, the convenor of the Southern Seabird Solutions Trust, Janice Molloy, listed the large range of inventions New Zealand fishers had produced to mitigate seabird problems. She announced the Smartgear Competition, closing August 31, for mitigation devices. Those interested should check Southern Seabird Solutions' website for details. Kris Ramm, of the Department of Conservation, spoke on case studies in mitigation.

A federation project, Fishing Rods for the Disabled, had representatives of the disabled community and supporters speaking on the changes the electrically powered rods had made to their ability to enjoy fishing.

Mike Sullivan, of Ocean Law, spoke to delegates on their rights and responsibilities in relation to MFish compliance. It was largely an updated reprise of his presentation at the previous year's conference. It ended with his most important injunction: "Don't say anything without legal advice."

SEAFIC's communications manager, Sid Pickering, who is better known to us as the editor of Seafood New Zealand magazine, spoke on "Educating the public", an exercise in self-preservation.

On the third day, after a tour of Tauranga's fishing facilities, the 53rd annual general meeting of the federation was held. It began with a minute's silence to honour fishermen who had died during the year.

The federation's chief executive, Pete Dawson, from Lyttelton, announced his retirement. There is, at present, no indication as to whom the next chief executive will be.

Doug Saunders-Loder (Nelson) was re-elected unopposed as president, as was Allan Rooney (Lyttelton) as vice-president.

Carol Scott (Nelson), Keith Mawson (Taranaki), Tony Threadwell (Lyttelton) and Brian Kiddie (Bay of Plenty) were re-elected to the executive, and new executive members elected were Greg Hayes (Leigh) and Peter Scott (Port Chalmers).