

A YEAR INTO **THE JOB**

WITH PHIL HEATLEY – MINISTER OF FISHERIES

BY KEITH INGRAM

Last month *Professional Skipper* was afforded the opportunity of a candid discussion with Phil Heatley, one of the few Ministers who, we could say, served his apprenticeship as opposition spokesperson.

A year into the job Phil, how do you feel?

"Pretty comfortable, but it has taken 12 months and I have only been through one sustainability round which meant making some hard calls on issues that have been a long time coming. Like Taranaki paua! This had been around for 18 years and yet it was a no brainer. It was not a hard decision, commercial might not like it, but the reccies would have to be pretty happy, wouldn't they?" We agree. This is the first time that an MLS differential has swung in favour of non-commercial. Almost in every case MLS concessions favour commercial fishing.

We have an ageing fleet of 30 to 40 years plus and the ACE price is killing small fishermen. If they all but disappear, isn't there a fear that quota owners will be asking you to let the foreign charter vessel inside the 12nm lines? *"That's not going to happen, no way will we allow foreign vessels to fish inshore quota."* And what is your view on the cheap labour and disparity of wages foreign crew earn? *"We have been pro-active with both Ministers of Labour and Immigration and believe we have systems in place to balance this. If you or the industry know of cases where this is not the case then let me know."*

Observer coverage: The conditions on some of the vessels are so sub-standard that our observers wont sail on these ships so their sins go undetected. Shouldn't we have 100 percent observer coverage on foreign vessels? *"Observer coverage has gone up in recent times which is good, isn't it." Yes, but given that most are factory ships and we have no idea what is disappearing into the meal plant and you cannot DNA meal to see if it was declarable by-catch, how can we guard against this, without 100 percent coverage? "Expecting observers to live in damp flea ridden cabins is not on. The question of the meal plant you are right, without observers, we don't know and if the conditions are so substandard that observers refuse to sail, then the vessel should not be able to leave port or fish our waters. I will look into this."*

What are your views on New Zealandisation? Two decades ago we committed to develop our deepwater fleet and remove the foreigners from the 200nm EEZ. With Kiwi crews, supplying local factories, the community and local economy all benefited. Now we have seen a complete reversal as the foreign vessels fish New Zealand quota, including Maori quota, with most disappearing off shore with little or no local value add. Are you concerned? *"Good concerns, but I have said we have gone as far as we are prepared to go. In reality I am responsible for the Fisheries Act and the welfare and the management of the fishery is my concern, not the business*



environment. Obviously we take into account commercial concerns, but it is the health of the fishery which is my focus."

Moving to aquaculture; by world figures 50 percent of seafood now available to the consumer comes from aquaculture. We have a million dollar a day industry, but we are constrained. Do you support aquaculture and how do you propose to make more space available? *"I am very supportive of aquaculture, they are nowhere near reaching their potential and for them to*

reach their potential they need two things. One is, they need the ability to better use their space, to change fish species to meet market demands and they can't do that under the RMA, it's too onerous. Secondly, they need more space. Although there is a lot of pressure on our inshore space from marine reserves, boaties, fishers all the rest of it I can tell you there is still plenty of room for aquaculture." So how do you propose to change things? *"First, we are going to give them the flexibility to use the space they already have better and secondly, make available more space. We have to give the industry certainty."* That's great but how will you manage the Queen Street opportunist who looks to buy water space only to onsell? *"Well we need investors. One of the recommendations we got from the independent report was that there be a five year use it or lose on water space. But I can suggest that Ministers don't think that time frame is short enough."* Well that's good to hear, especially if it equates to the marine farmer being able to get space to invest in and not have to compete with the Queen Street short-term money grubber.

The Ministry of Fisheries restructure, how do you think that has gone? *"Very happy, although a bit painful for the Ministry of Fisheries staff. The management team saw the need for it, we just could not sustain doing the things we were doing. It was not an efficient use of time. I have said that when they meet with various sectors it has got to matter. The meetings will be short sharp and focussed. I guess the message for the sectors is to come prepared to engage in the debate, make a decision and move on."*

Finally charter boat reporting, any update? *"The Ministry should be shortly engaging with the working group you headed on the report form and I will be very disappointed if it is not straight forward to use and easy to understand. One thing I would like to say is that since our meeting I have reflected on how far we should go in terms of reporting. Registration will be \$27 on line and it's the Ministry's, and my view, that every one should go through the process even if they do not fish very often."* So you will be happy to get nil reports? *"Yes nil reports are as useful as completed reports as it will give a measure on the activity."*

Where do you see your greatest challenge in the future? *"Marine farming, and the reason is we have got to convince marine farmers that it is worth the investments and secondly we have to convince New Zealanders that having a marine farm in a local bay is a good idea and that's not easy."*