

November 2007

Dear Stakeholder

2007-08 SQU6T Sea Lion Operational Plan

This letter sets out the management measures I intend to implement in accordance with s 15 (2) of the Fisheries Act 1996 (the Act) for the 2007-08 squid trawl (SQU6T) fishery.

The purpose of these measures is to mitigate the effects that vessels, operating in the SQU6T fishery, have on the Auckland Island sea lion population. These measures will be implemented through the SQU6T sea lion Operational Plan, which accompanies this letter, and will include:

- A limit on the number of sea lion deaths attributable to vessels operating in the SQU6T fishery – the fishing-related mortality limit (FRML);
- Procedures to monitor sea lion bycatch against this limit;
- A process to close the fishery if this limit is reached.

In reaching my decision, I have carefully considered the most recent sea lion population information, concerns with the Breen-Kim model and available information on the efficacy of sea lion exclusion devices to reduce sea lion bycatch. I have taken into account the views of the Minister of Conservation, advice from the Ministry of Fisheries, as well as views provided by stakeholders. I have also given consideration to the recent performance of the SQU6T fleet with the Operational Plan during the 2006-07 season.

I have also given careful regard to the legislative provisions and my obligations under the Act, particularly my obligations to managing the fishing-related mortality of protected species (s 15), the environmental and information principles (ss 9 and 10) and the purpose of the Act (s 8).

Fishing-related mortality limit

I have decided to set a fishing-related mortality limit (FRML) for the 2007-08 fishing season

of 81 sea lions. This FRML is based on Rule 4.

In making my decision I considered the fluctuations in sea lion pup numbers and the continued and increasing uncertainties associated with the Breen Kim model. I acknowledge that the sea lion pup count increased in 2007 but this is only a small increase in numbers and follows a continuous period of decline since 2002. Until the sea lion pup numbers show a period of continuous increase I believe exercising caution when setting the FRML is warranted.

I believe setting the FRML at 81 sea lions ensures the appropriate balance between providing for utilisation and ensuring this utilisation does not pose an unacceptable risk to the sea lion population. I intend to close the SQU6T fishery if the FRML is reached.

Predetermined strike rate

I have decided to increase the predetermined strike from 5.3% to 5.65% for the 2007-08 season. This strike rate will be used to monitor sea lion mortalities against the FRML. This means that for every 100 tows undertaken by SQU6T vessels, 5.65 sea lions will be counted towards the FRML. I believe an increase to the strike rate is warranted at this time given the increase in tow duration that has been observed amongst vessel operators in the SQU6T fishery in recent years. Research indicates that tow duration is one of the factors that can influence sea lion capture rates.

The use of a predetermined strike rate effectively imposes a maximum number of tows that can take place in the fishery before the FRML is reached and the fishery is closed. Vessel operators are required to provide information on all tows undertaken to the Deepwater Group Ltd, as set out in the Operational Plan. I urge all vessel operators to provide accurate and timely information to the Deepwater Group Ltd to ensure effective monitoring of the FRML in the 2007-08 fishing season.

Sea lion exclusion device (SLED) discount factor

Vessels operating in the SQU6T fishery which deploy an approved SLED and meet the monitoring and reporting requirements set out in the Operational Plan are eligible for a discount on the strike rate. This discount factor recognises that if SLEDs are manufactured and deployed correctly, they can mitigate the risk to sea lions from the squid trawl vessels

I have decided to increase the discount rate for the coming season from 20% to 35% to reflect the recent improvements made to SLED design and the good performance by industry during the last fishing season. Recent information suggests that the previous discount rate of 20% likely underestimates the survival rate of sea lions that interact with squid vessels when an approved SLED is deployed. A discount factor of 35% will provide an effective strike rate of 3.67% for any qualifying tow. Vessel operators must strictly comply with the conditions set out in the operational plan to receive the discount.

I acknowledge the work of the SLED Working Group and the Deepwater Group Ltd in developing and promoting the effective use of SLEDs. I also acknowledge the improved performance by vessel operators during the last SQU6T season. I look forward to this level of performance continuing and even improving over the coming season.

Operational Plan

The details necessary for the adoption of these measures can be found in the 2007-08 SQU6T sea lion Operational Plan which accompanies this decision letter. Vessel operators should fully comply with all elements of this Operational Plan.

Copies of the Operational Plan and the Final Advice Paper provided to me by MFish will also be available on the MFish website at www.fish.govt.nz. For further information on the Operational Plan, please contact either Stefan Leslie on (04) 819 4618 or Aoife Martin on (04) 819 4675 at the Ministry of Fisheries.

Yours sincerely

Jim Anderton
Minister of Fisheries