

Fishing hook danger ahead for politicians

Sunday Star Times
17.11.13

After the great snapper debacle, fisher folk are angry and aspiring politicians need to watch out.

Michael Field reports

POLITICIANS WHO believe the great snapper battle is over better think again as two of the country's biggest pressure groups eye next year's election.

"We may well vote on fish next year," says Scott Macindoe of the 32,000-strong Sport Fishing Council, which is demanding friendly policies in exchange for recommendations.

They've been politicised by the Government's public relations blunder in ordering a cut to recreational snapper catch-limit earlier this year.

Fishing types do not want to be caught out again.

"I don't see it as a snapper issue, I see political parties having the courage to place public friendly fisheries management policy on the table," Macindoe said.

Primary Industries Minister Nathan Guy created a fish frenzy last August when one of the proposals to restore dwindling snapper stocks was cuts to the bag limit in the SNA1 area that goes from East Northland to Bay of Plenty. Recreational fishers who could catch nine snapper a day were to take as few as three while commercial and traditional quotas were unchanged.

That led to 47,709 submissions in opposition and saw Guy back off, instead cutting the quota from nine to seven and setting up a Snapper 1 Strategy Group to find a more permanent solution to sharing out the snapper resource.

But the Ministry of Primary Industries' decision to select who sits on the seven-member strategy group, including deciding the two recreational fishing representatives alongside those from the commercial and traditional bodies, has angered amateur fishers.

Mandy Kupenga, of lobby group LegaSea, opposed to Guy's changes, said it had been invited to make a single nomination. "We have no visibility of the criteria on who they will select to represent."

However Guy is assuring that everyone's views will be heard.

"I want to see the stakeholders – the people with a direct interest in this fishery – working together. Finding common ground will help provide a solid foundation for decision-making into the future.

"We want to get everyone around the table, working together on protecting this fishery for future generations," he said.

"MPI have written to various organisations seeking nominations for these positions. I strongly encourage all sectors to engage with MPI to get the right people around the table. The intention is for the group to hold its first meeting before Christmas."

The strategy group is to be headed by Queen's Counsel Ian Barker, whose speciality is mediation, not science or fish.

Kupenga agreed a comprehensive strategy was needed. "There is no strategy for snapper in the long term."

But Macindoe was unimpressed with MPI calling the shots. "[The Ministry said] 'we will appoint; we will not nominate'. As usual here we are being dictated to."

The 57-year-old Sport Fishing Council, which spent \$600,000 to successfully to overturn a 2004 limit on kahawai recreational fishing, put fish at the heart of next year's elections.

It wants party manifestos to have "public friendly fisheries management policies" that the council will then advise its membership on.

"We will absolutely be assessing all political party policies; that is our job. If we do not do it we would be delinquent."

Macindoe underscored the political power anglers offer, not just in Auckland but across much of the northern North Island. For instance, Whangamata Ocean Sport Fishing Club has 6000 members and a waiting list to join. Many of them are traditionally National-supporting farmers.