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National Plan of Action to Reduce the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in New Zealand Fisheries

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand, with its extensive coastline, productive ocean and numerous islands, is an important breeding ground for about 80 seabird species. In fact a third of these species are endemic to New Zealand – they breed nowhere else in the world.

But some seabird species, particularly albatross and petrel, are under threat from commercial fishing operations, especially longline and trawl fishing.

In the past seven years, 13 different species of albatross and 17 of petrel have been recorded as caught in fishing activity in New Zealand waters. Globally, half the albatross populations being monitored are in decline – and for most, fishing is a key threat.

As a partner in the international efforts to reduce the seabird mortality, New Zealand has developed a National Plan of Action focusing on how to reduce seabird deaths in New Zealand fisheries.

Developed by the Department of Conservation and the Ministry of Fisheries in consultation with fishing interests, environmental interests, researchers and other interested parties, the plan establishes a long term strategy for working with the fishing industry to limit the level of seabird mortality for each fishery.

The National Plan of Action has now been approved by the Ministers of Conservation and Fisheries and implementation will begin straight away.

BACKGROUND

The main commercial longline fisheries affecting seabirds are the tuna, bluenose, snapper and ling fisheries. Albatrosses and petrels in particular are vulnerable to longlining because they dive beneath the surface and take baited hooks while the lines are being set. In certain conditions, the birds can get hooked or tangled in the line and drown.

Observation of seabird mortality in New Zealand has also identified a problem with trawl fisheries, especially the squid, scampi and hoki fisheries. Seabirds are killed in trawl fisheries when they collide with or become entangled in the fishing equipment.

Incidental catch of seabirds has also been reported in set net fisheries, which mainly target in-shore fish stocks such as various shark species, tarakihi, butterfish, moki and flatfish. Seabirds that dive for food can become entangled in the net and drown.



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While there have also been anecdotal reports of seabirds such as shags, shearwaters and gannets being caught in pots and recreational line fisheries, there is little known about the extent of the problem in these areas.



The fishing industry has taken steps itself to reduce seabird mortality, including funding research into new or improved ways to mitigate the problem, voluntarily adopting codes of practice, and adopting best practice ways of fishing.

However, New Zealand wants to ensure its expectations of the fishing industry with regard to seabird mortality are clearly laid out, and is doing so through the National Plan of Action.

WHAT IS INCLUDED?

The National Plan of Action will apply to:

- all seabird species absolutely or partially protected under the Wildlife Act 1953;
- commercial and non-commercial fisheries;
- all New Zealand fisheries waters; and,
- high seas fisheries in which New Zealand flagged vessels participate, or where foreign flagged vessels catch protected seabird species



The plan has two goals:

- To ensure that the long term viability of protected seabird species is not threatened by their incidental catch in New Zealand fisheries waters or by New Zealand flagged vessels in high seas fisheries.
- To further reduce incidental catch of protected seabird species as far as possible, taking into account advances in technology, knowledge and financial implications.

Codes of Practice

Fisheries identified as having known seabird interactions are the snapper, ling, bluenose, joint venture tuna and domestic tuna longline fisheries, the ling autoline fishery, and the squid, hoki and scampi trawl fisheries.

For each of these fisheries Codes of Practice will be developed. These codes will be drafted by industry participants, but will be evaluated by a Technical Working Group made up of industry, government departments, environmental groups, iwi and other interested parties.

Codes of Practice will include:

- details of the fishing practices those in the industry will follow;
- voluntary limits on the level of seabird mortality;
- any existing mandatory measures;
- ways to promote education and awareness about the reduction of seabird mortality;
- penalties for not complying with the code;
- how compliance with the code will be monitored.



Fisheries will also be required to decrease the level of seabird mortality over time. The Codes of Practice will detail how this will be achieved.

The performance of each fishery will be reviewed annually by the Technical Working Group and measured against its Code of Practice.

Given the variable readiness of fisheries to create and adopt codes of practice, existing fisheries with known interactions have been divided into two groups for implementation of codes.

Group one fisheries are required to have codes of practice developed and approved by 30 July 2004 and implemented from 1 October 2004. These include: ling autoline; joint venture tuna; hoki trawl; squid trawl.

Group two fisheries are required to have codes of practice developed and approved by 30 March 2005 and implemented from 30 June 2005. These fisheries include: ling longline; bluenose longline; snapper longline; scampi trawl; domestic tuna.

Mandatory actions

As noted above, codes of practice should include all actions deemed best practice in managing a fishery to avoid incidental catch, whether these are put in place voluntarily or through regulation. Specific fishing practices and catch limits will be made mandatory if these are not established or adhered to voluntarily through the Codes of Practice.

In addition, where there is sufficient information to show that the level of mortality in New Zealand fisheries is threatening the long term viability of a seabird species and to allow a limit to be set, mandatory catch limits may be set for those species.

Other measures

The Department of Conservation and the Ministry of Fisheries will also look at how seabird mortality can be further reduced through the use of economic measures. Legislation will also be reviewed, in consultation with interested groups, to consider legal options for action against individual vessels failing to take reasonable precautions to avoid seabird mortality.

Other domestic fisheries

Little is known about the level of seabird mortality in other domestic fisheries including those using set nets and pots. The main objective for these fisheries under the National Plan of Action is to gain more information about the extent and nature of their impact on seabird species.

International fisheries

A different set of rules and regulations apply to international fisheries, meaning that an alternative means of managing seabird mortality in these fisheries is necessary.

Codes of practices will be developed for New Zealand flagged vessels in international fisheries on a case-by-case basis. Codes for international fisheries will be subject to the same consultation, evaluation and review requirements as those for domestic fisheries.

The extent of seabird mortality in international fisheries is still largely unknown, including the level of catch by New Zealand flagged vessels, which is why it is also important to gather more information.

Benefits of the Approach

One of key advantages of the NPOA's approach is that it takes a collaborative approach to reducing the problem. It provides an opportunity and incentives for those in the fishing industry to work with the Government and other interested parties to take voluntary steps to reduce the level of seabird deaths. It takes the view that by working together the Government, industry and environmental representatives can achieve quicker and more positive change.

However, if this approach does not succeed in generating high quality codes of practice that are complied with, the plan's management focus will fall back on mandatory catch limits and other ways of regulating the fishing industry.



Photo: Neville Smith





Governance of the NPOA

In addition to the NPOA Technical Working Group already mentioned, the NPOA Seabirds Officials Group, comprising representatives of MFish and DOC, will be established.

The Officials Group will make recommendations to the Ministers of Fisheries and Conservation relating to the ongoing management and implementation of the National Plan of Action, including undertaking five-yearly reviews of it.

NEXT STEPS

The most important tasks to be completed to implement the NPOA include development of guidelines for codes of practice and the establishment of the governance arrangements.

Work is already underway on both these tasks and it is anticipated that fishers and other stakeholders will be contacted about these shortly. Guidelines for codes of practice will be in place to enable codes of practice to be implemented for Group 1 fisheries by 1 October 2004. The Governance arrangements are also intended to be fully operational by then.

If you have any queries about the implementation of the National Plan of Action please contact:

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