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Tough new measures to protect dolphins

Fisheries Minister Jim Anderton today announced the strongest-ever package of measures to protect New Zealand's threatened Hector's and Maui's dolphins.

The fishing measures include a variety of regional bans and other restrictions on set netting, trawling and drift netting in the coastal waters where the dolphins are most often found, as well as a significant increase in monitoring, which will include placing observers on commercial vessels, particularly in those areas where these dolphins live.

These measures sit alongside four new marine mammal sanctuaries announced by Conservation Minister Steve Chadwick today.

Jim Anderton said the Labour-Progressive Government had acted to protect one of the world's rarest dolphin species, and one found only in our waters.

"The measures strike the best achievable balance between the protection of these iconic dolphins and the activities of our commercial and recreational fishers," said Jim Anderton.

"They are based on the best available information—scientific data, information from commercial, recreational, environmental and iwi interests, an analysis of economic and social effects, and advice from the Ministry of Fisheries and the Department of Conservation.

"The decision has been a very difficult one because it will have a significant impact on some fishers' livelihoods, and on the recreational activities of many others. I have given careful thought to the unique conditions in each area, and have put in place the measures I consider necessary to protect these dolphins whose numbers, in the case of Hector's dolphins, are under threat, and in the case of Maui's dolphins, are facing extinction.

"The costs to the commercial fishing industry are considerable, estimated by the Ministry of Fisheries and independent analysis to be up to \$79.1 million over a five to ten year period. This cost is comprised of up to \$32.7 million in lost quota value and up to \$46.4 million in lost income over the next five to ten years.

The Fisheries Ministry forecasts up to 295 jobs will unfortunately be lost as a result of these measures – up to 65 in fishing, another 65 in onshore fish processing, and up to 165 in supply industries and the wider economy.

"Before making my decision I consulted widely and considered the views expressed in about 2,500 submissions on a draft threat management plan, which canvassed a wide range of options.

“Dolphin deaths are unintentional, but there is always a risk in the areas they share with fishing nets, and in some areas this risk is too high and therefore unacceptable. The Government took protective steps in 2003 and 2006, but I believe it is now clear that stronger measures are necessary.”

The Hector’s dolphin species has two sub-species. The Maui’s dolphin, numbering only an estimated 111, which live around the North Island’s west coast. The South Island Hector’s dolphin, numbering an estimated 7268, living around the South Island’s south, east and west coasts.

The new measures are specific to particular areas. They are:

- North Island west coast—from Maunganui Bluff north of Kaipara Harbour to Pariokariwa Point north of New Plymouth:
 - extend commercial and recreational set netting bans from four nautical miles to seven nautical miles offshore;
 - ban commercial and recreational set netting in the Kaipara, Waikato and Raglan harbour entrances, and extend the Manukau Harbour ban further into the harbour;
 - extend trawling bans from one nautical mile to two nautical miles offshore, and to four nautical miles in the core habitat area from Manukau Harbour to Port Waikato;
 - ban commercial and recreational drift netting in Port Waikato.
- South Island south coast—from Slope Point in the Catlins to Sandhill Point east of Fiordland:
 - ban commercial and recreational set netting to four nautical miles offshore, except in harbours, estuaries, and inlets;
 - ban commercial and recreational set netting in the whole of Te Waewae Bay;
 - restrict the type of trawl gear used within two nautical miles of shore.
- South Island east coast—from Cape Jackson in the Marlborough Sounds to Slope Point in the Catlins:
 - ban commercial and recreational set netting in most areas to four nautical miles offshore, except for flounder fishing in designated areas in winter;
 - ban commercial and recreational setnetting to around one nautical mile offshore around Kaikoura;
 - restrict the type of trawl gear used within two nautical miles of shore.
- South Island west coast—from Cape Farewell in the north to Awarua Point north of Fiordland:
 - ban recreational set netting to two nautical miles offshore;
 - ban commercial set netting to two nautical miles offshore between 1 December and 28 February.

Jim Anderton said he aimed to have these measures in place by 1 October this year, in time for the start of the new commercial fishing year and before summer recreational fishing.

“Part of the difficulty with managing the interaction between these dolphins and fishing activity has been the limited observer coverage in the inshore fleet and variable industry self-reporting.

“To boost our monitoring effort, the ministry’s budget has been increased by \$6 million, over the next three years, to place observers on commercial vessels, including in those areas where these dolphins live. These costs will be recovered from the industry through levies.

“The effort to protect Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins does not end here. I will continue to work with the fishing industry and the Conservation Minister to test the effectiveness of these measures, and to make adjustments as new information comes to hand. If there are any further fishing-related deaths of Maui’s dolphins I will immediately review the current package of measures and if necessary make them even stronger.

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Background

Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins

- Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins are found only in New Zealand’s waters. They are among the world’s rarest dolphins.
- The species is estimated to number around 7,379 dolphins. It is divided into two subspecies—the Maui’s and South Island Hector’s dolphins.
- The Maui’s dolphin sub-species lives around the North Island’s west coast. There are an estimated 111 dolphins. The Department of Conservation (DOC) classifies them as “nationally critical”.
- The South Island Hector’s dolphin sub-species lives in three genetically and geographically distinct groups around the South Island. There are an estimated 89 on the south coast (a more recent but as yet unpublished estimate is 403), 1,791 on the east coast and 5,388 on the west coast—a total of 7,268 dolphins. DOC classifies them as “nationally endangered”.
- Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins are most often seen in murky waters close to shore. They usually live in groups of three to five, and feed on a variety of inshore species, including red cod, yellow eyed mullet, small kahawai and stargazers.
- They live for only around 20 years and breed slowly. Females don’t have their first calf until they are about seven or eight years old, and have a new calf only every two to four years. This means the species may be threatened by even occasional deaths caused by human activity.
- Fishing is the greatest known human threat to Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins. Where the cause of death is known, fishing has caused 74 per cent of recorded Hector’s dolphin deaths and 33 per cent of recorded Maui’s dolphin deaths.
- The Ministry of Fisheries (MFish) believes recorded fishing deaths are an underestimate because there is low observer coverage of commercial fisheries, no formal monitoring of recreational fishing, and poor incentives to report entanglements.
- Set nets are the main fishing threat to Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins. They can become entangled in the fine nylon nets set to catch fish in coastal waters.
- Other significant fishing threats are the trawl nets towed by vessels, and the drift nets used around lower reaches of the Waikato River by fishers targeting mullet.
- Other human threats include marine tourism, vessel traffic, mining, construction, coastal development, pollution, sedimentation, oil spills, plastic bags, marine farming and climate change.

Reducing the threat

- There are measures already in place to deal with the threats to Hector's and Maui's dolphins, including:
 - a recreational set net ban along the South Island east coast between the Waiau and Waitaki Rivers from 1 October to 31 March to four nautical miles offshore
 - a marine mammal sanctuary around Banks Peninsula in the South Island
 - a range of voluntary measures, mainly in the South Island
 - a commercial and recreational set net ban on the North Island west coast from Maunganui Bluff north of Kaipara Harbour to Pariokariwa Point north of New Plymouth—introduced in 2003
 - a requirement for recreational fishers to stay with their set nets on the South Island south coast at Te Waewae Bay, and on the South Island east coast from 1 October to 31 March at Kaikoura between the Waiau and Clarence Rivers—introduced in 2006.

Hector's and Maui's Dolphin Threat Management Plan.

- For the last two years, MFish and DOC have been working on a draft Threat Management Plan
- In August 2007 MFish and DOC released the draft plan for stakeholder and public consultation. It identified all human threats to the dolphins and sought feedback on potential options to manage them.
- MFish and DOC received about 2,500 submissions from interested parties here and internationally—including commercial and recreational fishers, environmental groups, iwi and members of the public.
- The Fisheries Minister also received nine petitions and more than 6,000 pre-printed postcards urging additional protection for the dolphins.
- The new fishing measures will be implemented under the Fisheries Act 1996.