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'VESTED INTEREST' ADVICE LEAVES ALL FUTURE FISHERIES MINISTERS BELOW SUSTAINABILITY THRESHOLD

Non-commercial fishing representatives, both amateur and customary, are adamant the Minister of Fisheries, Jim Anderton, has been thrown a 'hospital pass' with the heavily influenced one-way 'vested interest' advice he has received to support an amendment to the Fisheries Act, advice written in collusion with industry representatives.

Ministry of Fisheries officials have promoted the Fisheries Act 1996 Amendment Bill (No.2) in response to a recent High Court ruling. Justice Miller highlighted illegalities in the way section 13 was applied, based on available information, to reduce catch limits in orange roughy.

Rather than address issues raised by the Court, non-commercial fishers are concerned the proposed amendment to Section 13 will put future fisheries Ministers in a position of always having to set maximum catch limits with the least amount of information about the particular fish stock, thereby putting sustainability further at risk.

Richard Baker, President of the NZ Big Game Fishing Council, is worried about the impact on all fisheries, particularly inshore species.

"Sustainability has to be the bottom line in fisheries management. Section 13 is the key measure used to ensure the ongoing sustainability of our fisheries. Lowering the information threshold will mean the Minister will be compelled to set the highest, justifiable catch levels irrespective of the quality of information. "

A spokesperson for the Hokianga Accord, Paul Haddon, acknowledges the Minister's responsibility to lower some quota catch limits but disagrees that the law needs to be changed.

"It was poor advice from his Ministry that put the Minister in court, not any fault with current legislation. There are other measures that can be used. Those alternatives were outlined in our joint submissions, with the Council, on the Bill."

This issue, which has put the spotlight on Ministry practices, was extensively discussed during the recent Hokianga Accord hui in Paihia. Representatives from the mid north iwi fisheries forum, the Council and option4 reported on their attendance before the Primary Production Select Committee hearing in early August. The Committee, presumably acting on Ministry advice,

dismissed sensible alternatives put forward by non-commercial fishing interests.

These alternatives would enable future fisheries Ministers to set total allowable catches where the best information about a particular fish stock was poor, but would require Ministers to put sustainability first.

option4's spokesperson, Scott Macindoe, agrees. "Forcing future Ministers to maximise extraction will not ensure a healthy marine environment nor will it achieve the purpose of managing fisheries at a level that gives people fishing for food a reasonable chance of feeding their family".

"It is unacceptable that people who are dependent on the sea's bounty for food are being denied the opportunity to have input into this hasty amendment process."

Parliamentary debate is expected to continue in two weeks time so the Bill can be forced through for questionable fisheries management decisions to be made by October 1st. This is an unacceptably risky process that will enable decisions in the absence of reliable information.

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For more information:

Web page www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries_Mgmt/section13.htm

Website www.nzbgfc.org.nz New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council

Website www.option4.co.nz option4 lobby group

Website www.HokiangaAccord.co.nz Hokianga Accord fisheries