

10 May 2009

To Phil Heatley, Minister of Fisheries.

Thank you for your response to our previous letter (2/3/09) regarding the FRML for sea lions. While we can appreciate that you are acting on scientific advice, we do not understand how that advice can lead to an increase in the FRML while the population has declined so dramatically. We believe that the Breen-Kim model has not and can not predicted the current decline in pup production and this raises doubts regarding the reliability of the model being used. We understand through Brian Templeton (one of our Trustees) that the model has been peer-reviewed by international scientists. Due to the severity of the current decline we would like to request copies of this review and all correspondence within and between government departments and NIWA relating to these reviews to satisfy ourselves that your decisions are being made based upon sound science.

We also have grave concerns about the method of by-catch estimation. The number of sea lions caught is based upon a predetermined catch rate (5.65%). This was calculated as an average of catch rates over a period of several years (2.8%-11.8%). Since then the tow duration has increased by more than 50%, from 4.1 hours to 6.8 hours, but the predetermined catch rate has only increased by 7% (5.3% to 5.65%). In a worst case scenario the real catch rate could be 19.6%; 3.5 times the predetermined rate. In recent years 80% of by-catch has been female so even with the voluntary reduction by the fishing industry this would mean 18% (266) of breeding females are potentially being caught.

NZ sea lions are also being caught in other fisheries both within and just outside 6T fisheries area and we believe this is being under estimated due to a low rate of observer coverage in these fisheries. At the very least, more accurate data needs to be collected from these other fisheries and included in the model so better informed decisions can be made.

We urge you to exercise much greater caution at least until a more accurate model and measurement of catch rate can be implemented. The current population is similar to that of the Hector's dolphin which is now receiving multiple protection measures all around the country. You state that you have to consider utilisation of the fishery as well as the sea lions. What will happen if the sea lion population continues to decline? The squid fishery may have to be closed completely.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shaun McConkey', written in a cursive style.

Shaun McConkey
Chairman
New Zealand Sea Lion Trust