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Quota system hurting fish and fishers report



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FISHING INDUSTRY

Andy Brew

New Zealand's Quota Management System (QMS), long praised as a world-leading model for sustainable fisheries, is driving small-scale inshore fishers out of business and severely depleting coastal marine ecosystems, says a marine conservation group.

LegaSea released a report this month called Rescue Fish, which challenges official claims that over 80% of New Zealand's fish stocks are well managed.

Instead, it says the system is beset by widespread stock depletion, shifting ecological baselines, deteriorating inshore economics, and regulatory capture by large commercial corporate interests.

However, fishing industry representatives have hit back, saying the report repeatedly attributes complex environmental challenges to failures of the QMS without demonstrating that connection. They say it fails to consider factors in ecosystem decline such as recreational harvest, habitat degradation, sedimentation, urbanisation and water quality impacts.

According to the LegaSea report, five large corporate entities now control more than 80% of New Zealand's total quota market, which has inflated to an estimated value exceeding \$5 billion. Smaller inshore fishers rent or lease quota from large quota owners, and still have to pay the rent even if they don't catch any fish, the report says.

LegaSea advocate Trish Rea said this economic pressure created direct environmental consequences. Deprived of profit margins, fishers were pushed to use cheaper, high-impact catching methods rather than selective, sustainable ones.

"It creates the environment where depletion becomes the norm," she said.

"When they do go out, they're still going to pay for the diesel and the crew and all the costs, so when they do actually go fishing, they go and fish hard."

Rea said that when fishers fished "hard", they scooped up a vast array of species using cheap bulk harvesting methods, but weren't allowed to land fish they didn't have the quota lease for. If they did, they had to throw the dead fish back into the sea, depleting stocks of other fish unnecessarily.

Moana New Zealand chief executive

Steve Tarrant pushed back against claims that fisheries challenges indicated failure in the QMS framework.

"We do not accept that challenges in some stocks amount to a failure of the Quota Management System," he said.

Tarrant said Moana aimed to build inter-generational value from fisheries assets while ensuring those resources remained healthy and productive for generations.

The QMS remained "one of the strongest examples of fisheries management in the world" when guided by robust science, effective monitoring, and the willingness to take difficult action, he said.

Rea said the market concentration had left small operators with little power over pricing, while retail seafood prices soared.

"I saw Moana selling snapper fillets for \$77 a kilo," Rea said. "I looked at that and I thought, 'You'd be lucky if the guy with the gumboots on is getting four bucks for that fish'. Where does the rest go? It just gets sucked up by these corporates."

Tarrant said the price paid to a fisher for a whole fish and the retail price paid by a consumer for a premium fillet product were not directly comparable.

"Between landing and retail, seafood can incur costs for transport, processing, filleting, packaging, refrigeration, food safety, quality assurance, distribution, compliance, labour and retail operations.

"Only a portion of a whole fish becomes a skinless, boneless fillet, so the retail price reflects both the value of the fish and the cost of turning it into a convenient, ready-to-cook product."

Lisa Futschek, chief executive of Seafood NZ, wouldn't comment on the impact of the QMS on local fishing communities, but said the report presented ecosystem decline as evidence of QMS failure without considering recreational harvest, habitat degradation, sedimentation, urbanisation and water quality impacts.

"This report repeatedly attributes these complex environmental challenges to failures of the QMS without demonstrating that connection," she said.

"We support regular review of fisheries management settings and better tools to ensure sustainable utilisation and responsive management. However, that is very



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different from accepting the report’s central claim that the system has failed.”



LegaSea says high fuel and quota rental costs, combined with a low return for the fish they catch, are “improverishing” small-scale independent fishers.