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CONSERVATION SERVICES PROGRAMME DRAFT ANNUAL PLAN 2024/25

1) The NZ Federation of Commercial Fishermen welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Conservation Services Programme Draft Annual Plan 2024/25.

2) We wish to endorse the submissions made by the Inshore and Deepwater Councils of Seafood New Zealand and other industry organisations, companies and fishers but feel that we need to make a supplementary submission on behalf of our members.

WHO WE ARE

3) The Federation is a national organisation that represents and advocates for the independent, private owner-operator and their crew. We currently have 375 members and they make up approximately 30% of all inshore owner-operators and crew operating in coastal New Zealand waters. We represent the fishers on the water - the skippers and the crew -whose activities and livelihoods will be most affected by the outcome of this consultation.

4) Any queries in respect of this submission should be directed to Doug Saunders-Loder President, NZ Federation of Commercial Fishermen (Tel 021 527 472).

OUR SUBMISSION

Introductory Comments

5) The Federation does not agree with all the projects within the draft Plan. We comment on those to which we object.

6) The Federation does not agree with the scope statements made in the Overview of the Plan. In particular, Conservation Services are a construct of the Fisheries Act 1996. The Act defines conservation services as "*outputs produced in relation to the adverse effects of commercial fishing on protected species... including*

(a) *research relating to those effects on protected species:*

(b) *research on measures to mitigate the adverse effects of commercial fishing on protected species:*

(c) *the development of population management plans under the Wildlife Act 1953 and the Marine Mammals Protection Act 1978*

7) As such CSP cannot have a vision statement that has a scope that exceeds that which is contained in the Fisheries Act. The Act requires the services to be in respect of adverse effects on protected species. With assessments of the risk to the sustainability of protected species for seabirds, marine mammals, protected sharks and fish in place, we would expect research projects would only involve those species with a risk ratio with a median or upper 95% credible limit over 1. Other species may still be at risk of capture but their sustainability is not assessed as being at risk. We oppose any research into those species. We disagree that the scope of CSP includes *"Adequate information on population level and susceptibility to fisheries effects exists for protected species populations identified as at medium or higher risk from fisheries"* Objective (E). Those labels are not used in the latest assessments and in any event are species with a median or upper 95% confidence limit risk ratio less than 1.0 and are not subject to an adverse effect from commercial fishing.

8) The Federation has an expectation that the CSP budget will reduce over time as adverse effects to protected species are mitigated and no longer require an annual investment of $3m by industry. In the past decades, the risk to protected species has declined significantly as shown by Ministry commissioned independent risk assessments to the point where there are few protected species at an adverse risk from commercial fishing. Notwithstanding those risk reductions and investment in mitigation measures, the CSP budget has not declined. Increasingly, the projects being undertaken with CSP funding often involve non-threatened species or are unrelated to the mitigation of risk.

9) CSP appears to have become a source of funding for scientists rather than a strategic initiative to reduce the risk of an adverse effect to protected species. That characterisation of CSP is strengthened with the project development process operated by CSP. Rather than develop a strategic plan to address adverse risk on a prioritised basis, CSP continues to operate with an ad-hoc, scientist bidding process that results in scarce funds being pepper-potted between projects without achieving significant gains in conservation value. That is not acceptable. CSP is to support protected species, not scientists.

Comments on New Projects

10) The Federation does not agree with all the projects within the draft Plan. We comment on those new projects to which we object. We have only commented on the inshore fisheries projects which is the area of activity of our members. It should not be assumed that we support the deepwater project.

11) We do not support all the existing projects which are to be funded this year but this consultation does not extend to those existing projects.

INT2022-02 Identification of seabirds captured in New Zealand fisheries, INT2022-03 Identification, storage, and genetics of cold-water coral bycatch specimens, INT2023-04 Identification of marine mammals, turtles and protected fish captured in New Zealand fisheries

12) With the reduction in observer coverage, we would expect that the number of birds, mammals and corals returned to land from observers would also decrease. We note that CSP intends to use those services for the identification of protected species imagery. That makes sense but we would expect CSP accordingly to reword the service descriptions.

13) The reduction in the number of carcases being returned by observers from inshore fishing activities will compromise the research undertaken with the carcases. We would appreciate DOC advising how they plan to continue to obtain carcases for research in the event of no observer returns, presuming that the research undertaken previously was of value to the conservation of protected species.

INT2024-02 Port-based audit and protected species retention programme

14) We are opposed to this project.

15) Liaison officers are already employed to undertake the role of advising on the use of mitigation and auditing PSRMPs and we see no value in duplicating the expense. The activity would be at best part-time when the fleet is in port and we would not want to replicate the problems previously experienced with inshore observers who were compelled to spend part of their deployment onshore to the cost of industry. Monitoring of mitigation use is already an integral part of camera monitoring programme and is more effective and informative than dockside monitoring of mitigation measures.

16) If this project is primarily to process landed protected species specimens, then DOC should be able to undertake those processes with existing DOC staff.

17) If the project is to ensure that the risk to protected species in areas and at times known to be particularly problematic for protected species captures is to be mitigated, industry has already initiated programmes to address those issues and we see no need for CSP to replicate industry developments.

INT2024-03 Understanding the effects of fishing depth on turtle and seabird bycatch

18) The Federation recognises that the prospect is for an increased catch of turtle with climate change resulting in warmer seas. We can support the need for targeted research but this project is not appropriate.

19) The project attempts to bundle both turtle and seabird risk into one project. Industry is well aware of the seabird issues and the impact of depth on catches and there are already sufficient strands of work in place to address seabird risk. Turtle captures are rare events and research is difficult to target turtle captures.

20) We can see value in receiving additional information from TDRs and would prefer the project be more focused on the provision of TDRs to support mitigation.

INT2024-04 Exploring impacts and recovery potential of protected deep-sea stony corals, utilising Remotely Operated Vehicle capability on RV Sonne in the New Zealand region

21) We note that NIWA has already committed itself to this project with funding from other NIWA sources. While there may be some direct benefits to New Zealand from the survey, the proposed project is essentially to refinance NIWA.

22) With the small trawl footprint in the deep sea, there is no evidence to assert that bottom trawling poses a significant adverse effect on deep-sea stony corals. Until that risk is demonstrable, coral research projects should not be cost recovered.

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INT2024-06 Interaction of spotted shags with northern North Island set net fisheries

24) There is significant recreational setnetting activity in North Island waters frequented by spotted shags. Whether spotted shags die in set nets, recreational or commercial, has yet to be demonstrated.

25) Shags inhabit the inshore waters which are frequented by mankind but are also the most impacted by mankind including urbanisation, sedimentation, pollution and general disturbance. Those factors must contribute to the decline in spotted shag populations.

26) There are no grounds for cost recovery, let alone full cost recovery.

INT2024-07 Collection and curation of tissue samples from protected fishes and turtles

27) We oppose this project. CSP is not to be used as the basis for taxonomic research.

POP2024-02 Improving knowledge on coral life history traits: assessing reproductive capacity to infer productivity, vulnerability and resilience of protected deep-sea corals in the New Zealand region.

28) With the small trawl footprint in the deep sea, there is no evidence to assert that bottom trawling poses a significant adverse effect on deep-sea stony corals. Until that risk is demonstrable, coral research projects should not be cost recovered.

MIT2024-01 Protected Species Liaison Project

29) While we will continue our support for this project, that support is conditional on the need for an independent evaluation of the programme. The benefit sought of improved mitigation on vessels to the extent possible has probably been achieved and the programme is providing little more than a maintenance role with mitigation improvements arising from other avenues of investment, such as weighted hooks, net design, use of dolphin deterrent devices.

MIT2024-02 Enhancing seabird bycatch mitigation across the set and soak periods in surface longline fisheries and

MIT2024-03 Assessment of weighted hooks as a seabird bycatch mitigation option for surface longline fisheries

30) The Federation is thankful that CSP now recognises the risk to seabirds during the soak phase of a fishing event.

31) Fishers are already trialling weighted hooks to mitigate the risk and they do not need CSP or FNZ officials or other interested parties to impose their beliefs as to effective mitigation on their fishing operations. Those parties have for years told, and continue to tell, fishers how to fish and many still advocate the "3 out of 3" approach to mitigation on setting without accepting its low level of success. The fleet has adopted a technological effective approach with hookpods and now increasingly weighted hooks.

32) Industry is more than capable of working with fishers to promote the benefits of weighted hooks. We suggest some of the funding be re-allocated to Seafood New Zealand to enable them to continue their work with this fleet.

33) The Federation supports the intent to measure the effectiveness of weighted hooks but has doubts as to the methodology to be employed.

MIT2024-05 Testing the utility of visual deterrent options to mitigate incidental bycatch of protected species in set nets

34) While we can see possible benefits in the use of visual deterrent mitigation options, given the low capture rate of any protected species in setnets, it will not be possible to extract scientifically robust results from the research.

35) We would prefer the research focus on the impacts on catch levels of fish species. Should the deterrents not impact catch levels of fish, fishers could choose whether to adopt and trial such technology but without any claims as to its performance.

MIT2024-06 Efficacy of seabird mitigation in large vessel trawl

36) The greatest contributor to the assessment of seabirds' risk is cryptic deaths. We support focussed research to provide robust informative estimates of such deaths.

37) Monitoring of warp strikes by observers has failed to provide robust assessments of the efficacy of warp mitigation or the effect on seabirds. We see no reason to add one more unsuccessful project to that list of failures.

38) What is needed is a robust research project to assess the impact of the mitigation and the level of captures. That can only be undertaken by a structured, on the sea research programme. An observer programme will not achieve the outcomes sought.

MIT2024-07 Hector's dolphin acoustic deterrence devices in trawl fisheries

39) We do not support CSP undertaking this project.

40) Seafood New Zealand has a project underway to identify existing use of deterrents. The Federation has already compiled a review of recent international research on acoustic deterrence devices and their effectiveness.

41) We would however support CSP levying for a generic project and funding the work to be undertaken by SNZ from those levies. We encourage SNZ and CSP work to achieve that outcome.

Yours

Doug Saunders-Loder
President NZFCF