

National Plan of Action to Reduce the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in New Zealand Fisheries

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Introduction

As a partner in the international efforts to reduce incidental seabird catch in fishing, New Zealand has developed a National Plan of Action (NPOA) focusing on how to reduce seabird deaths within New Zealand fisheries. Drafted by the Department of Conservation and the Ministry of Fisheries, the NPOA proposes to work with the fishing industry to limit the level of seabird mortality for each fishery.

Background

New Zealand, with its extensive coastline, productive ocean and numerous islands, is an important breeding ground for about 80 seabird species. In fact a third of these species are endemic to New Zealand – they breed nowhere else in the world. Some seabird species, particularly albatross and petrel, are under threat from fishing operations, especially longline and trawl fishing.

In the past seven years, 17 different species of albatross and 19 of petrel have been recorded as caught in fishing activity in New Zealand waters. Globally, half the albatross populations being monitored are in decline – and for most, fishing is a key threat.

The main commercial longline fisheries affecting seabirds are the tuna, bluenose, snapper and ling fisheries. Albatrosses and petrels in particular are vulnerable to longlining because they dive beneath the surface and take baited hooks while the lines are being set. In certain conditions, the birds can get hooked or tangled in the line and drown. Observation of seabird mortality in New Zealand has also identified a problem with trawl fisheries, especially the squid, scampi and hoki fisheries. Seabirds are killed in trawl fisheries when they collide with or become entangled in the fishing equipment.

Incidental catch of seabirds has also been reported in set net fisheries, which mainly target in-shore fish stocks. Seabirds that dive for food can become entangled in the net and drown. While there have also been anecdotal reports of seabirds such as shags, shearwaters and gannets being caught in pots and recreational line fisheries, there is little known about the extent of the problem in these areas.

The fishing industry has taken steps itself to reduce incidental seabird catch, including funding research into new or improved ways to mitigate the problem, voluntarily adopting codes of practice, and adopting best practice ways of fishing. However, New Zealand wants to ensure its expectations of the fishing industry with regard to seabird mortality are clearly laid out, and is doing so through the NPOA.

One of key advantages of the NPOA's approach is that it is collaborative. It encourages the fishing industry to work with other interested parties to take ownership of the incidental catch problem and take positive steps to reduce seabird deaths. However, if this approach does not succeed, a management approach based on regulation will be implemented.

Scope

The NPOA will apply to:

- all seabird species absolutely or partially protected under the Wildlife Act 1953;
- commercial and non-commercial (i.e. recreational and customary) fisheries;
- all New Zealand fisheries waters, and;
- high seas fisheries in which New Zealand flagged vessels participate, or where foreign flagged vessels catch seabird populations that breed in New Zealand.

Goals

The NPOA has two goals. First: to ensure that the level of seabird bycatch in New Zealand fisheries is such that the long-term viability of seabird populations is not threatened. Second: to further reduce seabird bycatch as far as possible, taking into account advances in technology, knowledge and financial implications.

Management Proposals

Codes of Practice

Fisheries identified as having known seabird interactions are the snapper, ling, bluenose, joint venture tuna and domestic tuna longline fisheries, the ling autoline fishery, and the squid, hoki and scampi trawl fisheries. For each of these fisheries, Codes of Practice will be developed. Codes will be drafted by industry participants, but will require approval by a Technical Working Group of industry, government departments, environmental groups, iwi and other interested parties. Codes of Practice will include:

- details of the fishing practices those in the industry will follow;
- voluntary limits on the level of seabird mortality;
- ways to promote education and awareness about the reduction of seabird mortality;
- penalties for not complying with the code;
- how compliance with the code will be monitored.

Fisheries will also be required to decrease the level of seabird mortality over time. The Codes of Practice will detail how this will be achieved. The performance of each fishery will be reviewed annually by the Technical Working Group and measured against its Code of Practice.

Mandatory Actions

Specific fishing practices and catch limits will be made mandatory if these are not established or adhered to voluntarily through Codes of Practice. In addition, where there is sufficient information to allow effective measures to be put in place, mandatory catch limits and input controls will be adopted.

Other Measures

Work is proposed to examine how economic measures can be used to further reduce incidental seabird catch. Legislation will also be reviewed, in consultation with interested groups, to consider legal options for action against individual vessels failing to take reasonable precautions to avoid seabird catch.

Other Fisheries

Domestic : Little is known about the level of seabird mortality in other domestic fisheries including those using set nets and pots. The main objective for these fisheries under the NPOA is to gain more information about the extent and nature of their impact on seabird populations. This will enable appropriate management actions to be developed and applied where necessary.

International : A different set of rules and regulations apply to international fisheries, meaning that an alternative means of managing seabird mortality in these fisheries is necessary. Codes of practices will be developed for New Zealand flagged vessels in international fisheries on a case-by-case basis. Codes for international fisheries will be subject to the same consultation, evaluation and review requirements. The extent of seabird mortality in international fisheries is still largely unknown, including the level of catch by New Zealand flagged vessels, which is why it is also important to gather more information.

Governance of the NPOA

In addition to the Technical Working Group already mentioned, a Protected Species/Fisheries Interactions Management Group will be established. The Management Group will primarily comprise Government agency representatives and will make recommendations to the Ministers of Fisheries and Conservation relating to the ongoing management and implementation of the NPOA, including undertaking five-yearly reviews of it.

Process

The draft NPOA has been consulted on twice with the most recent process finishing in late 2003. It has been revised following this consultation and was submitted to the Ministers of Conservation and Fisheries in late January 2004 for their final consideration. Implementation will begin once Ministers have considered and approved a final NPOA. It is anticipated that the NPOA will be implemented in a staged way through 2004 and 2005.