NEW PLAN FOR MUD CRAB FISHERY

The minimum size of mud crabs retained by commercial fishermen will be increased by 10 millimetres and tougher penalties will be introduced for over potting, under amendments to the Northern Territory Mud Crab Fishery Management Plan.

The minimum size increase will apply to both female and male mud crabs.

Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries Kon Vatskalis received 12 submissions to the proposed amendments after they were circulated for public comment late last year.

Mr Vatskalis said the amendments seek to enhance prospects for the replenishment of the wild mud crab stock.

“Over the past three years we’ve seen a significant decline in catch rates – from 1139 tonnes in 2001 to 393 tonnes in 2003, 425 tonnes in 2004 and 303 tonnes in 2005.

“This serious decline, together with a reduction in the average size of mud crabs in the commercial catch means we have to act now to ensure the future sustainability of the fishery.

“I accept that these changes will impact on the commercial industry in the short term, but industry members and the NT Crab Fishermen’s Association agree that maintaining the status quo is not an option - we must act urgently.

“We’ve seen a reduced size of mating male crabs, an increase in commercial fishing capacity through an extension of the fishing season, multiple pot lifts each day and over potting.

“A fundamental principle of ecological sustainable development is that we act in precautionary way. Commercial fishers are causing strain on the mud crab fishery – ultimately affecting the potential for recruitment.

“The commercial sector harvests around 80% of the entire catch and anecdotal advice suggests that recreational anglers are enjoying a successful season in areas where commercial fishers are excluded – these changes do not effect recreational anglers.

Amendments to the Northern Territory Mud Crab Fishery Management Plan are expected to be finalised by May 1, 2006.

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