MUD CRAB PROPOSAL LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

Minister for Primary Industry and Fisheries Kon Vatskalis has called for submissions on proposed amendments to the Northern Territory Mud Crab Management Plan.

The proposed amendments include an increase to the minimum size of mud crabs retained by commercial fishers and tougher penalties for those who commit more than two offences under the Mud Crab Management Plan.

Mr Vatskalis said the proposal is aimed at ensuring the long-term sustainability of the mud crab fishery.

“The commercial crabbing industry takes up to 80% of the total catch of mud crabs per year and we have seen a significant decline in the industry’s total catch number and catch rates over the last three years, from 1100 tonnes in 2001 to 425 tonnes in 2004.

“Unless drastic action is taken now, this valuable fishery is at risk of collapse and I believe that everything must be done to ensure that does not happen,” said Mr Vatskalis.

Scientific evidence shows there are biological indicators that suggest the fishery is in serious trouble. A reduction in the average female mud crab size has also prompted the release of the proposed amendments for consideration.

“At this stage, I believe the best possible way forward is to put in place serious measures to provide greater protection to the breeding stock and seriously discourage commercial crabbers from over potting – a practice that has greatly contributed to the problem we are now faced with.

“Industry, members of the community, and other interested parties have 28 days to lodge a submission and I look forward to considering all comments put forward. Maintaining the status quo is simply not an option.

“I understand this proposal will not please everyone, but if tough decisions are not taken now, our mud crab fishery is unlikely to survive,” he said.

The package of amendments includes:

• Increasing the minimum size of mud crabs caught by commercial fishers by 10mm
• Prohibition of commercially unsuitable mud crabs
• A requirement of commercial fishers to check crabs at the point of capture to ensure they are of legal size and commercial suitability
• Allowing the use of holding cages by commercial fishermen
• An increase in penalties for over potting by commercial fishers
• Limiting the use of one vessel under each crab licence.
• Penalties for abandoning mud crab pots
• Refusal of entry to the commercial fishery for 2 years for any individual who commits two serious offences under the management plan

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