SESSION 4

WHY CHANGING TO A QUOTA SYSTEM WOULD BE THE DEATH KNELL OF THE WESTERN ROCK LOBSTER FISHERY.

Supporters of a quota system of management invariably have the simplistic view that setting a limit on the catch taken will on its own save a fishery from over exploitation. I will set out the reasons why this doesn't work, with examples from other lobster fisheries where this philosophy will lead to the eventual failure of the fishery.

These are the reasons why a quota managed fishery will fail:

REASON 1. Poor scientific advice

All fisheries rely on accurate impartial advice from the scientists responsible for examining the particular fishery. Without exception, this advice has been at best flawed, sometimes totally incompetent.

With input controlled fisheries, this poor advice has some mitigation in that by its nature, the control of effort in the short term at least prevents overfishing. Output controlled fisheries, on the other hand, can collapse in a very short time with the incompetent, often optimistic levels of catch set by the scientists. The over optimistic levels set are generally supported by the short sighted amongst the fishermen. The more visionary fishermen have little chance in convincing other fishermen of the need for caution in the face of opposition from the scientists. The effect is to very quickly lead to the overfishing of the stock

This has been shown in a spectacular manner in the WRL fishery over the past 14 years, when a group of fishermen have consistently urged that effort must be restrained to compensate for the rapid increased in effective effort with the advances in technology in the fleet, and this being actively denied by the scientists, making it impossible to convince the majority of fishermen to support this idea.

The reduction in effort and further protection for the breeding stock instituted in 1994, when 18% of pots were removed and the taking of setose females banned, saw a rapid improvement in general stock levels and in particular the breeding stock, which allowed for 12 years of excellent recruitment and good catches.

However, these catches were also the result of huge advances in technology- computer based pinpoint navigation systems, rapid advances in echo sounders able to pinpoint changes in otherwise flat bottom, secure communications using mobile phones, accurate weather prediction systems, large fast vessels able to exploit the remote areas of deep water, big fast jetboats able to work the shallow reef areas, and most importantly the rapid rise in skill levels of the fishermen.

Because these increases in effort were not able to be measured by them, they were ignored by the scientists responsible for providing advice, and together with a poorly lead, weak RLIAC, nothing was done to restrain this effort increase for 12 years. In this time the catch has only been maintained by increasingly exploiting the residual stock, and this can be seen by looking at the catch composition over the past 8 years, when the previously predominant A and B sizes steadily became a smaller part of the

catch, and the larger animals from our reserves in the residual stock previously not exploited became a greater part. This was not sustainable as can now be seen.

What happened in this regard in other Australian lobster fisheries?

In SA, the SE fishery was the first Australian lobster fishery to become managed under a quota system. This has seemingly worked well for many years, with easily caught lobsters taken in the shallows. A couple of years ago the scientists in SA actually promoted an increase by 200t in the TAC, despite (or in ignorance of) a rapidly increasing amount of physical pot lifts required to take the catch has beaten the shallows down, and is unable to take the quota fishing in the previously lightly fished deep water grounds using more pot lifts than when the fishery changed to quota. This does not take into account the probable 50% increase in effective effort over the last 15 years, again probably because the scientists are unable to measure it. The fishery is gradually moving North towards the only ground that supports an undersize population off the mouth of the Murray River.

The Tasmanian lobster fishery moved to quota 10 years ago after a closely fought debate, and is now finding itself in trouble for different reasons which will be covered below. Again, the inability of the scientists' to understand or predict how fishermen's behaviour will change in order to react to different circumstances is part of the problem.

REASON 2: Regional and spatial depletion

Under an input management system, fishermen exploit the whole fishery, as the impetus is to catch as much as possible under the constraints of the amount of effort allowed.

However, when a Quota system is introduced, the whole thing changes. The fishermen now want to catch the most valuable lobster as easily and cheaply as possible. Inevitably, multiple pricing for different size and colour of lobster will be introduced, so the most valuable will be targeted, particularly those close to home

Inevitably, the catch history from the whole available ground fished under input is taken to set the TAC when a fishery has moved to Quota. whereas there is not this much available in "targeted" areas. The SA SE fishery had some cushion in the 10-15% of "cash", or black market catch which was not counted when the TAC was set, which helped for a while, until efficiency caught up and the catch exceeded the sustainable amount available. The Tasmanian fishery had no such buffer.

So let's look at the problem this is causing in the Tasmanian fishery.

When the Tasmanian fishery was changed to Quota ten years ago, the catch was 1500 tonnes, and this was set as the TAC. Of this 1500 tonnes, 2-300 tonnes was taken by a small number of large vessels off the West and NW edge of the shelf in the big winter and spring swells during the passage of fronts, and who typically had a catch of 20-30 tonnes. Additionally, there was a "whites" run of bout 150 tonnes off the SW Cape in the summer, of low value lobsters.

As was warned during the debate, these lobsters are not now taken although they were part of the catch used to make up the TAC of 1500 tonnes. Why is this? The big boats that used to fish off the West coast in the winter received 5.8 tonnes as their quota

initially, because of ridiculous restriction on pots owned, and is now 8 tonnes, and it is obvious that they will choose to either leave the fishery, or take this small amount in a far more congenial area . Similarly, the "whites" run is not taken, as it is of low value. In addition, the more remote areas of Flinders and King Islands in Bass Strait are now lightly fished, probably because of their remote location making it costly to fish there, and remember, the imperative is to catch the most valuable lobsters as cheaply as possible.

So what we have now in Tasmania is a fleet of smaller boats with a skipper leasing the quota trying to take the TAC of 1500 tonnes catching 600g red animals (the most valuable),on the coast south of Hobart. This will fail, as there was never that amount of lobsters there in the first place; so this fishery will be a victim of regional depletion. Unfortunately, this may be terminal, as the skill levels held in longstanding fishing families have been discarded, and the ability to exploit the "hard" lobsters has been lost, probably forever.

This non fishing of the deep water may be suggested as a benefit, to protect the breeding stock, but as it is almost certain that the Tassie recruitment all comes from SA, it will do no good at all.

In the SE of SA, a different thing may be the cause of the problem. In this fishery, the fleet targeted, seemingly successfully, 600g red animals in the shallows close to their home port, discarding the rest. They did this year after year, removing one year class every year. Although never before studied in a lobster fishery, there is some evidence from other fisheries in the world that the continual removal of one year class from the stock has caused the eventual collapse of the particular fishery.

Certainly, the original TAC was set from the history of the fleet using the whole fishery, and the consequence of the whole catch being achieved by taking 600g animals from the shallows was never going to work, and the result has been regional depletion, in this case, of the shallows.

REASON 3: The absolute unfairness of the allocation of each share in the fishery.

This is the doozie. I hear people on their hind feet spouting that the WRLF could have some element of catch history applied to the allocation process. IT CAN"T!

Without catch history for each pot being available, **and it isn't**, there is no way to allocate a different catch to each pot. Every fisherman will receive the same allocation in their zone as everybody else, and it is a reward to the lazy and indolent, and a penalty for the smart and hard working. And don't think they are the BIG fishermen, many "small" fishermen have very high per pot catch rates, even though they have small boats and less pots. It can only be kg's per unit, same for all.

In Tassie, the unfairness was savage. Some fishermen were lifestyle fishermen catching 1-1.5t in little boats on the East coast, and they got 5t, the same as the guy with an 80' boat that did it hard on the West coast in the winter to catch 20 or 30t. In SA there were ongoing court cases about the allocation process, as there was in NZ. There, one fisherman successfully appealed at not receiving any catch history because he was in Jail at the time!

REASON 4: Cost, complexity and practical difficulty of the actual operation of a Quota fishery

The cost of operating a Quota based lobster fishery has previously been estimated by FWA at an additional $60/unit above our $147/unit presently paid under cost recovery.

Daryl Sykes (NZ lobster fishery) in his paper states that it is a myth that a Quota system is more expensive to enforce. Daryl provides no proof about this, and it is really on an opinion unsupported by facts. The Tasmanian fishery has had a huge increase in costs to fish, and our Fisheries have estimated a considerable increase in costs to run our fishery under Quota.

The real problem is the difficulty to actually manage and count to a fine degree what is caught..

Managing the paperwork associated with running a Quota is time consuming and probably the last thing a tired fishermen needs at the end of his day. In Tassie, the fisheries have forensic accountants going through in fine detail fishermen's landing records from previous years, and prosecuting them for quite minor discrepancy from years ago, and in their case it is a criminal prosecution, not a fisheries one.

Managing illegal catch would be an almost insoluble problem on our coast, where in reasonable weather it is possible to land illegal catch directly onto the beach anywhere pretty well from Hillaries to north of Dongara We would have to do away with all the small anchorages and land our catch at centralized official weighing stations. What would happen to the catch from the Abrolhos transported on carrier boats is difficult to imagine. It would certainly be far more complex loading the carrier boats than it is at present.

REASON 5: Loss of ownership of the fishery by the fishermen.

The history in other Quota fisheries is mixed. In NZ, the majority of the Quota is controlled by the Maori's, the factories, investors, and retired fishermen and the actual fishermen are pretty much serfs. In Tassie, the situation is similar. The only fishery where the fishermen seem to have maintained control is SA.

In WA, the situation is that already the factories, retired fishermen and investors control maybe 30% of the pots, and the likehood is that this would rapidly increase with the introduction of Quota.

REASON 6: Loss of the skilful, hard working fishermen.

With the introduction of Quota, history in Tasmania and NZ shows that the skilful fishermen leave the industry, and the fishery becomes less efficient, with a loss of ability to exploit the more difficult ground, and more effort is needed to take the catch, because of the loss of skills.

Conclusion:

In the present circumstances of probable recruit failure, from overfishing of the resource, the most irresponsible action a Minister could make would be to move to Quota.

Finally, the will to make input controls work has been shown by our Minister, albeit in desperate circumstances, and has demonstrated last season how effectively take can be managed using input measures, and how much it can reduce fisherman's costs, at the same time removing the unprofitable catch peaks. A Quota managed fishery would without doubt have to catch much of the catch during the whites peak while they are easy and cheap to catch, particularly if the extreme measures of no input control as has been advocated is adopted. It is interesting to note that all the quota fisheries in Australia have a lower CPUE than WRL now has, and this is a always a good measure of the success of management

Quotas demonstrably do not "FIX" fishery problems and as has been shown, introduce a whole raft of other issues. The WRLF is going to have to go through a number of years of greatly reduced catches, to try and rebuild the stock, because of mismanagement. To try and introduce a quota into this uncertainty before DOF research has demonstrated that they have a "handle" on stock depletion is madness.

Good bye from me, and good luck!

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