



Call for complete lobster closure callous

A CALL for the WA rock lobster fishery to be closed for the foreseeable future is an outrageous and naive attack by the Conservation Council and Wilderness Society on the livelihoods of fishermen.

Agricultural Region MLC Brian Ellis said the two conservation groups seemed to be more interested in protecting lobsters than families, and appeared to lack a practical understanding of the industry.

Mr Ellis's electorate includes fishing ports such as Lancelin, Cervantes, Geraldton, Kalbarri, Port Dennison and Dongara.

Mr Ellis is concerned that the two conservation groups appear to be basing their argument solely on the basis of the puerulus count without taking into consideration other management measures.

"The fact that Greens leader Giz Watson supported the Fish Resources Management Bill without argument in the Parliament last week suggests that not all conservationists hold the extreme views of the Conservation Council and Wilderness Society," Mr Ellis said.

"It suggests to me that they are failing to take the whole management practice into account.

"The government is optimistic that the puerulus count is beginning to slowly increase, but has nevertheless taken a precautionary approach to sustaining the fishery.

"The Minister has reduced the catch to 5,500 tonnes for this year and the two following years, even though the sustainable catch for this year is estimated to

be 6,500 tonnes.

"In the meantime, research is continuing into the effect of ocean currents and wind patterns on puerulus settlement to determine whether - as some fishermen believe - they may be settling further offshore, away from the collectors."

Dave Thompson from Indian Ocean Rock Lobsters in Cervantes said the government needed to look at the take of recreational fishers.

"It saddens me that we can be attacked by these organisation who obviously have no understanding of the industry, when we were the first industry to be accredited with the worldwide Marine Stewardship Council," he said.

"They have not talked to us, they have just come out and made this statement.

"The industry has undergone massive rationalization, which was needed, but the government still fails to recognise that the amateur fisherman are a lot bigger concern for our juvenile stock.

"Commercial fishers have had massive cut backs, but the amateurs have not been restricted.

"It has been stated that amateur fishers only take about five per cent of the stock, but it is much higher than that.

"The restrictions placed on a commercial fishery is unfair compared to the amateur having no restriction at all and can pull pots any day of the week.

"The number of juvenile stock being targeted and unchecked, would be closer to 70 per cent."

A major issue at the recent

worldwide Marine Stewardship Council's annual audit of the WA lobster fishery was the management and research response to address low settlements.

Mr Ellis said the Fisheries Department continued to be internationally accountable for its management practices.

He said that, if it is good enough for a world-recognised sustainability body to take a broad management approach, local conservation groups should at least wait for the outcome before calling for a century-old industry to be abandoned on the basis of one factor in the process.

The MSC Auditor has requested clarification on what the effort reduction measures are estimated to yield in breeding stock terms over the next five years.

The auditor is also likely to request an independent, transparent and robust risk assessment to determine whether the poor settlements are breeding-stock induced.

Mr Ellis said the Conservation Council and Wilderness Society had jumped the gun and were shooting down the livelihoods of about 400 families.

Mr Ellis said it was impractical and heartless to expect fishermen to dispose of multi-million dollar assets at sale prices - and then find the money to start up again in a few years.

"It is better for fishermen to ride out a few rough waves over the next few years on a smaller catch until the full picture is known than to send their livelihood to the bottom of the ocean before the research is complete," he said.



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Page 2 of 2



■ Agricultural Region MLC Brian Ellis.