

Submission Swan River Crabbing

Hon Kim Chance MLC
Minister for Fisheries
11th Floor, Dumas House
2 Havelock Street
WEST PERTH WA 6005

Dear Minister

I am writing to bring to your attention two very important and inextricably linked matters that are of the utmost concern to Recfishwest and the wider recreational fishing community.

Both matters are in relation to the management of the Swan-Canning Estuarine Fishery.

Firstly, the Swan-Canning Estuarine Fishery is managed by a combination of regulations and licence conditions. An important regulation is Regulation 54 of the Fish Resources Management Regulations 1995 (FRMA). Entitled 'Crab nets in the Swan or Canning River' this states in part:

'(2) A person who is the holder of a commercial fishing licence who is using a fishing net to fish for crabs in the waters referred to in subregulation (1) must not use -

- (a) more than 8 fishing nets at any one time; or
- (b) any fishing net exceeding 64 metres in length

Penalty: \$5000'

Subregulation (1) refers to waters of the Swan River or the Canning River or their tributaries.

Despite there being no ambiguity in the meaning of this regulation we have become aware that Swan-Canning River commercial fishers are using nets in excess of the permitted length and that this has been, and still is, condoned by the Department of Fisheries.

Recfishwest has brought this matter to the attention of the Department of Fisheries and has endeavoured to arrange to meet with the commercial fishers in a meeting chaired by the Department. So far we have not had any success in any of these attempts to negotiate the issue or have any meaningful input into the management process that so clearly impacts on our constituents.

The failure of the Department to objectively enforce the Act is of great concern to Recfishwest. It is our firm position that the Department of Fisheries must immediately enforce Regulation 54.

Unfortunately, and despite our advice to this effect to the Department of Fisheries on numerous occasions since July 2002, the Department of Fisheries continues to fail in its duty to enforce this regulation.

Minister, I am sure that you will recognise the seriousness of this matter and ask that you address the matter by immediately instructing the Department of Fisheries to enforce Regulation 54.

Secondly, the strong Recfishwest view described above is directly related to a very serious concern that the Board of Recfishwest has regarding commercial crabbing in the Swan-Canning Estuary. We have been worried for some time about the proportion of crabs taken by commercial fishers in the Swan-Canning Estuary.

In all the other West Coast estuaries the catch of crabs is dominated by the recreational take. Given the accessibility of estuaries for recreational pursuits this seems to us to be a reasonable outcome. However, the commercial take of crabs in the Swan-Canning is three quarters of the total. This is the reverse of the situation in the other estuaries and particularly unbalanced given the high population of the Perth metropolitan area.

During recent years the number of crabs caught by recreational fishers has significantly declined at the same time that there has been an increase in the focus of the remaining four Swan River commercial fishers toward targeting crabs. The nett result has been that despite there being a significant reduction in the numbers of commercial fishing licenses in the Swan-Canning Estuarine Fishery through fishery adjustment scheme buy backs, the overall commercial catch has remained relatively constant.

Recfishwest has had the view that this disproportionate allocation of Swan River crabs is an issue that must be addressed by the integrated management allocation process. However we have been amazed to see that the recent draft interim management plan proposes to double the permitted commercial fishing effort by recommending that each commercial fisher be allowed to use 1000 metres of crab net in the waters of the Swan-Canning Estuary.

It is not acceptable to Recfishwest that the disproportionate shares of the crab catch between the recreational and commercial fishing sectors should be further complicated and exacerbated by changing the commercial fishing management rules by allowing an increase in permitted fishing gear.

Minister, we urge that you take into account the strength of our views in this matter and reconsider your approval of the interim management arrangements for the Swan-Canning Estuarine fishery.

Yours sincerely

Norman Halse
Chairman
25 March 2003