

FISHING INDUSTRY WELCOMES MARINE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION PLAN

New Zealand's deepwater fishing industry today welcomed the new protection plan for marine habitats on the seabed which it says will allow the country's valuable commercial fishing industry to continue fishing while at the same time guaranteeing protection to more than a third of New Zealand's EEZ.

Under the plan the deepwater fishing industry agrees that there will be no bottom trawling or dredging in 17 different areas within New Zealand's EEZ.

The industry will sign an Accord with the Government establishing the 17 Benthic Protection Areas (BPAs). Together with existing closures they will account for 32% of the EEZ, and cover an area more than four times New Zealand's landmass.

In the past, trawling has occurred in 16 of these BPAs and almost 20,000 tonnes of fish has been caught in them while trawling. However the majority of the area that comprises BPAs is pristine and is now guaranteed to stay that way.

Deepwater Group chief executive, George Clement says the BPA accord is a significant step forward.

"This is the industry and Government working together to develop a sensible marine protection plan for the marine ecosystems on the seabed that goes into effect now," Mr Clement said.

"The industry approached the Government last year with this proposal because we wanted some certainty and because we acknowledge that we need to fish responsibly. We wanted to find the balance that would allow New Zealand's \$1.6bn commercial fishing industry to continue to operate and export while at the same time responding to concerns about protecting the marine environment. The BPA accord is a bold move that achieves that."

The Accord has been developed and improved in a number of respects since it was proposed in February last year. In particular, George Clement said that three new areas have been added at the request of the Government, which has materially increased the number of seamounts and hydrothermal vents that will be protected under the Accord.

The closure of the areas comes with strict rules to control fishing by methods other than bottom trawling. This will ensure that no trawls will ever touch the bottom. Any vessel entering the BPAs in the future to fish will need to have two Ministry of Fisheries observers on board, the vessel will have to be satellite

monitored and an electronic net monitoring system will be used to see where the net is in relation to the ocean floor at all times.

Fishing within 100m of the seabed will be a criminal offence. Any net that gets within 50m of the seabed will be deemed to be touching the bottom, and will be a more serious criminal offence resulting in automatic vessel forfeiture.

George Clement said the industry was happy to abide by these rules. "We have been voluntarily keeping out of these areas ever since this proposal first went to Government," he said.

The industry is also undertaking to pay up to \$333,000 a year to fund further research into benthic habitats.

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