

WEST COAST DEMERSAL SCALEFISH - MANAGEMENT PLAN

Statement by Minister for Fisheries

HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral - Minister for Fisheries) [3.34 pm]: The sustainability of key demersal scalefish species along the west coast, particularly jewfish, pink snapper and baldchin groper, has been a growing concern for the Western Australian government and various stakeholder groups. This concern is based on evidence of escalating fishing effort, particularly by the burgeoning recreational fishing sector. The number of registered recreational boats has grown rapidly as the state's population continues to climb. Recreational fishers have also become more effective as they have quickly adopted new technology. In particular, global positioning systems and high quality sounders have now become standard items on fishing boats. This has made recreational fishing far more precise and targeted. More people fishing and more effective fishing methods have increased the pressure on fish stocks. To better understand the impact this increased pressure is having on fish stocks, the Department of Fisheries undertook a number of dedicated research programs to assess the status of jewfish, pink snapper and baldchin groper. These popular and well-recognised species of fish were chosen for the assessment because they are good indicators of the health of demersal scalefish stocks more generally. This research is now available and it shows that Western Australians are already over-fishing jewfish and pink snapper throughout their natural distribution and over-fishing baldchin groper within the Abrolhos Islands. If the current situation is not addressed, it is likely that continued fishing pressure will see these stocks of fish collapse within four to five years. It is important to acknowledge that both the commercial and recreational sectors are capable of exerting considerable impacts on these stocks, and more effective management of both sectors is required to reduce catches. I have already taken steps to address the commercial catch of demersal scalefish. A new management plan, which will soon be implemented, will reduce the number of commercial fishers operating under a new and strict management system. This new plan will ensure the commercial sector fish in a sustainable way and are able to provide high quality seafood to restaurants and local retailers.

Recognising the seriousness of the problem and the particular significance of increasing fishing pressure in the metropolitan region, I have now made the unprecedented decision to remove all commercial fishing for demersal scalefish in the waters off the greater metropolitan coastline, thus creating the state's largest exclusive area dedicated to recreational line fishing. Specifically, there will be no commercial fishing for demersal scalefish from Lancelin to a point south of Mandurah, 31 degrees south to 33 degrees south, to be effective from November this year.

This action will provide immediate relief to fish stocks but further action is necessary, and the burden of responsibility cannot and should not be carried alone by commercial fishers. Each of us has a responsibility to fish for the future and ensure that fishing - commercial and recreational - is sustainable in the long term. Recreational fishers in Western Australia are to be commended for the way they have supported the existing management system based on bag and size limits. However, it is clear that the problems we now face require new and innovative solutions. The strategy that is ultimately adopted to manage recreational fishing must aim to ensure sustainability. However, it is important to not take the fun out of fishing by its becoming too regulated. It is also important that the community support the system we choose because voluntary compliance with the necessary rules will help us achieve our goals more quickly.

To support the new strategy, the WA government has allocated more than \$5.3 million research funding over four years to undertake detailed monitoring of demersal fish catches by recreational and commercial fishers. This research will evaluate the effectiveness of management practices to rebuild these fish stocks. The process of determining a new recreational fishing strategy will involve the release of a discussion paper and research report into the current status of west coast demersal scalefish stocks. The purpose of the fisheries management paper 225 is to engage recreational fishers and the wider community to develop new strategies that can achieve this vision of sustainable and enjoyable recreational fishing. This paper examines more fully the nature of the problems facing us and presents some of the new measures we should consider.

The community's views on the way forward are critical to the process, and stakeholders will be encouraged to become involved in the comprehensive consultation process, which will include a series of public meetings across the west coast region throughout October. Following this initial consultation period, it is my intention to release a draft management package for further consultation early in the new year, with a view to introducing a new, more effective and long-term management strategy for recreational fishing on the west coast mid-2008. However, during the consultation period it is important that we do not allow recreational fishing pressure to continue to escalate. Therefore, I will be implementing an interim management package to cover this period. These new rules may not form part of the longer-term strategy, but in the short term they are crucial in limiting recreational fishing pressures. This interim package will be phased in from November this year and will involve extending the closure to fishing for pink snapper in Cockburn and Warnbro Sounds from 1 October to

31 January; extending the existing possession limit to an individual's place of residence throughout WA; totally protecting baldchin groper within the Abrolhos Islands; and introducing a possession limit of four category 1 - high risk - fish per person on aquatic charter vessels operating along the WA coast.

Western Australia is blessed with an amazing marine environment. However, against a backdrop of unprecedented economic growth, growing population and significant technological advances in fishing practices, our precious fish stocks are under more pressure than ever before.

I would like to table fisheries management paper 225, "Managing the Recreational Catch of Demersal Scalefish on the West Coast: Future Management Scenarios for Community Consideration" and report 163, "Spatial scales of exploitation among populations of demersal scale fish: implications for management".

[See papers 3130 and 3131.]

Consideration of the statement made an order of the day for the next sitting, on motion by **Hon Ken Baston**.