Eastern Zone: A Fisherman’s Perspective

Matthew Harry

To all License Holders/operators and stakeholders, SIV, VFA and the recreational Fishers;

Introduction:

My name is Matthew Harry. I have been an Eastern Zone Lobster fisher and had my own vessels within the Eastern Zone for the past 16 seasons. During that time I have seen the fishery both increase and decrease almost exclusively due to the Lobster recruitment trends. This has been the single most driving factor for performance of the fishery in my opinion. Other factors are more seasonal or even monthly but have not impacted the fishery for sustained periods. The Covid impact and China market closure has changed fishing effort but has not had an effect on the biomass.

 I have a logistic management background and hold a Certificate IV in information technology, Certificate III in Logistics and warehousing as well as being a qualified Skipper.

Fishery Overview:

 Today the Fishery is in decline on all the major indicators. This has occurred after a period of record recruitment in 2009/10 which led to all the Quota being caught in the successive seasons. In 2015 the Fishery started to produce record size lobster, giving a false return of a higher CPUE. With a lack of recruitment coming through, these large stocks were/are being harvested and now the Fishery is returning to a more historic spread of Lobster size classes and showing some recruitment which is important.

Risks:

 The Eastern zone faces on-going risks. Some are being dealt with within the current harvest strategy and management plan but others have been put in the too hard basket.

 Low Recruitment: TAC levels need to ensure sustainability during both good and bad periods of recruitment.

 High Mortality: Large numbers of both catch in boats and Octopus kills have been occurring in recent seasons. Extra levels of Salmon bait being used in recent years has seen an increase in pot mortalities not experienced historically in the zone.

 Whale Entanglement/wildlife interaction: The day the public hears of a Whale being killed due to the high volume of Lobster gear being set around the coastline could see huge ramifications for the Lobster industry. Although there has been some work done on this other practical things should be adopted from industry or the VFA.

 Recreational Fishers: Not just the divers but also the increase of Tuna anglers, with more people accessing the coastline for recreational purposes if industry continues to ignore this we will see more aggressive or even hostile incidents occur as these high traffic areas of Coastline become even more congested.

Recommendations:

 After considering all the risks, the current state of the fishery and also drawing on other Fisher’s experiences and opinions, I recommend the following;

* New Harvest strategy and management plan to have a cap of 50 ton. This will ensure that the increases and decreases in the TAC year to year don’t have the crippling effect that the current plan has had to industry.
* Pot reduction to 60 pots maximum staggered over next five seasons to reduce Whale interactions and also reduce congestion along the coastline and decrease mortality in pots due to longer soak times. Immediate reduction from 120 to 100 pots and 10 pots removed each season there after until the cap of 60 pots is reached.
* 48 hour rule. Baited craypots need to be removed and/or hauled on the fishing grounds within 48 hours. Will decrease mortalities and also decrease unworked gear that would otherwise be a navigational hazard for other users/fishers and wildlife. If fishers know there is foul weather coming they should bring all their fishing gear back into port safely before the foul weather arrives.
* Small sales. We need greater flexibility within the Fishery Application (Vic e-catch) to be able to have more direct to public sales at the jetty etc.

Conclusion:

 The eastern zone does not need to become un-fishable before it gets better nor do we need closed seasons. With a few easy changes I foresee this fishery becoming a Lobster haven for both commercial and recreational fishers. Quota reductions only solve some of the issues. We have to adapt to the new set of circumstances we find ourselves and to ensure that the fishery has a great future.

 Kind regards,

 Matthew H