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Snapper battle rages on

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Commercial fishers are aggrieved that they are denied a slice of the total catch increase; environmental groups say the decision does nothing to rebuild the fishery and the recreational sector say they are the only ones taking a cut.

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Recreational sector say they are the only ones taking cut

Recreational fishers say they are the losers despite winning the "rights" to all of a 500 tonne increase in the total allowable catch in the country's prized snapper fishery.

An increase in the minimum legal size from 27cm to 30cm and reduction in daily bag limit from nine to seven are the key rule changes for the troubled Snapper 1 fishery announced yesterday by Primary Industries Minister Nathan Guy.

Commercial fishers are aggrieved that they are denied a slice of the total catch increase; environmental groups say the decision does nothing to rebuild the fishery and the recreational sector say they are the only ones taking a cut.

The review of catch limits, the first since 1997, was prompted by a new assessment which found the fishery was struggling to rebuild towards a target level set by scientists. MPI managers gave the minister options ranging from cutting bag limits as low as three to raising the legal minimum size to 35cm. The ensuing debate drew hundreds to protest meetings, 47,000 submissions and threats of an electoral backlash in the Snapper 1 area which covers Northland, the Hauraki Gulf and Bay of Plenty.

Mr Guy said the recreational sector campaign had drawn attention to concerns of wastage and outlined wide-ranging measures to better monitor the commercial fleet.

They include a phased introduction of onboard cameras and observers to monitor the amount of juvenile fish (under 25cm) killed in nets, to be returned to the sea under the Quota Management System.

Trish Rea, spokeswoman for recreational advocacy group Legasea, said it would still hurt "Mum and Dad" fishers who are more likely to land fish just over the legal limit.

"For people who fish inshore or from the shore rather than in big Haines Hunters out in the gulf, raising that minimum limit to 30cm may mean they miss out on a feed."

Richard Baker, past-president of the Sport Fishing Council, said 50 per cent of fishers in the Bay of Plenty and Northland returned home without landing snapper under the old size limit. While the so-called recreational "allowance" had been raised by 500 tonnes, the increase still did not reflect the actual recreational take, which had grown by an estimated 765 tonnes over the 1997 allowance.

Eric Barratt, managing director of Sanford Ltd, said it sent a poor message to the commercial sector - "look after the fishery but ultimately you will lose it".

Environmental Defence Society policy director Raewyn Peart said failure to implement a credible rebuild plan was extremely disappointing.

Mr Guy said over time he hoped to raise the recreational sector's share of the allowable catch to 50 per cent.

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