

Seabird scientists warn of flaws in New Zealand bycatch framework

Title

Concerned that the proposed framework for managing the incidental mortality of seabirds in New Zealand fisheries is flawed, 50 seabird biologists, including many from BirdLife Partners in the Pacific region and beyond, have written to the country's Fisheries Minister, Phil Heatley. They assert that in their informed opinion, the current levels of bycatch tolerated in New Zealand waters are not sustainable, and will lead to further declines in the populations of a number of species.

New Zealand is a centre of biodiversity for seabirds. Eighty-four species (more than 25% of the world total) breed in New Zealand, and a high proportion of these breed only in the New Zealand region. Twenty three of the seabird species breeding in New Zealand are currently listed by BirdLife on behalf of IUCN as threatened with extinction. More species of albatross, the most threatened family of birds in the world, breed in New Zealand than in any other country. Similarly, a significant proportion of the world's petrels, shags and penguins, many of them threatened, are represented in New Zealand, and all are known to occur periodically in New Zealand fisheries bycatch. Five out of six species of penguin breeding in New Zealand are currently in decline.

The Ministry of Fisheries recently released for consultation their policy for managing the incidental mortality of seabirds in fisheries. "We are extremely concerned that the proposed policy does not sufficiently address the need to reduce seabird bycatch in fisheries", the scientists write. "It is estimated that 22,000-40,000 seabirds are killed annually in monitored New Zealand commercial fisheries, including many threatened species. While this is acceptable under this policy, we, as a group of scientists familiar with seabirds, do not consider this level of mortality sustainable for at least some species, particularly those most threatened."

They add: "We are not convinced that the measures set out in the proposed policy constitute best-practice mitigation measures or policies in management of incidental mortality of seabirds in fisheries." And they conclude: "We urge you to reconsider the policy for managing seabird bycatch in New Zealand Fisheries. We recommend that to implement a best-practice model of management of this issue, developers of a New Zealand National Plan of Action-Seabirds (NPOA-Seabirds) follow the guidance as set out in the FAO Best Practice Guideline

for Managing the Incidental Mortality of Seabirds In Fisheries. The existence of a NPOA-Seabirds for New Zealand is an obligation under ACAP (Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels), and should include the precautionary management of risks that is affecting our much valued and highly vulnerable wildlife.”