Fisheries Act Amendments 2026: Catch Limit Setting Tools

The issue: challenges with the current system

Electronic reporting and monitoring have provided fisheries managers with better quality data. Updating the Fisheries Act to better utilise this data is a natural progression to modernise how we manage fisheries.

While the sustainability framework under the Fisheries Act is robust, there is an opportunity to add to the tools available to improve responsiveness, predictability and efficiency. The proposed tools are already applied in our current management approach – however, each catch limit change requires a full review even there is no new information.

Catch limits (TACs and TACCs) are central to our fisheries management system. They are designed to ensure sustainability while enabling utilisation. However, there is currently only one approach to setting and adjusting catch limits and it can be:

Resource intensive - Full catch limit reviews require significant scientific, policy and consultation resources. This limits how many stocks can be reviewed in a given year.

Slow and delayed - The time required to complete reviews often results in lag between new information emerging and catch limits being updated.

Reactive rather than responsive - Decisions are often triggered by formal reviews rather than structured data signals, which can delay proportional responses.

Abrupt impacts - When substantial changes are required, they are typically implemented in a single step which can create sudden operational and economic disruption.

Unpredictable for business and communities - Without clear forward pathways or rule-based adjustments, it can be difficult for people to plan for the future.

The proposed tools

1. Phased catch limits

Phased catch limits allow significant changes to TACs or TACCs to be implemented progressively over a defined period, rather than all at once.

Phasing does not change the sustainability target. The final catch limit is still set according to the statutory framework. Phasing simply provides a structured pathway to reach that level. Setting TACs under a phased approach would still require consultation.

The benefits of phasing include:

- Reducing economic shock from large one-step changes
- Supporting business continuity and workforce stability
- Allowing ecosystems and fishing behaviour to adjust more gradually
- Providing transparency about the intended long-term direction
- Reduced administrative burden from repeated full reviews

This tool supports smoother transitions without weakening management standards.

2. Management procedures

Management procedures are pre-agreed, science-based decision rules that adjust catch limits automatically in response to defined indicators (e.g. stock biomass trends, catch-per-unit-effort, or other abundance indices).

Under a management procedure:

- Indicators and thresholds are agreed upfront
- Adjustment formulas are specified in advance
- Catch limits are updated in line with those rules

This shifts the system from discretionary, case-by-case decision-making to a structured, predictable framework.

Benefits of management procedures include:

- Faster, data-driven responses to stock changes
- Greater predictability for industry and communities
- Improved transparency about how decisions will be made
- Reduced administrative burden from repeated full reviews

Management procedures are widely used internationally and represent standard practice in modern fisheries management.

Consultation and safeguards

These tools do not remove consultation rights or lower sustainability or information standards.

- Phased catch limits remain sustainability decisions under the Fisheries Act and require statutory consultation.
- Management procedures are developed and implemented through consultation before being applied.
- Environmental and information principles remain in place.

In many cases, consultation may be strengthened, stakeholders have input into the design of decision rules and transition pathways upfront, rather than reacting only to individual annual changes.

Transparency, accountability, and review mechanisms remain in place. The tools will have a maximum tenure of five years and review with consultation is required if new information becomes available. This is not a set and forget approach.

Why this matters

Sustainability: More responsive tools allow timely adjustments when stock abundance changes (up or down). This strengthens management within the resources available.

Economic and social stability: Fishing underpins regional economies and coastal communities. Predictable, staged, and rule-based adjustments support:

- Investment certainty
- Employment stability
- Business continuity
- Community resilience

System Efficiency: Modern tools reduce unnecessary administrative burden and allow management effort to be focused where risk is greatest.

Our Position

We support the use of phased catch limits and management procedures as practical enhancements to New Zealand's fisheries management system as they:

- Maintain sustainability standards
- Maintain statutory consultation rights
- Improve responsiveness and predictability
- Reduce unnecessary disruption
- Support environmental, economic and social outcomes

This is not deregulation. It is the evolution of management tools to ensure the system remains efficient, adaptive and fit for purpose.

Bottom Line

Multi-year catch tools ensure our management system keeps pace with the data and information we now have. They deliver smarter, more timely decisions that improve sustainability, utilisation, and certainty for all sectors.