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Deepwater Council Environmental Liaison Officer (ELO) Report for 2023-24 Fishing Year

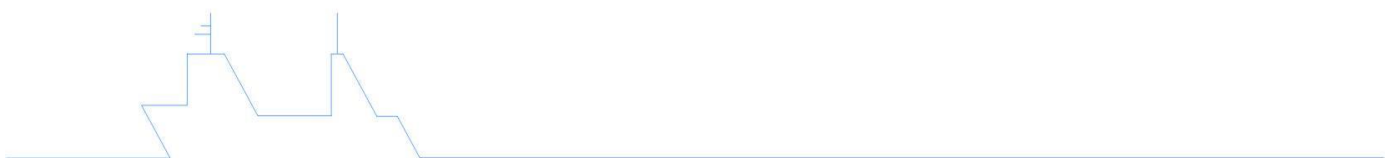
Background

Over the past several years, Deepwater Group (DWG)/now Seafood New Zealand Deepwater Council (DWC) has expanded its delivery of documented standards (Operational Procedures - OPs) to a much larger and more diverse range of vessels. Ling bottom longline, scampi and coastal hoki vessels now bring into the programme many smaller vessels with mostly owner/operators and many without fully adequate systems or management structures to manage mitigation and risk systems to levels required by the DWC OPs. We now have the DWC Info Portal (the electronic version for all deepwater trawl vessels) which houses our standards, OPs, Fleet Notices, Protected Species Guidelines and general fishery information. Each vessel will also carry out a predeparture report and trip completion report.

Due to increased emphasis on meeting the objectives of the NPOA – Seabirds (2020) ongoing concern regarding all protected species captures, in particular, sea lions, dolphins etc, increased awareness of protected sharks and benthic concerns and with the increased Government and public pressure for reducing protected species interactions, there is now even more need to ensure all vessel operators maintain a consistent and diligent approach to our OPs.

Overall Objectives of DWC's ELO Programme

- Visit at least 90% of the deepwater trawl fleet (including fresher, factory, and seasonal hoki), and all scampi and ling bottom longline vessels.
- To train senior crew and vessel managers in protected species capture, risk reduction measures
- Promote best practice mitigation standards across the fleet and review the DWC standards set out within the OPs.
- Audit Vessel Management Plans (VMPs) and best practice environmental and mitigation practices.
- Encourage improvement and effectiveness of fish waste control and mitigation device use and improve real-time reporting of the capture event.
- Be on call 7 days a week to respond to any multiple or trigger capture event reported by DWC vessels and reply immediately to gather further information and offer advice.



Providing Fishing Solutions

Annual Objectives

- Organise and deliver environmental training resources to the senior crew and associated managers. Target all SQU, JMA and SBW fleet for pre-season briefings.
- Monitor deepwater vessel operators' adherence to agreed environmental risk OPs.
- Maintain a fleet database of deepwater vessels, operators, target species, ports, skippers etc. Undertake port calls and vessel visits to a minimum of 90% of the fleet.
- Analyse all Fisheries New Zealand (FNZ) Observer audits of VMPs and OPs, contacting operators with feedback for each audit.
- Provide expert advice on vessel-specific options for fish waste management and warp mitigation systems and ensure this is documented.
- For SQU and SBW seasons, ensure the full fleet adheres to SLED audit programme:
 - Maintain an updated database of all SLEDs
 - Monitor in-season SLED damage, repairs, and re-certification
- Maintain strong liaison with government – particularly with FNZ, DOC and DOC's Inshore Liaison Officer Programme.
- Review VMPs, ensuring each vessel has an effective vessel-specific seabird risk management programme.
- Review and revise VMPs on scampi and hoki fresh fish fleet.
- Provide full induction into DWC programmes to new skippers and/or vessel operators who have moved to new fisheries or have started on new vessels.
- Support reviews and re-drafts of any OPs that require renewal.
- Produce an end-of-year summary report to DWC, FNZ and DOC.

2023-24 DWC Fleet (Vessels Targeting DWC Fish Stocks)

- 28 deepwater trawlers (> 28m) vessels – OPs and VMPs
 - 24 factory trawlers (+ 1 tied up (full time))
 - 3 fresh fish
 - 1 tied-up (full-time)
- 10 fresh fish hoki trawl (< 28m) Coastal Hoki – Coastal Hoki OP and PSRMPs
- 10 scampi vessels – Scampi OP and VMP
- 20 BLL (target FMA 2- 7) – BLL OP and PSRMPs
 - 3 auto line (1 permanently tied up)
 - 12 hand-bait (land > 10 tonnes) & 2 others tied up.

- 5 hand-bait (target and land 4 to 10 tonnes) & 3 others tied up.
 - Another 12 odd vessels landing few kgs of ling, (less than 4t) these covered by LO programme.
- 8 Ling Potting boats. 4 full time boats doing ling (plus 4 part time doing BLL & Pots)
- **Total number of vessels: 71 (and 7 currently tied up for various reasons)**

Deliverables & Outputs Table 1: ELO Vessel Visits (including phone briefings)

	Vessel numbers	Vessel Contacted	No-Contact
Factory vessels	24	23	1
Fresh >28m	3	3	0
Fresh <28m	10	10	0
Scampi	10	8	2
Ling (auto line NZ)	3	3	0
Ling hand bait (+4T)	17	14	3
Potting	4	3	1
Total fleet	71	64	7
% of fleet visited		90%	10.0%

Notes:

- 16 of the 71 vessels visited, were visited at least twice during the year.
- another 7 DWC Vessels (mostly BLL) were tied-up all year
- the scampi fleet & BLL are difficult to visit in person as boats use many ports being spread out all over NZ, so some were done via phone/briefings. Hence lower coverage across these vessels!

Triggers

This year there were 33 protected species capture trigger-point events. This is a small increase over past years, (last year was 30 triggers) most were mainly fur-seal multiple capture events in the Cook Strait & Pegasus hoki fishery.

Summary of Trigger events: (Seabird, Dolphins, Sharks & HSL all down but fur seals well up)

- Seabird - 5 trigger events
 - Very low seabird trigger events, one was deck strike event of 40 birds/prions in Southern Ocean, rest were all minor capture events.
- Fur-seals - 21 trigger events (nearly double of last years)
 - most coming from our Coastal Hoki trawlers and
 - SQU fishery with many fur-seal captures off the Stewart/Snarers-shelve.
 - One Coastal Hoki fresher had 9 triggers (49 furs) reported from Pegasus fishery
- Dolphin - 3 dolphins
 - 2 x bottle nose, Chatham Rise, shallow water tow, Target, Redbait
 - 1 Common dolphin/dead, taken in hoki fishery in C/S

- Basking sharks – 4 captures, 2 dead & 2 released alive.

Other capture events: (not triggers)

- White Pointers/WPS: 4 captures,
 - 1 BLL fishery/LIN FMA5/Alive
 - 1 Auckland's/SQU/Dead & 2 Stewart /Snares/SQU/Dead

Other positive points of interest:

- Sea Lions - Nil trigger events
- Coral (MSC) triggers - Nil
- JMA 7 fishery - No protected species captures this year

Follow-up and communications occurred, most often on the same day or within 24 hrs, with vessel management or directly with the skipper. Occasionally, with more serious capture events, contact was made with the vessel owner and/or quota-permit holder to discuss issues and how further captures might impact the quota owner or vessel owner. The conversation and responses happen swiftly, often while events are unfolding.

After the event, corrective actions are carried out and changes made to VMPs and/or DWC OPs as required. All capture event information plus any additional information requested from the vessel or MPI Observer Services is logged. On completion, a summary of events is recorded for DWC and FNZ. Trigger information and feedback are used to inform vessel briefings, OP reviews and rewrites.

VMP/MMOP Observer Reviews

Analyse all FNZ audits of VMPs, MMOPs and OPs, contacting vessel operators with feedback for each audit as required. At times this requires follow-up with MPI Observer Services and/or advice to be given to vessel operators or changes to be made to VMP/PSRMP.

- 121 observer review forms have been assessed, and summary/feedback reports were sent to each vessel operator. (5 of these there was no review form completed by the observer)
- *Another 33 forms sent late by FNZ (of these 14 were from late 2023, other 19 were from early to mid-2024) these trips were added to the final summary sheet (as late entries) no feedback sent/given to vessel operators, but these reviews were all low-risk factory vessel trips)*
- Totally, we had 154 reviews entered into our observer trip summary sheet, 121 fully reviewed and assessed, and 33 older reviews just filed away
- Some of the factory vessels' observer reviews were for two, three or even four trips at a time, (three to four months on some vessels). Observers were staying longer onboard some vessels doing multiple trips (the trend for observer in recent years often more do multiple trips at one time, rather than doing just one trip, travelling from boat to boat or travelling home and being redeployed)

- Information on each vessel voyage, with a list of any protected species captures, comment on offal control and mitigation is all recorded for each voyage and recorded into a summary sheet for DWC and FNZ.
- 14 reviews (about 9%) had follow-up activity, mostly minor, about half of these were errors/mistakes in completing the form or the FNZ observer misunderstanding of the vessel risk management systems or the DWC standards.
- 2 of those 14 reviews (about 1.2% of all reviews) required more follow-up action and response by DWC and the operator, corrective actions were required as vessel didn't meet some of the more important aspects of the VMP.
- *FNZ will also review all VMP observer reviews and will separately advise how many required further action/follow up etc.*

Positive outcomes

SBW and SQU 6T fisheries (sea lions)

- Excellent results again this year with adherence to the FNZ Sea lion Operational Plan and DWC OPs. Trigger reporting was completed where necessary, there was 100% adherence with SLED checks completed by fishery officers and observers, and 100% for pre-departure port notices for observer coverage placement.
- There were NIL sea lion captures in the SQU 6T or SBW fisheries

SLED Pre-season Audit

For squid season, there were 68 SLED checks & check sheets issued pre-season. 8 of these SLEDs were damaged and repaired and re-checked during the season. In the SBW season another 22 SLEDs had pre-season checks.

All SLED check sheets approved for use for the SQU and SBW fleets. All meet the SLED legal requirements when checked by fishery offices and/or observers.

JMA Fishery, No Common Dolphin (CDD) Captures

The BATM fleet (& Tokatu) has performed very well in the JMA fishery this year and for the first time this fleet reported NO protected species captures in this fishery (i.e. we've had years in the past with no CDD captures, but this year we had no fur seals and no birds as well).

MSC/Benthic measures; there were no coral triggers this year, a big improvement over last year (2 coral triggers, last year). Vessel operators and skippers have been working hard to minimise coral triggers in MSC areas.

Seabird Captures in the SQU Fishery

The squid fishery had the lowest total seabird numbers recorded since we went to near 100% observer coverage (9 years ago).

A significant component of this was the reduced number of white-chinned petrels caught. The main driver for the reduction is likely due to changes in fishing distribution in recent years, with more effort on the Snares and Chatham Rise.

Scampi Fleet

Feedback from observers was largely positive, however, there are still a couple of operators who still need to tighten up on seabird mitigation and fish waste management, particularly for warp captures. There were reduced protected species triggers from the scampi fleet this year and reduced overall seabird capture numbers. So this fleet is heading in right direction.

Summary of performance and/or issues during the year

Hoki fleet & warp capture of Salvin's & Bullers albatross.

- For the past 9 years, DWC has been working on reducing the risk of warp strikes/captures of the Salvin's & Bullers albatross, (Deepwater's highest-risk birds). 2020/21 there was a 'spike' in the number of Salvin's caught. It is unknown what the driver of this may have been, as adherence to VMPs and OPs has been very high in recent years.
- DWC introduced additional measures to reduce the risk to Salvin's and Bullers & other mollymawk species. A seasonal seabird mitigation plan for the high-risk period (1 Sept to 30 Jan) was written for each vessel in the hoki fillet fleet. The Plan does increase awareness of seabird risk using a 'look-think-act' approach and outlines additional mitigation use during the summer months. In particular, the Plan emphasises the need for management procedures around the discharge of SWA fish waste as this is considered a significant attraction for the birds.
- This year we had a slight reduction in warp captures, (while net capture remained about the same). DWC is closely monitoring all Salvin's & Bullers captures each week over the spring and early summer period.

Hoki Cook Strait, Fishery 'Coastal' fresher fleet.

- The Cook Strait Hoki fishery is all but over for the smaller 'Coastal fleet' this has been mainly Talley's boats, but trucking costs and price reduction for smaller fish has meant this fleet has been deployed mainly to the West Coast, leaving only the Sealord boat the *Thomas Harrison* (TH) in Cook Strait, so far, less effort and fewer fur seals taken in Cook Strait this season.
- The Pegasus Canyon was a different story with far more effort this year and with one fresher starting in this area early and had big issues with fur seals captures, ending up with multiple triggers and 49 fur-seals for the season. There have been multiple meetings and emails etc to ensure this number is not repeated with this vessel next season.

- in one tow there was a 10-seal capture event, in which there must have been issues with trawl /hauling etc, but skipper remains adamant had no issues with gear.
- Mollymawk/Albatross captures, this was not during the Hoki season, but many of our Hoki Coastal boats took far too many Mollymawks warp captures when on inshore species (20 to 25 birds each) I been working with 4 boat operators to get this number down.

SQU and SBW fisheries

- No issues. Overall capture numbers of mammals, sharks & seabirds all down on past years. There were no HSL captures this season in either fishery

BLL/Ling

- The ling BLL fleet is still a way off aligning with the standards. The introduction of the new BLL Circular (2021), has resulted in the whole fleet needing to rethink their approach to setting bottom longlines. The new regulations require vessels to sink their slowest sinking hook to a depth of 5m within the aerial extent of the tori line. Some operators are finding this difficult to meet.
- A small percentage of our BLL fleet set the gear at 2kn to 2.5kn boat speed, making it very difficult to achieve the mandatory 50m aerial extent consistently. The slower you set the harder it is to maintain suitable drag to keep the tori line in the air, but this is offset with much better sink-rates when setting slower.
- Likewise setting for Blue Nose, skippers add a lot more flotation to the gear when setting of BNSs, making it impossible to achieve the regulated sink rate requirements!
- Reporting appears to be, still not good enough.

There are still some issues with the uptake of our standards in our smaller BLL and to a lesser extent our hoki coastal trawl vessels. Skippers and boat ownership often change, making it difficult to get uptake of information. This year we had many vessels tied up, then sold off, and a few retired from BLL fishing. This also means new owners, and a lot more work to get new operators up to standard.

Focus This Year 2024/25

- Work with the BLL ling fleet, cameras will be 'Live' in March 2025, more work needs to be done with the vessel operators to be ready for cameras. Some still not doing the sink/depth rate tests well enough, or often enough, some still are not prepared to improve their sink rates well enough to decrease risk of captures.
- Raising the importance of reducing benthic catch volumes and staying clear of known high-volume areas. Working with senior crew to establish new ORH/MSC measures, increasing crew ID standards and improving reporting in the new coral trigger and pause tow requirements.

- Work with our Coastal fleet to bring down warp strike captures, while most captures are occurring when inshore fishing, the boats are closely aligned to deepwater fleet being our hoki trawlers, so we are helping to decrease warp captures numbers during rest of the year!
- Review the Hoki fleet on the Chatham Rise for captures numbers of Salvin's/Bullers to check how secondary mitigation measures are working, work with vessels to decrease capture rates of Salvin's & Bullers within the C/Rise hoki fillet fleet.
- Work with the fleet skippers to increase awareness and improve Seabird ID's, so our three main Mollymawk species & three main Petrel/Shearwater species can be properly identified and reported using individual codes
- Meetings with Hoki Pegasus and Cook Strait operators and work through issues and look to increase fur seal mitigation measures.
- Ensure all Deepwater trawl vessels can confidently use the new Info Portal system.

Regards John
John Cleal, DWC ELO