

WEST COAST ROCK LOBSTER

NEWSLETTER – AUGUST 2009



This is the first in a series of monthly newsletters for the coming West Coast Rock Lobster season. The aim of these newsletters is to provide up-to-date information to stakeholders on matters of interest, including:

- puerulus settlement;
- research projects; and
- management arrangements.

It will be electronically mailed to Professional Fishermen's Associations, the Western Rock Lobster Council, rock lobster processors (where e-mail address is known) and the Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee. It will also be available on the Department of Fisheries' website at <http://www.fish.wa.gov.au>. The Department of Fisheries encourages its widest possible distribution.

If you have received this publication by e-mail please do not respond directly to this address, as the "enquiries@fish.wa.gov.au" inbox is not monitored.

Current Puerulus Settlement

The puerulus settlement index is published on the Department of Fisheries' website, and is updated approximately 10 days after the full moon each month.

The latest puerulus settlement information is available at:

<http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/docs/pub/PuerulusSettlement/index.php?0405>

The July settlement (collected over the August full moon) showed a small amount of settlement at Jurien and the Abrolhos Islands, but at a level that is below the long term average for this time of year.

The historical peak puerulus settlement periods run from the August to December new moons although this timing can vary slightly from year to year.

Puerulus settlement is a complex issue which has underpinned predictions for future catch over several decades. This approach, supplemented with additional information such as, juvenile catch rates, biomass indices, egg production and anecdotal information from fishers, has enabled accurate predictions of future catches for several decades. Until recently, puerulus settlement has largely reflected variations in environmental factors, especially the Leeuwin current. This pattern has changed in the past two seasons so the Research Division, in collaboration with other research groups, is undertaking a series of projects to better understand the reasons for the change. Details of these projects were published in the March 2009 edition of Western Fisheries as *The hunt for missing puerulus*.

Research conducted by the Department and others into puerulus settlement and catch predictions was recently the subject of an open workshop drawing together an independent panel of experts and interested participants in the fishery. The workshop confirmed that the key risks have been identified and are being investigated through a series of projects that are underway. Findings from this research will be published as soon as it becomes available.

2009-10 Management Arrangements

Information released to stakeholders in association with the development of management arrangements for the 2009-10 season can be obtained at:

<http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/sec/com/fisheries/WCRockLobster.php?0206>

Department of Fisheries' researchers have recently been carrying out extensive work to determine the commercial catch level that will be sustainable over coming years. A key factor being taken into account is the low to very low puerulus settlement that has occurred since 2006-07 and the effect this will have as it flows through into the breeding stock.

The first objective considered by the Department of Fisheries is:

to ensure there is a high probability that the breeding stock will remain above critical threshold levels over the next five years.

Recent research indicates that it may be possible to catch 6,000 to 6,500 tonnes in the coming season and meet this objective. The same research cautions that further substantial catch reductions will need to follow in subsequent seasons if sustainability is the only factor considered and puerulus settlement continues to be very low.

The Fish Resources Management Act 1994 identifies a range of objectives that should also be considered in determining a nominal total allowable commercial catch (TACC). These objectives include fostering the development of commercial fishing and optimising economic, social and other benefits from the use of fish resources.

While a TACC in the range of 6,000 – 6,500 tonnes may achieve the sustainability objective, it would not maintain the breeding stock at levels needed to improve certainty for fishers and investors or optimise economic returns over the next three to five years.

A precautionary management approach that takes into account the various objectives, combined with the potential for sustained very low puerulus settlement, suggests that a lower TACC is more likely to achieve the objectives of the Act.



Government of Western Australia
Department of Fisheries



Fish for the future

The Department of Fisheries has formed a preliminary view that the various objectives identified in the Act are most likely to be achieved with measures directed at achieving a catch in the range of 5,000 to 5,500 tonnes for each of the next three years. A TACC set at this level for 2009/10 would also be precautionary by minimising the risk of the further substantial reductions in catch being required in the following two seasons.

This preliminary view is currently being considered in the light of findings from research, initial puerulus settlement results for 2009/10, feedback from the Western Rock Lobster Congress, fishers and other parties.

Consideration is also being given to establishing notional TACCs for each zone and/or notional TACCs for the reds and whites catch. This approach may allow for precautionary input control measures to be established, backed by notional TACCs to address the risk of unanticipated catch performance.

Environmental conditions during the migration of the whites in 2008/09 proved to be particularly favourable. These conditions meant the actual catch was tracking well ahead of anticipated levels when effort restrictions were introduced at the start of the season. Further action had to be taken in mid season to ensure the catch projections were below the TACC of 7,800 tonnes established at the start of the 2008/09 season. Setting a notional TACC for particular zones (or the whites and reds) during the 2009/10 season could allow more targeted intervention in the event of unanticipated catch performance.

Irrespective of the management measures put in place, the Department of Fisheries will continue to conduct research and closely monitor the Fishery to ensure sustainability can be maintained.

The Minister will consider final advice from parties such as the Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee (RLIAC), the Western Rock Lobster Council (WRLC) and the Department of Fisheries regarding the most appropriate management package for the coming season in the near future. The Minister is then expected to finalise his decision regarding the rules that will apply in 2009-10 during the first half of September.

Meshed Pot Project

Rock lobster fishers can help improve our understanding of the differences between the relative abundance of undersized lobsters in deep and shallow water by participating in the Department of Fisheries' Meshed Pot Project.

Since the project began in 2007, 28 fishers have participated in this project, which involves meshing over the escape gaps in one pot and committing to using this pot at regular intervals in shallow and deep water and recording the number and sizes of lobsters caught.

The project allows the catch rate of undersized lobsters to be monitored and comparisons to be made between catch rates in shallow and deep water. For example, early results suggest that very few small lobsters are found in deep water off Dongara. This does not necessarily mean that puerulus settlement failed to occur in this area. It may simply mean that the habitat is unsuitable for lobster survival.

Anyone wanting more information on this project should contact Mr Eric Barker or Dr Simon de Lestang on 9203 0111.

2009/10 Access Fee

The West Coast Rock Lobster Managed Fishery is a fully cost recovered Fishery, meaning access fees reflect the total cost of research, management, consultation and compliance services provided by the Department of Fisheries. Access fees also include a contribution to the Development and Better Interest Fund.

The Department of Fisheries is aware of the difficult financial circumstances facing industry – and the associated expectation that access fees should be reduced. The Department of Fisheries is attempting to address these concerns at a time when demands on services (particularly in the research and management areas) have increased because of the need to respond to the recent low and very low puerulus settlement years.

The Department of Fisheries has commenced discussions with the WRLC on 2009-10 access fees and intends to advise the Minister on the proposed fee by the end of August.

Options being considered to reduce access fees include:

- increased fisher participation in research projects;
- a reduction in the number of patrol vessels being utilised;
- redeployment of Fisheries and Marine Officers;
- the sale of surplus assets that impact on recurrent allocated costs;
- increasing utilisation of compliance technologies such as vessel monitoring systems;
- focussing compliance activity on sustainability issues, (leaving issues such as pot theft for investigation by others); and
- reforming consultation and funding arrangements.

Quota Versus Input Controls

As part of the process of advising the Minister on the long-term future management regime for the Fishery, RLIAC commissioned an independent panel of experts to prepare papers on an optimised quota management system and an optimised input control management system. These papers can be viewed at:

<http://www.fish.wa.gov.au/sec/com/fisheries/WCRockLobster.php?0206>

The Minister is expected to make his decision on the future management direction for the Fishery in the near future.

The decision about whether to stay with input controls or move to quota is independent of current sustainability issues. The Fishery can be sustainably managed under either input or output controls.

Stuart Smith
Chief Executive Officer

