

Dear Stakeholder,

The Department of Fisheries is currently reviewing management arrangements for the Peel-Harvey Estuary Crab Fishery for 2009/10.

The Department is **seeking your views** regarding the following proposed changes by **25 September**.

### **Peel-Harvey Estuary Crab Fishery**

Following the closure of the Cockburn Sound to crab fishing in 2006 the Department is reassessing the current management settings on the west coast to ensure the sustainability of the crab fishery. Before the demise of the Cockburn Sound stock it was thought that the minimum size limit, which is set above the size at maturity, would provide adequate protection for crab stocks. However, the experiences in Cockburn Sound have shown that several years of low recruitment and high levels of fishing pressure can cause a crab stock to crash.

To gain a better understanding of the fishery the Peel/Harvey Estuary has been the focus of a \$600,000 three year blue swimmer crab research program. This research has already provided the Department with a better picture of the Peel-Harvey crab stock, its male/female ratio, catch rates of undersized crabs, and catch distributions. This preliminary report is attached to this letter. In light of this new information, concerns have been raised that the current closure of the fishery during September and October may not be sufficient for stock protection. With this in mind the Department is **seeking your views** regarding the following proposed change to the management of crabs in the Peel Harvey Estuary for the 2009/10 Peel-Harvey Crab Season:

#### **Extending the September-October season closure to include November and 1-14 December for both commercial and recreational fishers.**

There are two underpinning reasons for proposing to extend the current closure that exists in the fishery until the 15<sup>th</sup> December. These are:

- a) To protect pre-spawning and berried females
- b) To reduce catch of undersize crabs

#### **Protect pre-spawning and berried females**

The catch data for the fishery indicates that male crabs dominate the catch over the summer months and that female crabs start appearing in the catch by April. The previous Minister for Fisheries, in a precautionary move to provide protection to pre-spawn female crabs, introduced a seasonal closure from 1 September to 31 October and recreational bag and boat limits were reduced by 50% across the West Coast region. The research has shown that pre-spawning females are present in the Peel-Harvey estuary during November and early December. Protecting these females with an extended season closure may result in an increase in the productivity of the fishery.

#### **To reduce catch of undersize crabs**

In the two years since the closure was introduced, concerns have been raised about the high proportion of undersize crabs in both the commercial and recreational catch during the early part (Nov/Dec) of the Peel-Harvey crab

season. The lessons from Cockburn Sound point to the need to provide increased protection for breeding stocks so that enough adult stock is left in the water to ensure adequate recruitment occurs when environmental conditions are suitable. Extending the current seasonal closure, which currently expires on 31 October, to 15 December would, in most years, significantly reduce the numbers of undersized crabs that are captured and returned to the water. During the catch monitoring surveys from 2007-2009 the percentage of undersized crabs in the commercial catch in November was 76% and in December 47%. This compares to the January percentage of 21% of the catch being undersized. The closure will have the effect of reducing catch, giving further protection to pre-spawning females, and reducing the levels of undersize crabs through providing increased time for crabs to undergo a moult.

Please provide comment on the proposed management changes by 25 September. Comments can be emailed to [Andy.Warmbrunn@fish.wa.gov.au](mailto:Andy.Warmbrunn@fish.wa.gov.au) or mailed to: Andy Warmbrunn, Department of Fisheries, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, The Atrium, 168 St Georges Terrace, Perth 6000.

If you have any question or wish to discuss the management of the fishery please call me on 9482 7256.

Yours sincerely,

Andy Warmbrunn  
FISHERIES MANAGEMENT OFFICER