

Fight to protect lobsters



LIMITS: TARFish chief executive Mark Nikolai has offered a number of management strategies to constrain crayfish catch numbers.
Picture: RICHARD JUPE

TASMANIA'S recreational fishing body has urgently called for more direct catchcontrol mechanisms to limit the East Coast's booming rock lobster harvests.

But the Tasmanian Association for Recreational Fishing has also warned against further cuts to season dates and catch limits as a solution. A new survey by the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies found that during the eastern-region rock lobster season (November to April), fishers exceeded the East Coast stock rebuilding strategy's notional catch limit of 42 tonnes by 8.2 tonnes.

This was compared with the 35.7 tonnes caught in 2015-16, which was influenced by biotoxins in the area.

Overall, 87.9 tonnes of lobster were caught statewide last season, short of the total allowable recreational catch of 170 tonnes. This was 7 per cent of the total allowable catch (1221 tonnes), which includes the commercial catch limit.

IMAS fisheries researcher Jeremy Lyle said last week if fishers continually exceeded the 42-tonne cap, then the East Coast rebuild would take longer. Dr Lyle declined to comment on possible catchcontrol strategies.

TARFish chief executive Mark Nikolai said the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment would now review the rock lobster management plan, which addressed season dates and catch limits, because the cap was exceeded. The department is yet to release dates for the 2017-18 eastern-region season just two months out from its usual start date.

In the eastern region, daily bag limits for crayfish sit at two per person, with the boat limit at 10 and a total possession limit of four.



BOOMING: Recreational fishers exceeded the rock lobster catch on the East Coast by 8.2 tonnes.

Picture: PETER CLARK



Mr Nikolai said in the short term, decisions were being made ahead of a substantial IMAS research project on management options for constraining lobster catch. It is understood funding for the project has been secured but no start date is known.

In terms of catch-control mechanisms, Mr Nikolai last year told IMAS that drastic action could include closing the eastern-region fishery for a year to enable stock regeneration. He has also suggested the implementation of crayfish catch tags for fishers to serve as a seasonal limit.

His other suggestions included:

A GROWTH model for the East Coast recreational catch cap that would increase its notional allocation to about 50 tonnes, without exceeding the 170-tonne total recreational catch.

SPECIFIC total allowable catches for each of the state's 12 research zones that would equate to the overall allowable catch, rather than limits in the eastern and western regions.

"TARFish seeks a direct catch-control mechanism to be developed for the recreational sector, which would be more effective in directly constraining the recreational catch," Mr Nikolai said.

"[The IMAS report] is likely to provide additional information to the sectors and the minister to facilitate a more informed decision process."

Mr Nikolai warned DPIPW that more reductions to season dates and bag limits would make little difference as catches in previous years had increased despite changes.

"Due to the propensity of recreational fishers to adapt ... by modifying their fishing activities, TARFish does not support a season reduction and believes it will not be effective in restraining catch," he said.

He said bag and possession limits were already at very low levels.