

LOCAL NEWS

Last minute lobsters

Fiordland lobster fishermen are hoping the Chinese New Year will result in a strong demand for their product and enable them to finish the season on a high.

The season ends on March 31 and while both the quantity and quality of crayfish has been high, around 20 percent of the year's allowable catch was still to be landed at the end of last year.

That's primarily because the high New Zealand dollar has hampered export returns and many fishermen have gambled on the often fickle festival market at the end of the season to bolster their income.

Fiordland Lobster Company chief executive Mike Schuck said it was a risky move and not one the company encouraged. While the Chinese New Year often proved lucrative, there were other years when the hoped for returns simply didn't eventuate. Last year the Fiordland Lobster Company processed around 30 tonnes for the Chinese New Year market, this year it has around 100 tonnes. Added to that was knowledge that western and southern Australia was also producing lobster at the moment and the New Zealand dollar was still high.

"That's not a very good position."

One of those witness to the large number of lobster coming out of Fiordland at present is Alpine Choppers which has been transferring much of the catch. Te Anau-based chief pilot Gaven Burgess said two heavy lift Squirrel helicopters had shifted several tonnes from boats to factories last week, with more loads this week. The fish

are carried inside the choppers, graded at the factories, packed and exported live to the off-shore markets.

The Fiordland lobster fishery is part of the CRA8 management area. Introduced in 1998 to protect and enhance the fishery, the allowable take was radically reduced, putting many fishermen under severe financial pressure and forcing many others out of the industry altogether. However, since then lobster numbers have shown marked improvement to the extent that this year's total allowable commercial catch was raised to 1019 tonnes, the highest in many years.

CRA8 Management Committee chief executive Malcolm Lawson said the CRA8 area currently represented 37 percent of the total allowable commercial catch in New Zealand. It was a success story that was now in the process of being replicated around the country and was also attracting international interest. But it didn't happen overnight.

"It didn't happen without effort and impact. Now, with those sacrifices, we're seeing the other side of it and they're getting the benefit from it," he said.

"The state of the fishery, with the good abundance there, is not just good for the commercial fishery, it's good for amateurs, customary fishermen and also people who just like to know that there's plenty of fish out there in the water," Mr Lawson said.

"The management regime we have in place is fairly conservative, we're not out there



Alpine Chopper pilots Brendan Thow (right) and Dale Green unload lobster from their machines and into a waiting truck at Manapouri Airport last week.

trying to take every last one that we can... there's better value to be gained by being conservative and allowing the fishermen the opportunity to pick and choose when they go fishing and the grades that they land."

Because of the high New Zealand dollar, many fishermen this year elected to hold back on their quota, gambling on the possibility of higher prices coinciding with Chinese New Year festivities.

To the end of December there was still about 200 tonnes to be landed for this fishing year.

The total allowable commercial catch is reviewed annually and recommendations for the next fishing year are due to be made to the Minister for Fisheries soon.

"By all accounts there's good amounts of juvenile fish around as well so that will come into the fishery over the next few years so things are looking good as far as that's concerned," Mr Lawson said. "Because of the level of confidence in the fisheries we're seeing reinvestment and people buying new boats. It's certainly one of the only inshore fisheries in the country where that's happened."

District council offers online service

Southland District Council customers are now able to make a request for service online, thanks to an initiative launched in December.

Customer services manager Janet Thomas said requests could be made on a diverse range of issues, from abandoned vehicles to potholes. Found under Online Services on the Southland District Council website, all requests are actioned on the

following working day and forwarded to the appropriate council member to follow up, Mrs Thomas said. There was also an option to be contacted further in regard to the request.

"There are many benefits of this new service especially for those who live in isolated areas of the district. The service allows our customers easy access to council services and the opportunity to

lodge a request for service any time of the day or night," she said.

Different requests would have different priorities in the council system and therefore resolution timeframes would vary, Mrs Thomas said. For urgent matters customers should call 0800 732 732 direct any time so the issue could be dealt with immediately.



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