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Demersal fish ban will see Jurien Bay charter business shut down while commercial fishing continues daily

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Wed, 24 August 2022 8:00AM |  Paul Cross says charter boat operators will not survive proposed fishing changes. Credit: Jackson Flindell/The West Australian

A Mid West charter business owner fears he will not be able to stay afloat and will be forced to shut down under strict new State Government rules clamping down on recreational fishers.

A Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development consultation paper has recommended a nine-month fishing ban for recreational fishers, including charter operators.

The charter tagging system would enforce a set number of fishing days and set a benchmark limiting the number of demersal scalefish caught per [charter licence](#).

The changes come after a DPIRD demersal stock assessment found the recovery rate – which has been in effect since 2010 – was not increasing fast enough to meet the [2030 targets](#).

The 20-year recovery plan for the west coast demersal scalefish zone from Kalbarri to Augusta was aimed to replenish fish populations. DPIRD said there continued to be a lack of older dhufish and pink snapper in the population which was important as these are the fish that breed.

The commercial fishing sector will continue to catch demersal species all year round while recreational fishers are set to see a fishing window of 94-days from December to May, or 123-days from April to October.

Recreational fishing peak body Recfishwest CEO Dr Andrew Rowland said it was unacceptable for the recreational sector to face a nine-month closure.

“The opportunity to set this fishery on a secure pathway through proper reforms should not be missed and this discussion paper represents a complete failure of fisheries policy which destroys value rather than creates it,” he said.

Legend Charters owner Paul Cross, who operates in Jurien Bay, said running the business was already borderline difficult as he kept charges for customers low as the cost of living continued to rise.

The new proposal would potentially restrict the charter vessel from operating 11 months of the year and running costs would outweigh keeping the business.

“We roughly do about 80 to 100 charters a season. There’s meant to be a 50 per cent reduction, we might only get a month of fishing,” he said.

The tagging system would reduce the catch limit to 20 tonnes – equating to a retained catch of 7120 demersal scalefish – for the charter fishery.

He said his running costs included maintaining the \$500,000 vessel, \$80,000 for licensing and \$10,000 for docking the boat at the marina, on top of costs for vehicles, moorings, quality fishing equipment, joint shared offices and tenders.

“It’s around \$750,000 a year that’s going to be parked up and can only be used once a month,” he said.

“Coupled with the prior ban, winter closures and not enough people around for the season, to have closes on top of that again it’s not feasible or viable.

Mr Cross said he would need to turn over \$50,000 a month for the business to survive and that was impossible with the proposed recreational laws.

“When someone calls up and asks to book a charter in December, what am I meant to tell them?” he said.

“It’s physically not viable having a boat that you can use for one month at a commercial capacity.

“I’m trying to sell the vessel in a market where inflation is rising.”

Mr Cross said he was one of the lucky ones having paid off the \$500,000 vessel, but he could not imagine how others would cope with their repayments.

“People who fish in the demersal area won’t stay in business,” he said.

Mr Cross said since purchasing the business in 2017 and fishing the waters, recent years had produced some of their highest catch rates and he did not believe there was a risk to demersal scale fish populations.

“We’ve fished these waters and had the best fishing seasons we’ve had in the last four or five years. I don’t know what everyone else is like but based on our catch rate we’re doing well,” he said.

Currently, commercial operations are allocated two thirds of the 750 tonne annual catch limit across the west coast bioregion and recreational fishers are restricted from catching demersal species from October 15 to December 15.