

WA fishing ban: Industry facing downturn before shock proposals to slash limits implemented



Steve Butler | The West Australian
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Minister for Fisheries Don Punch. Credit: Michael Wilson/The West Australian



WA's charter fishing industry, which delivers \$488 of economic benefit to WA for each prized fish caught and kept, is already feeling the pain of plans for dramatic new measures to try and protect stocks in the State's waters.

Marine Tourism WA has confirmed that shock proposals revealed by Fisheries Minister Don Punch to slash the total catch allowed for 100 licensed charter fisherman by half to just 20 tonnes annually, has resulted in an industry downturn even before the changes have been implemented.

Without the changes, Mr Punch and Premier Mark McGowan have claimed there will be no more fish to fish. But the plan has triggered widespread backlash from an industry which claims it has been ignored on fairer solutions to stock problems.

MTWA president Matt Howard said many operators, particularly those offering trips which required significant forward planning such as extended tours to the Abrolhos Islands, were already being hit hard.



Fisheries Minister Don Punch has proposed slashing the total catch allowed for 100 licensed charter fisherman by half to just 20 tonnes annually. Credit: Simon Santi/The West Australian

“I’ve taken numerous calls this week from operators relaying the same advice that their forward bookings are being challenged,” Marine Tourism WA president Matt Howard said.

“We’ve got some operators really feeling the heat with people demanding deposits back and wanting to cancel trips because they are just not sure what the outcome of this process is going to be. It’s already having a financial impact and the changes aren’t even in.”

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MTWA president Matt Howard

Shikari Charters operator Allan Bevan, who has run his business out of Fremantle for nearly 30 years, said the industry had already been hammered by border closures during the global coronavirus pandemic. He said news of Mr Punch’s proposed bans had continued to turn away international fishing visitors, particularly from Asia.

MTWA, which represents the charter sector to relevant government departments, has made an impassioned plea for further discussion on the changes likely to be implemented by the end of the year, or face sending the State’s \$2.4 billion fishing industry into unprecedented turmoil.



Pictured is Allan Bevan from Shikari Charters. Ian Munro Credit: Ian Munro/The West Australian

Mr Howard said a recent study showed the charter fishing industry was worth an annual \$111 million to the State in direct and indirect expenditure and employed more than 830 people. He said unless the sector was allowed to keep its 40-tonne allowance, it would face devastation.

“We’re 100 per cent behind sustainable fish stocks, but to maintain operator viability on 20 tonnes is just about impossible,” Mr Howard said of the industry which attracts 70,000 clients each year.

“There would be devastating financial impacts, loss of businesses, loss of jobs and in some cases for full-time professional operators, their houses will be on the line. We’re already 10 years through a process to reduce catch and effort, we’ve already taken a hit and we can’t keep going further.

“We’re more than open to looking at another way and we’re hoping we can get the Minister back to the table to work through the process.”



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Shadow Fisheries Minister Colin de Grussa claimed on Monday that Mr Punch had conducted a “sham consultation process”. He said he had joined with the WA Recreational Family Fishing Alliance to push a petition calling on the State Government to re-engage in discussing fairer options for the industry.

The alliance, founded by local tackle and boating industry figures as well as recreational fishers, was formed in response to changes which were first mooted late last year. The petition, launched on Sunday, had already attracted 3500 signatures by Monday morning.

“The government actually had no intention of implementing any of the options that were put on the table by the recreational sector,” Mr de Grussa said.

“The government clearly had its mind made up before it entered the process for consultation. This government has just taken the ‘one size fits all’ approach and applied the same management mechanism right across the fishery.”

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Is it just me or is the sentiment expressed by fisher folk eerily like that of the timber workers just a few years ago? Not, 'let's stop before we annihilate this resource' but, 'do you realise how much money we are making, sorry, bringing into the community'. Sad but true. Congratulations McGowan for having the courage to do what many wouldn't.

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