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Media Release

EDS calls for Commission of Inquiry into Fisheries Management

Earlier this week Fisheries Minister Stuart Nash announced the creation of Fisheries New Zealand as a dedicated business unit within the Ministry of Primary Industries.

“On the face of it, this announcement could be a small improvement on the current situation although it is lacking some important detail,” said EDS Policy Director and fisheries researcher, Raewyn Peart.

“It is not clear what the change will mean in practice since the intention is that some staff will continue to be shared across the MPI organisation. It may amount to nothing more than cosmetic rebranding which would be an inadequate response to the major problems in fisheries management.

“The fisheries system is not working. It has been subject to some serious scandals in recent years. It’s an important part of our economy and it’s culturally significant. Recreational fishing is part of the New Zealand lifestyle. There’s an urgent need for a wide-reaching, independent public inquiry into whether the management arrangements need more fundamental reform.

“Fisheries management is rife with agency capture, conflicts of interest, an absence of robust regulatory independence, a closed mind to innovation, failings in the funding and quota management systems and an inadequate response to some major environmental challenges.

“Many inshore stocks are inadequately researched and poorly managed. For example, more than 70% of the Hauraki Gulf’s finfish harvest is from stocks of unknown status. Only 5% of the harvest is from stocks identified as likely or very likely to be above their target size.

“New Zealand is well behind other developed countries in addressing the environmental impacts of fishing. There is an urgent need to control the ongoing damage to seafloor habitats. Such impacts are chronic, cumulative and difficult to reverse. If that degree of environmental harm was happening on land or in freshwater there would be a public outcry.

“A reorganisation of management structures within MPI doesn’t go anywhere near far enough to addressing these issues. We may need a new Oceans Agency to focus on fisheries management. There may be a role for the Ministry for the Environment or the Environmental Protection Authority as environmental regulator.

“There is a clear need for a wide-ranging, independent review of fisheries management to restore public confidence in the sector.

“We urge the Minister to make the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into Fisheries Management a top priority,” concluded Ms Peart.