



Reaction from experts contacted by the Science Media Centre:

Dr Angus McIntosh, Professor of Freshwater Ecology, University of Canterbury, comments:

“Eels are disproportionately important in New Zealand rivers because of their position at the top of the food web, so the imperilled state of longfin eel populations, highlighted in the PCE report, warrants action. It is concerning that some of the best evidence for longfin declines, a widespread and substantial reduction in their distribution, has not been given due weight in setting harvest quotas. I hope the agencies responsible for eel management implement the commissioner’s recommendations. However, I’m concerned that the hamstrung state of the Department of Conservation (DoC), being further exacerbated by the current round of job cuts, will prevent it from doing so.”

Dr Roger Young, Freshwater Ecologist, Cawthron Institute, comments:

“I welcome this report from the PCE on one of New Zealand’s iconic native species. The information presented on the status of the longfin eel population provides strong evidence that the population is in serious trouble.

“The consistent lack of the smallest eels in samples from throughout the country is particularly concerning. However, it is possible that this result may be influenced to some extent by the sampling method that has been used; electric fishing is generally less effective at catching very small eels. Despite this, I think the multiple lines of evidence indicating a decline in the eel population is compelling.

“Longfin eels live for many years, but only breed once at the end of their life. Therefore, they are very susceptible to habitat degradation and loss, and overfishing. My personal experience of snorkelling in rivers around New Zealand indicates that there are substantially more eels in rivers where regular harvesting does not take place. I strongly support the recommendations in the report and hope to see changes in longfin eel management in the near future.”

Dave Allen (MSc), Director - Aquatic Natural Resources Ltd (more than two decades experience managing eel fishery at the former Ministry of Fisheries) comments:

“The Commissioner has reached a view that the commercial fishing of longfins should cease, partly to address non-fishing issues of land and water management. However, this view has been reached from an unfair appraisal of peer reviewed research information. Long-standing commissioned research is unreasonably picked apart in apparent favour of other research information that fits better with a preconceived view of a resource in decline. The available evidence does not provide a reasonable rationale to stop fishing completely, and there are more moderate options to further restrict fishing, while still ensuring sustainability, which are not entertained as a potential outcome(eg, catch limit reduction).

“It is wrong to assume that a stock’s catch limit will always be caught in any one year – there are other factors that affect whether a stock is fished (eg, international buyer demand). In some contrast to northern hemisphere eel fisheries, the decline in national commercial catch for longfin, particularly in the North Island since 2004, is a reflection of MPI’s active management intervention and the resulting



significant reduction in the number of the commercial fishers and processing facilities.

“Maintaining an open mind to a range of research information is beneficial, and research providers and environmental advocates should actively participate in official science review processes, such as the MPI-convened Eel Science Working Group. MPI may need to explore alternative funding mechanisms to cater for a broader range of research indicators for this high priority resource.

“As highlighted in the report, the combined inclusion of shortfin and longfin species within the same generic South Island eel stocks needs separation, so that more focused catch limits can be applied to longfin in the South Island. This would go a long way to providing the assurance that sustainability outcomes can be achieved on both a regional and a national basis.

“It would have been helpful if better incentives were identified for land and water users as it relates to habitat management. To expect that fishing interests should cease their activities for valued social, cultural and economic outcomes, for an indeterminate timeframe, because of inactions or actions of land and water users over many decades, does not provide the stimulus required for the latter to improve their performance.”

Alistair Dunn, Programme Leader, Fisheries Stock Assessment and Monitoring, NIWA comments:

“The PCE report raises issues around some of the science and data collected on New Zealand’s longfin eels populations. We intend to work closely with MPI and DoC in the review of science needs for fisheries and conservation management of this iconic New Zealand species.”

Dr Russell Death, Associate Professor, Institute of Agriculture and Environment - Ecology, Massey University, comments:

“I have been aware for some time from research colleagues that our endemic longfin eel has been under threat, and have been disappointed at the lack of action from agencies charged with their protection. It is therefore great to see the PCE’s office providing an objective assessment of the facts. Clearly the PCE’s assessment bears out the concerns many of the scientific community and public have had; that one of our greatest freshwater taonga is at risk.

“A moratorium on longfin fishing is an obvious first step; however, clearly more drastic steps will be needed to prevent its extinction. New Zealanders are proud of our efforts to conserve many of our terrestrial species and it would be a tragedy to see our largest freshwater species disappear simply because it is not as cute and cuddly as many of our other conservation treasures. In that regard I would have liked to see some more prescribed suggestions of the way forward for its preservation. The agencies currently charged with the protection of eel appear to be failing and we obviously need an alternative if we are to avoid losing another unique New Zealand icon.”

Dr Gerry Closs, Associate Professor, Freshwater Ecology, University of Otago, comments:

“The call to close the longfin eel fishery until stocks recover by the PCE is to be commended, and I fully support this action. Freshwater fisheries scientists have regarded this fishery as



unsustainable for a number of years, and the data presented in this report confirms this view. The low numbers of juvenile and large adult longfin eels in recent catch data from Otago and Waikato are particularly alarming, and confirm too few longfin eels are surviving to breed.

“Female longfin eels can take over 80 years to grow to maturity. Even if an eel fisher only returns to fish a site every five years, each longfin eel has to evade their nets on at least 10 occasions over their long life. The odds of surviving to maturity are minimal.

“Currently, the longfin eel is being managed into extinction by the Government agencies responsible for their protection. A lack of action by the relevant ministers following receipt of this report would be wilful negligence. Closure of the fishery, essential if the species is to survive, will have little impact on the total catch of eels given that shortfin eel will still be available. In the longer term, sustainable exploitation of longfin eels can only occur if either the North or South Island is permanently closed to commercial fishing.”

Dr Mike Joy, Director, Centre for Freshwater Ecosystem Management & Modelling, Massey University, comments:

“This report on the status and management of New Zealand’s threatened endemic longfin eel is clear and convincing in its call for a halt to their commercial harvest. Furthermore the report vindicates the long standing call for a moratorium on longfin eel harvest by the Manaaki tuna group.

“Disturbingly the report revealed some serious shortcomings in the management of the longfin fishery by the Ministry for Primary Industries and insufficient protection for longfin eels by the Department of Conservation.

“This report emphasises the crucial value of independent scientific appraisal and just what a national treasure all New Zealanders have with the office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment.”