# BETTER TIMES AHEAD
## for freshwater aquaculture?

BY JUSTINE INNS

The Ministers of Fisheries and Conservation announced in mid-March that changes would be made to the Freshwater Fisheries Regulations to better allow for farming of koura (freshwater crayfish).

These regulations are administered by the Department of Conservation, and the difficulties faced by koura farmers operating under them have been highlighted in the pages of *New Zealand Aquaculture* in the past.

In announcing the proposal to amend the regulations, the ministers acknowledged that "differences" exist between DoC's Freshwater Fishing Regulations and the Freshwater Fish Farming Regulations administered by MFish.

Koura farmers have had to navigate both regimes, as well as grapple with the requirements of the Resource Management Act and applicable district and regional plans.

The current proposal is to amend the regulations so that licences can be issued for new koura farms where broodstock can be sourced from existing farms, and to allow limited quantities of wild koura to be collected in certain circumstances. The more difficult issue of harvesting wild koura is to be dealt with separately in a wider review of freshwater regulations.

Current and prospective koura farmers no doubt welcomed these announcements, albeit cautiously, given their experiences to date. The reality is that koura farming is just one face of the wider issue of the overlap between MFish and DoC's roles when it comes to managing freshwater fisheries. The approaches and priorities of the two agencies, as set out in their empowering legislation, are about as divergent as it is possible to be.

DoC is directed by section 6 (ab) of the Conservation Act, "to preserve so far as is practicable all indigenous freshwater fisheries, and protect recreational freshwater fisheries and freshwater fish habitats". MFish, on the other hand, must "provide for the utilisation of fisheries resources while ensuring sustainability". The demarcation line between these two regimes and their conflicting objectives has never been adequately resolved.

The reality is that many of our freshwater fisheries species - both indigenous and introduced - have significant commercial potential. Clearly, realising that potential is exactly what "utilisation while ensuring sustainability" is about. The preservation and recreation focus of DoC sits far less comfortably with commercial use, however.

There is no reason, in principle, why freshwater fisheries should be managed any differently from marine species. Yes, some are iconic, some are endangered and some have complicated and little-understood life cycles and breeding patterns. But marine species share all of those features. Many freshwater species are vulnerable to habitat changes and pollution, but so are many inshore marine species.

Thus far, only a few freshwater species have been shown to have aquaculture potential. Again, the same is true of marine species. Neither in the marine context, nor in freshwater or on land, has aquaculture been shown to have major adverse effects on the environment. The major reform of the marine aquaculture regime recognised that the RMA provides a more appropriate regime for assessing and managing those effects than the Fisheries Act.

While that reform left freshwater and land-based aquaculture largely untouched, the same logic surely applies. That's not to say that the RMA hasn't presented problems for some koura farmers in the past, but that's another story.

The details of the proposed changes to the Freshwater Fisheries Regulations are still in development, but they will need close scrutiny. That will be even truer of the "wider freshwater review". Major changes will be required if the potential of freshwater species, and the entrepreneurs and innovators who seek to utilise them, is to be realised.

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