



For immediate release:

Responsible Fisheries Alliance cautions that government's disregard for West Coast Rock Lobster recovery plan could affect global trade

Cape Town (February 2017) -The Responsible Fisheries Alliance (RFA) has cautioned that the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries' (DAFF's) decision to overlook the scientifically-based agreed-upon recovery plan for the West Coast Rock Lobster (WCRL) fishery could not only compromise the long-term future and sustainability of the WCRL stock but also ultimately influence trade.

The RFA said that unless DAFF took rapid action to address illegal fishing and corruption, and committed to abiding by scientific advice and responsible practice principles of fisheries management, South Africa risked losing key international markets for the West Coast Rock Lobster fishery.

The WCRL fishery is one of South Africa's most commercially important fisheries, with an estimated annual turnover of R530 million and provides direct employment for over 4 100 people from communities along the West Coast. The fishery also contributes to the livelihoods and food security of many small-scale fishing communities in the Western and Northern Cape.

For several years, fishery stakeholders have been working closely with the department's scientific and management staff to collaboratively address the serious issues confronting the rock lobster fishery. The fishery has been plagued by rampant illegal fishing which has severely damaged the resource and its ability to sustain the legal fishing thereof by both the commercial and soon to be introduced small scale fishing sector in the future. Current estimates are that just 2% of the original stocks are left. This has resulted in the species being downgraded to "Red" on WWF-SA's Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI) list.

On 17 November 2016 DAFF unfortunately announced a total allowable catch (TAC) for the 2016/2017 fishing season contrary to that recommended in terms of the scientifically-based agreed-upon recovery plan. The scientific advice recommended that catches should be substantially reduced to protect the future sustainability of the fishery. Furthermore, DAFF failed to implement the expected additional fishery management controls aimed at reducing illegal fishing.

Jonty Jankovich, chair of the RFA, commented: "DAFF's decision may also have significant implications for the broader South African fishing industry. Seafood buyers, locally and globally, are increasingly making commitments to sourcing only seafood which comes from well-managed, sustainable sources."

Specifically, foreign markets like the United States of America are in the process of implementing legislation to ban the importation of seafood products that carry a high risk of being the product of illegal fishing.

The RFA is concerned that DAFF's decisions are not supported by scientific advice and that the department is discounting the multi-stakeholder processes supported by all involved in the fishery.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time DAFF has not adhered to scientific advice with regard to the WCRL fishery. In 2012, the Department also sought to implement a higher than the scientifically recommended TAC that would have hampered adequate resource recovery. In response to a public outcry at the time, the government committed to following the scientific advice in future management decisions – a commitment which it now appears to have neglected.

The RFA would therefore like to call on DAFF to take heed of the best available scientific evidence and reinstate the previously agreed upon recovery plan for the WCRL fishery – including a reduction in the TAC for the 2016/17 fishing season to levels which are ecologically and economically sustainable.

Notes to the editor

The Responsible Fisheries Alliance

The RFA, a partnership between environmental NGOs, WWF South Africa (WWF-SA) and BirdLife South Africa, and five major fishing companies, namely Irvin & Johnson (I&J), Oceana Group, Pioneer Fishing, Sea Harvest and Viking Fishing, is aimed at promoting the responsible use of South Africa's marine resources.

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