



Eel Q & A - December 6 2013

1. What did the panel conclude?

The panel concluded that the population of longfin eels is much lower than it was.

They concluded "*there is a high probability that the longfin eel population has been substantially reduced*".

2. Is the longfin eel population in decline?

The longfin population has been declining for a long time.

While some monitoring indicates the rate of decline may have slowed in recent years, the panel agreed that the population has generally declined over the last twenty years.

3. What are the causes of decline?

The main causes of decline are the loss of habitat, barriers such as dams blocking their ability to move up and down rivers, and fishing.

The panel concluded that the information used by officials to assess the state of the longfin population does not address all these causes.

They stated: "*What appears to be lacking is an integration of the different information sources, a comprehensive assessment addressing all potential impacts/threats to the eel...*"

4. Is the way we monitor the longfin eel population adequate?

The panel recommended a wider range of information be used to monitor and assess the longfin eel population.

They criticised the limited set of information currently being used to guide management decisions, and made many recommendations on how to improve the quality of this information over time.

The panel recommended "*a more comprehensive approach than currently presented*".

The Commissioner's report reached similar conclusions – that the scientific basis for judging the sustainability of the longfin eel population is overly narrow and inadequate, and that a wide range of information should be considered in its entirety in order to make an assessment based on a weight of evidence.

5. Why are longfin eels difficult to manage?

Longfin eels are difficult to manage because they are exceptionally long-lived, only breed once at the end of their life, and face a wide range of threats.

The panel noted that eels are "*relatively susceptible*" – longfin eels, in particular.

6. Why should we suspend commercial fishing?

The Commissioner's report concluded on the weight of evidence that longfin eels are a species in trouble.

There are things that can be done to improve eel habitat and assist their passage along rivers.

But these take time and some, such as removing hydro dams that kill mature eels on their way out to sea to breed, will not happen.

The only thing that can make a difference quickly is to reduce the pressure from fishing.

The Commissioner recommended that commercial fishing should be suspended until evidence shows that longfin eels have recovered to a sustainable level.

7. What information is best for assessing the longfin eel population?

It is important to have a wide range of information so conclusions can be drawn on a weight of evidence.

The panel found that the main measure used by officials at present (CPUE) was good but "*need to be interpreted with caution*" for a number of reasons.

The Commissioner's report drew on wider information from electric fishing surveys and the Freshwater Fish Database – information not currently used by officials.

The panel agreed with the Commissioner that this information is "*very useful*" and recommended that these measures be further analysed, developed and used by officials.

8. Did the panel recommend suspending commercial fishing?

The panel was limited by its terms of reference to only consider scientific information and not make recommendations about managing the fishery.

The panel's assessment will be used by the Minister for Primary Industries to set fishing limits.

9. Why are eels important?

Longfin eels are found only in New Zealand, are our top freshwater predator.

They can grow to more than 2 metres long, weigh up to 25 kilograms, and live more than 100 years.

They are a taonga for Maori, and are viewed as guardians of the waterways and links to the gods.

They are also a valuable food source for Maori.