

MEDIA STATEMENT

19 February 2025

MISINFORMATION REGARDING THE COMMERCIAL ABALONE FISHING SECTOR

It has come to the Department's attention that recently there has been misinformation spread via social media regarding the status of the commercial abalone fishing sector and plans for the future of this sector. The Department therefore deems it necessary to clear up these misunderstandings.

In 2004, long-term rights in the commercial abalone fishing sector were allocated to 304 successful applicants for a period of ten years. These rights expired on 30 July 2014 and reverted to the state. During the 2015/2016 Fishing Rights Allocation Process, applications were invited for commercial fishing rights in various commercial fishing sectors, including abalone. However, the process was not concluded. Since then, and to date, the previous abalone right holders have been granted yearly exemptions from the requirement to obtain a fishing right in terms of the Marine Living Resources Act, 1998 (MLRA). Accordingly, and on condition these previous right holders obtained permits, they have been allowed to continue to operate in the sector for the past 10 years.

As a globally accepted practice for sustainable fisheries management, catch data reconciliation is essential to ensure that Right/Exemption Holders do not exceed their allocated catch limits when fishing and landing their catch. However, during the catch data verification process between 2020 to 2024 the Department found evidence that 10 exemption holders were willfully and intentionally transgressing the MLRA. Upon the conclusion of an administrative enforcement process, the exemptions in respect of these 10 fishers were revoked and no further permits have been issued to the non-complaint group.

During 2024, it further came to the Department's attention that the majority of the exemption holders in the abalone sector were transgressing the MLRA. A verification process was conducted and finalised in December 2024. As a result of this process, 179 previous right holders are suspected of having committed serious offences in terms of the MLRA. These fishers will not be issued with a further exemption until the criminal investigations have been finalised and only then their right of access will be reconsidered.

While the sector was operating, on 23 October 2020, the then-Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, invited the public to comment on the proposed resource split between local commercial and small-scale fishing in the traditional linefish, squid and abalone fishing sectors in terms of section 14(2) of the MLRA.

Only a few comments were received and since then, the Department has been having discussions with various stakeholders to consider the future of the management of the abalone sector as a result of changes that have broadly been happening in the fishing sector. It is for these reasons that the Department is considering reopening the consultation process. No decision has been taken in this regard.

Any proposed options for the future of the abalone fishery, including whether or not to split and/or classify abalone as a small-scale resource, will first involve a meaningful public participation process prior to any final decision being taken. Accordingly, each and every affected person will be provided with an opportunity to object to or otherwise provide comment on any future proposal and the comments will comprehensively be considered by the Department prior to any final decision being taken.

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ISSUED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY, FISHERIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT