**Briefing paper on Maui’s dolphin**

Both nationally and internationally (i.e. IUCN Redlist), Maui’s dolphins are considered Critically Endangered. This means “facing an extremely high risk of extinction”. Two independent population assessments have indicated a total population of around 100 or fewer. No dolphin population of this size can be considered sustainable unless human impacts are reduced as far as possible. This means eliminating fisheries bycatch. Deaths of Maui’s dolphins in gill nets and trawl nets are easily avoidable, by avoiding use of this gear in their habitat. More selective, sustainable fishing methods, that do not kill dolphins are readily available. Using selective fishing methods would benefit not only dolphins, but also seabirds and the fish populations on which the long-term future of the fishing industry depends.

The distribution of Maui’s dolphins includes the west coast of the North Island from Maunganui Bluff (near Dargaville) in the north to Cape Egmont (south of New Plymouth) in the south, including the harbours in that zone (Manukau, Kaipara, Raglan, Kawhia, Aotea Harbours). When Pete Hodgson created the first protected area for Maui’s dolphins, he was under strong pressure from the fishing industry and the Ministry of Fisheries not to include the southern part of their range and the harbours. At that time, there had been very few recent sightings in that area, so it was not included. Up to the 1990s there had been sightings and several gillnet captures of Maui’s dolphins in the area around New Plymouth. More recent sightings, and the gillnet capture on 2 January 2012, prove that this southern zone remains an important part of the habitat of Maui’s dolphins.

Continued research has provided a much stronger base for protecting Taranaki and the harbours. New scientific information shows that the southern boundary urgently needs to be extended. The recent public sightings and death of a Maui’s dolphin underscore the need to extend the southern boundary of the protected area to at least Cape Egmont. The exact location of the dolphin death has still not been made available. It may be necessary to extend protection further south.

Precautionary management would be to extend protection not only to Taranaki but also to Tasman Bay and Golden Bay. There is a small population of Hector’s dolphins present in this area, and there are very occasional sightings of Hector’s dolphins or Maui’s dolphins along the southwestern coast of the North Island (including Wellington Harbour), and off Taranaki. Genetically, there is no reason why the two subspecies (Maui’s dolphins and other Hector’s dolphins) cannot and should not interbreed, and indeed dolphins in this zone are the only possibility of linking the North Island and South Island populations. Yet this area is entirely unprotected - the dolphins within it face a much higher risk of capture than they do elsewhere. In other words, not protecting this area exacerbates the isolation of the North Island population, and makes its recovery much less likely. Until the connection with the South Island population is re-established, Maui’s dolphins are at extreme risk of extinction.

What’s needed is one coherent package of protection measures that matches the distribution of the dolphins and includes the areas of greatest threat. This would reduce population fragmentation and allow population recovery throughout the range of the species.

The fisherman says the dolphin he caught on 2 January was female. With a population of about 55 Maui’s dolphins, there will be fewer than 25 females and about 10-15 breeding females. Losing one of these means a major increase in the extinction risk for Maui’s dolphins.

These deaths are avoidable. It is now well known that Maui’s dolphins are found of Taranaki. Maui’s dolphin is the worlds rarest marine dolphin. If New Zealanders want them to survive it is crucial that no more are caught in fishing gear. Bycatch needs to be eliminated now. No dolphin population this small can afford such losses.

**A brief history:**

1970-1988

* Hector’s dolphin populations decline rapidly from almost 30,000 to fewer than 8,000 individuals

1988

* Helen Clark (Minister of Conservation, Labour) creates New Zealand’s first marine mammal sanctuary, to protect Hector’s dolphins around Banks Peninsula

2003

* Pete Hodgson (Minister of Fisheries, Labour) creates protected are for North Island Hector’s dolphins, also known as Maui’s dolphin

2008

* Jim Anderton (Minister of Fisheries, Labour-led coalition) puts in place a comprehensive package of protection measures for Hector’s and Maui’s dolphins
* Scientific analysis shows that these latest protection measures are almost enough to halt the population decline, but not yet sufficient to ensure sustainability or allow the species to recover

2011

* Phil Heatley (Minister of Fisheries, National-led coalition) undermines the existing protection measures for Hector’s dolphins by allowing commercial and recreational gillnets back into protected areas in Marlborough
* This compromise to the protection measures is made despite evidence from observers on fishing boats that at least 23 Hector’s dolphins are still being caught on the east coast of the South Island