

WESMAR Sonar: Eye on the Big Eye

“The trouble with sounders is their narrow beam. We need to see a wider area because we’re looking for concentration of feed; the sonar is the best way to do that. With the WESMAR sonar we can see feed either side as well as ahead – up to 1000 meters on each side of the track we are on.”

Andrew Gray, Skipper of the 85-foot New Zealand Longliner F.V. Red Bluff

Sonar on a long line boat is critical to finding and tracking the fish. And for regulated and managed fisheries like New Zealand’s Southern Bluefin and (soon to follow) Big Eye Tuna fisheries, it is one of the most useful fishing tools available.

“The WESMAR sonar helps us find good areas of feed concentration and stay on them,” said skipper Andrew Gray. He is captain of the 85-foot tuna long liner F.V. Red Bluff, a 300-ton steel vessel owned by Simunovich Fisheries, Limited of New Zealand. It is one of the company’s 17 elite fishing and processing vessels and is presently their only large Surface Longliner--part of New Zealand’s 150-vessel commercial fleet of vessels 40 to 90 feet. It is presently one of the top catching boats.

Gray and his crew of three, fish half the year for the Big Eye, typically staying out 10-14 days, within northern New Zealand’s 200nm EEZ. The other half of the year they fish for Southern Blue Fin Tuna, which is found in the colder southern waters. Both are valuable catches, both are exported to Japan, and both are closely regulated. Once they catch their first fish they are immediately restricted to just 9 more shots (days) to finish the trip. This ensures a high quality product and higher return for their fresh chilled tuna.

Those shots have to be made with as much information as possible said Captain Gray in a phone conversation following a recent 10-day trip with his WESMAR sonar.

Gray uses a depth sounder, temperature gauges, full set of Orbimage charts downloaded daily, a WESMAR HD800 horizontal scanning sonar, and Bathymetric charts for his fish finding operation. He uses a Lindgren and Pitman 40 nm drum with shooter and sets up to 2500 hooks in any one shot.

“The best way to find the Big Eye or Southern Bluefin is to watch for temperature breaks, current swirls, and sea surface activity including birds, indicating feed fish in the area and hence bigger fish under them. Then we steam around



Captain Andrew Gray (right) likes his WESMAR sonar for tuna fishing because he can scan such a wide area and track the feeder fish as well. He is shown with his sonar and WESMAR Sales Manager Alan Leong.

the area with the sounder and sonar. We need the sonar to see a wider area because we’re looking for concentrations of feed and they are easy to pass by with only the narrow beam of a sounder – the tuna feed on small fish including squid – so we can keep the bulk of our gear on the feed and hence amongst the bigger fish. The sonar allows us to deviate from a narrow straight line into a curve and with the sonar we can see up to 1000 meters on each side of the line we are on. So I can deviate my setting path to cross that patch of feed I otherwise would not have seen.

Gray says they typically lay 1,800 to 2,500 hooks over 40 miles. “The location you put these hooks is critical and once you find the fish it is also vital that you stay on them. The sonar is an important tool for this purpose,” he said.

Gray is reluctant to talk about his success, but admits the Red Bluff is near the top in production. It is Gray’s fifth year on the boat and his fifteenth year as a captain. He’s 35 and started fishing with his grandfather when he was 5.

