The term “social licence to operate”, or SLO, has increasingly featured in public discussion about commercial operations in the marine environment. As part of the Sustainable Seas National Challenge, we are studying how this term is being used in New Zealand and its implications for industry-community relations.

**METHODS**

From a series of online searches, we found 99 documents that mentioned SLO in relation to NZ’s marine industries. We analysed sentence structure and verb choice to assess who is given agency to affect SLO.

**SECTORS & TRENDS**

NZ usage started in 2008, though most occurred after 2012. Seafood sectors combined had more mentions of SLO (38) than mining sectors combined (30). Industry and government were the most frequent sources (Fig.1).

**AGENCY**

An actor has agency with respect to SLO if the text refers to them as being able to influence SLO. We assigned agency where the actor (i.e. agent) was explicitly identified in the text.

For example, “the community granted social licence” or “industry can build social licence…” Of 40 documents that assign explicit agency, only 16 give agency to community and only 5 give agency to iwi. Most give agency to industry and/or central government. (Table 1)

The term ‘social licence’ suggests that communities have power to grant or withhold approval of commercial operations in the marine environment, but the actual wording used by those talking about SLO suggests otherwise.

**CONCLUSION**

The public discourse of SLO has been dominated by industry and central government voices. They frequently vest agency over SLO with industry and then state or imply that industry already has SLO and just needs to maintain or improve it. Changing the way we talk about social licence would help achieve the vision of a blue economy, increasing benefits from the ocean environment while sustaining communities and marine ecosystems.

Industry and government could change their wording to send a different, more empowering message to iwi and community groups about seeking their acceptance and trust.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Funded by Sustainable Seas National Challenge