



THE UPDATE

Captain's Blog



Bluff oyster season off to a strong start

While the rock lobster sector is doing it hard, there is good news on the Bluff oyster front.

The season, which began last Sunday (Mar 1), has had a positive start, according to Invercargill-based Barnes Oysters general manager Graeme Wright.

He had 50 people waiting outside the Spey Street store on Monday morning, keen to sample the season's first Bluffies at \$26 a dozen.

There was the usual "crazy demand" but the company would continue its standard practice of being loyal to locals, with about 70 percent of the catch sold in Southland in the first few weeks.

And the annual homage to the Foveaux Strait delicacy, the Bluff Oyster Festival on May 23, has been sold out since Christmas.

The Total Allowable Commercial Catch has again been set at 15 million oysters but the quota holders are taking a conservative approach, opting to catch just half that amount – 7.5 million oysters – at this early stage.

That will be reviewed in a month or so, depending on catches, the weather and the health of the shellfish.

Wednesday was a day off, courtesy of a 50 knot westerly and four-metre seas.

A similar management approach was taken last year and the final take was about 10 million oysters, still only two thirds of the quota.

That is estimated to be only two percent of the total biomass.

There is no sign of the bonamia ostreae disease that has destroyed the farmed oyster industry on Stewart Island and in the Marlborough Sounds.

The wild oysters are infected with a different strain of bonamia – exitiosus – which is not harmful to humans and appears to be a low levels this season.

There is reason to be cautious.

Catches have fluctuated wildly over the years and were at 15 million for six years until 2002 when the ever present bonamia struck.

The fishery was closed due to the disease for three years before that.

At that time the estimated mortality of mature oysters was as high as 90 percent – around 1.2 billion shellfish.

There was another mass mortality in the summer of 2013-14, affecting about a third of the population.

Oysters are slow growing in the cold, stormy Strait waters and are five to eight years old when harvested.

Recruitment can be sporadic but has been strong for the past several years.

Barnes, a co-operative of eight companies that includes major players Skeggs, Sanford, United and Independent, handles about two thirds of the catch. Ngai Tahu has the next biggest holding.

The Foodstuffs supermarket chain has a small quota holding of around 30,000 dozen, currently selling for \$32 a dozen in Auckland.

The oyster fleet peaked at 23 boats in the 1970s but is now down to 12.

The catch is handled by 20 openers at Barnes, the oldest in his late 70s.

“They are good old soldiers, they turn up every day,” Wright said.

Top operators can open 50 dozen an hour.

The fishery has no exposure to China, the bulk of the catch is consumed domestically, with a small amount sent to Australia.

Meanwhile lobster fishers reliant on the Chinese market – closed due to the coronavirus – have been given limited relief in being allowed to carry forward to next year 10 percent of uncaught quotas.

There is no indication when the lucrative Chinese market might reopen and the disruption could take months to resolve.

Around 110 operators stand to lose over 290 tonnes of unused entitlements worth \$34 million in exports at season’s end on Mar 31.

Twenty-year lobster survey still going strong

NIWA scientists have been travelling from Wellington to the Wairarapa to survey populations of the spiny red rock lobster for 20 years.

Established in the late 70s, it's one of New Zealand's longest running marine surveys.

NIWA researchers Dean Stotter and Jeff Forman are contributing to the wider project, investigating puerulus settlement – the young, translucent post-larval stage of the spiny red rock lobster – along the Wairarapa coast; one of seven survey sites around the country.

Stotter and Forman only have a three day window each month to carry out the surveys, which must be done at low tide when the puerulus collectors are sitting in approximately 1m of water.

The collectors, albeit rudimentary, are reliable. Developed in the 70s, the originals consisted of plywood boards attached to a metal weight.

The boards sit closely together, creating an ideal environment for puerulus to settle and hide from predators.

"The first thing they want to do is hide. They're looking for an ideal habitat and that's what we're providing with these collectors," Forman said.

A knife is used to scrape out the puerulus into a catch bag for counting, at which point they are released back into the water.

The equipment has hardly changed since the survey's inception – maintaining scientific consistency and allowing researchers to accurately compare year-to-year trends in the species' settlement.

There can be big differences in the number of individuals that survive the journey and grow into legal-sized crayfish, Forman said.

"That's what we're trying to detect."

The annual surveys will continue to contribute to the year-to-year understanding of puerulus settlement, helping to shape management of the fishery.



Dean Stotter puerulus sampling for one of New Zealand's longest-running marine surveys. Image; Lana Young, NIWA.

Kids Gone Fishin' 2020 - Wellington

Police charity Bluelight, together with KP Marine, are gearing up to present the annual Kids Gone Fishin' event in Wellington this Saturday.

The event was launched by Graeme Sinclair more than a decade ago as an offshoot of his popular Gone Fishin television series.

Children will have the opportunity to try their hand at fishing, with dive squads in the harbour preparing \$1000 worth of cash prizes ready to be snagged.

Major prizes have also been lined up for the biggest fish caught and KP marine will be giving one lucky family the opportunity to take a trip out on one of their boats.

Live music, food trucks, police, fire brigade, dive squads and more will complete the family-friendly day.

Saturday 7 March, 9am – 11.30am, Queens Wharf, Wellington.



News

On Wednesday, fishing company Nino's Limited, its director Antonio Basile and vessel master Shane McCauley, were fined \$449,500 at Wellington District Court, *Stuff* reported. The company was also ordered to pay \$64,800 to the crew for emotional harm and unpaid wages. At the time, the boat, which could carry no more than five tonnes had been overloaded with at least 28 tonnes of fish. In June 2017, three crew members and the master of fishing boat *Victory II* left Wellington to fish off the coast of the South Island near Kaikōura. The weather and sea conditions were good when the crew began their return journey to Wellington, but in a matter of minutes, water began flooding the boat's back deck and it began to sink. McCauley made a distress call and the crew members launched

a life raft. The boat sank so quickly, all four men did not have enough time to put their life jackets on. The company, Basile and McCauley pleaded guilty to one charge each of exposing people to risk of death or serious injury by failing to ensure people's health and safety. The company also pleaded guilty to two further charges of not paying two crew members' wages after the sinking. One person was owed 47 days of wages and the other was owed 12 days of wages. Maritime New Zealand headed an investigation into the incident and found that a year before the incident, the boat had consistently been overloaded. Basile and McCauley told Maritime New Zealand they did not know the vessel's load capacity was five tonnes. MNZ central region compliance manager Michael-Paul Abbott said overloading the boat was "like putting 20 medium-sized cars onto a small fishing boat".

Lobster fishers hit by the fallout from the coronavirus outbreak say they are "bitterly disappointed" at the Government's aid package, *Stuff* reported. Fisheries Minister Stuart Nash announced on Tuesday that lobster fishers would be allowed to carry forward to next year 10 percent of uncaught quotas. Rock Lobster Industry Council chief executive Mark Edwards said this would still leave many fishers "bitterly disappointed". A large number of quota holders would have to forfeit remaining entitlements that had already been paid for. Over 290 tonnes of unused entitlements worth \$34 million in exports would be lost, he said. The next fishing year starts on April 1. Fisher and quota holder Richard Kibblewhite said the majority of fishers would be "thrilled" and "grateful" for the aid package. "It's a critical decision for the rock lobster industry and one that some might say is common sense. However, there are going to be a lot of financially hurt fishers and it doesn't go all the way to resolving the issues," he said. Export prices for rock lobster had plummeted from \$100 a kilogram to just \$35. Fishers that had leased quota from quota holders would also be badly affected, unable to carry it over, despite having already paid for it. The quota holder would get it again next year anyway, Kibblewhite said. "People are going broke. There's boats on the market, there's people considering getting out of the game. People are looking for other jobs." Edwards said the losses would see small fishers unable to service debt, and some risked losing their vessels and property. He questioned the rationale for the decision and said carrying forward entitlements would not increase the number of lobsters removed from fisheries. "It just allows this year's unused catch entitlement to be used next year."

The North America Seafood Expo scheduled to take place 15 to 17 March in Boston, Massachusetts, has been postponed. The event, a premiere international trade show for the seafood sector, is an opportunity for seafood buyers in every market category to meet with suppliers from around the world to source seafood, new products, equipment and services. The decision was made in response to growing concerns over the global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, according to Diversified Communications Group Vice President Liz Plizga. "This was an incredibly difficult decision due to the importance of the event to the industry," Plizga said. "We have been monitoring the rapidly evolving situation caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and have done our best to listen to the concerns as well as the needs of our customers. We chose to make this decision now to give those planning to attend Seafood Expo North America enough time to respond to the postponement of the event." Diversified is aiming to host the event later in 2020, either in Boston or in another

U.S. city, with an announcement expected on that decision by mid-April. Exhibitors and visitors will have the option of rolling over their fees to that event, or alternatively, to the 2021 version of Seafood Expo North America in Boston.

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