

Sea squirt found at salmon farm

An invasive sea squirt which has the aquaculture industry on alert has now been discovered at a salmon farm owned by Nelson-based company New Zealand King Salmon.

The marine pest *Didemnum vexillum* was found at the company's Te Pangu Bay farm in Tory Channel in the Marlborough Sounds just before Christmas and plans are being made to treat the site.

The sea squirt, which can smother mussel lines and devastate the marine environment, has been found at various sites in the Marlborough Sounds and also at Port Taranaki in Golden Bay and there are ongoing efforts to eradicate it.

New Zealand King Salmon Company chief executive Paul Steere said the sea squirt incursion at the Te Pangu salmon farm was not extensive but it was annoying because the company had cleaned the farm structures and made efforts to prevent it taking hold there.

Scientists from Nelson's Cawthron Institute were checking the squirt to confirm it was *Didemnum vexillum*, Mr Steere said.

They were also determining if the sea squirt was spawning, because if it was more care had to be taken not to spread it about when it was treated, he said.

The sea squirt was on the sea floor under the farm and possibly on the predator nets surrounding it, and Mr Steere said it may have come from the farm structures. He said when the structures were cleaned the squirt could have been in crevices and not visible.

Mr Steere said *Didemnum* did not affect salmon and farming of the fish at the site was continuing as normal, although staff were mindful of the pest and taking more care during net changes.

He said the company was working with the mussel industry on measures it could take to eradicate the pest or stop it spreading.

Meanwhile, a new method of treating infected mussel lines is being developed, using diluted bleach, so seed mussels can be transferred onto lines without the risk of also transferring *Didemnum*.

Didemnum working group operations manager for the sea squirt clean-up, Marlborough man Aaron Pannell, said vinegar had been used to treat lines but it was not as effective as first thought because it needed a long contact time to work and did not entirely kill big pieces of the sea squirt, so the pest could re-grow.

Mr Pannell said a couple of mussel farmers were working with Cawthron scientists doing trials

with bleach, which seemed more effective in killing *Didemnum* and broke down quickly on contact with organic material.

Although bleach was "pretty benign" they wanted to avoid using it on larger structures infected with *Didemnum*, Mr Pannell said, so vinegar was sometimes still used in those cases. However, now more structures were just being wrapped in plastic to smother the pest, without using vinegar, and that seemed to be working, he said.

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