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## ENVIRONMENT STORY

**Sea squirt entrenched - Anderton**

20 May 2006

By DAN HUTCHINSON

**Biosecurity Minister Jim Anderton says it is no longer feasible to eradicate a sea squirt that is threatening to play havoc with the South Island's \$300 million aquaculture industry.**

Biosecurity New Zealand (BNZ) and its predecessor MFish have known about the *Didemnum vexillum* sea squirt for five years but decided to take no action because it was deemed to be a native species.

Meanwhile, the squirt has destroyed two mussel farms in the Marlborough Sounds, infested salmon-farm cages and moorings and may be present in other parts of the Sounds as well.

The New Zealand Marine Farming Association (MFA) and the Marlborough District Council were calling on the Government to help pay for surveys and possibly a control programme.

Anderton said he was awaiting a report into the issue before deciding on funding.

"Debating whether *Didemnum* was native or exotic, and therefore which agency is responsible for leading any action is irrelevant and does nothing to solve the problem. Eradication is simply not feasible and management will require a team effort," Anderton said.

Queen Charlotte College aquaculture students had taken a keen interest in the squirt over the past five years and head of science at the college, John Whitehead, said all the evidence pointed to the squirt being a foreign species.

A marine scientist at Washington State University was studying the previously unidentified squirt and results of genetic testing to prove its origins were expected within the next three weeks.

Another squirt, *Steyla clava*, prompted widespread publicity last year when it was discovered in harbours around New Zealand and BNZ has since spent \$1.5m on the problem, including educating the boating public so it did not get into such key areas as the Marlborough Sounds.

Whitehead said the *Didemnum* posed an even greater threat than *Steyla* because of the way it reproduced and that it was now present and growing in a key marine farming area.

Before Anderton's comments yesterday, BNZ policy analyst Paul Bolger said even if the genetic testing found it was an imported species, a peer review of that work would still need to be carried

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out.

National MP for Kaikoura Colin King said BNZ had willingly bought into the argument that the squirt was a native species even though it had two conflicting scientific opinions.

King said BNZ's record when it came to marine threats was poor in comparison with the efforts it put into land-based threats.

"They are a bit of a Claytons. When it comes to aquaculture, they are the biosecurity organisation you have when you don't have a biosecurity organisation," he said.

"They believe they are taking a lead role but, if they are, then it is a lead role in doing nothing.

"It is easy to point the finger in hindsight but at the end of the day that is what it is all about, they should have learnt, this thing has been around since 2001."

The squirt was thought to have arrived in Shakespeare Bay near Picton in 2001, aboard a forestry barge from the Philippines called the Steel Mariner.

Salmon cages stored in Shakespeare Bay and the college mussel farm later became infested.

A group of industry, science and local authorities had been formed following the sudden spread of the squirt.

Anderton said BNZ had met this group and would work with it.

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