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HUGE THREAT: sea squirt growing on mussels.

Action on sea squirt

07 July 2006

Marine farmers in the Marlborough Sounds may have to get used to their latest nemesis: *Didemnum vexillum* sea squirt. Dan Hutchinson reports.

The squirt spread prolifically last summer, and has gone from being confined to a bay near Picton to become a major threat which has destroyed two mussel farms, infested salmon cages and spread across the top of the South Island.

Biosecurity Minister Jim Anderton has all but ruled out eradication of the squirt because of the extent of its spread, but this week he signalled the Government was still committed to fighting the problem.

He met marine-farming representatives and the Marlborough District Council on Monday. Marlborough Mayor Alistair Sowman said they were seeking Government assistance to manage the pest.

Sea squirt was particularly worrying for the mussel-farming industry in Marlborough, which produces most of New Zealand's \$166 million of mussel exports, New Zealand's second-largest seafood export.

While Anderton promised to respond to the request for help within two weeks, didemnum working group chairman Graeme Coates said the industry was already putting substantial resources into combating the problem. "A lot of public good is involved, including the effect on public amenities and tourism if it spreads to wharfs, beaches and recreational-boating facilities. It also poses a threat to areas of high natural importance such as the Tonga Island, Whakapuaka and Long Island marine reserves," he said.

The first priority was to contain the squirt to reduce the potential for spawning, and then eradicate it if possible.

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Control suggestions include:

Minimising the movement of fouled structures.

Using anti-fouling paint on boat and barge hulls.

Cleaning hulls regularly at council-provided facilities.

Advising of any suspected sightings of *Didemnum vexillum*.

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