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ENVIRONMENT STORY

Govt pays up to kill sea squirts

15 August 2006

Biosecurity Minister Jim Anderton has allowed officials to divert \$150,000 of his departmental budget to kill colonies of a native sea squirt which mussel farms in the Marlborough Sounds see as a threat.

Didemnum vexillum is a leathery light mustard-coloured sea squirt which looks like a yellowish wax dripping over ropes or mussel lines, and is reported to be capable of smothering mussels.

The Government previously announced it would spend \$12 million to manage a different sea squirt, Styela clava, along with the freshwater algae commonly known as rocksnot and painted apple moth.

At the time of the initial funding announcement, Mr Anderton said the Mussel Farming Association Inc, King Salmon company, Port Marlborough, Marlborough District Council, the Cawthron Institute and Biosecurity New Zealand were discussing how to manage the native sea squirt.

It is known to have been growing in the Marlborough Sounds since 2001, but has flared this year, with the potential to smother mussel lines.

Seafood Industry Council chief executive Owen Symmans, said the mussel industry was pleased with the funding.

"The didemnum threat is a very real and serious one for marine farming in New Zealand," he said.

Biosecurity NZ pest manager Andrew Harrison said the aquaculture industry and the local district council wanted to reduce the risk that didemnum posed to the Nelson-Marlborough mussel farms.

Mr Harrison said scientists were divided on whether the sea squirt was a native, but its classification was not relevant because the control measures were not intended to eradicate it.

Graeme Coates of the Marine Farming Association based in Blenheim, chairs the Marlborough group which has been working to combat the pest since it first met in April.

It wants to kill colonies of the sea squirt before the mussel spawning season starts in September.

A dozen affected sites have now had primary eradication efforts where an infected structure or vessel was either removed from the water for 24 hours or wrapped in plastic to prevent the organism feeding.

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This clean-up would continue for a further two weeks and initial results looked very promising.

But containing the pest would also require the local community to ensure vessel hulls were free of fouling and painted with anti-foul coatings to prevent the organism's spread.

Jetties were also prime habitat for the sea squirt, and owners would be asked to check these over the summer months.

The mat-forming sea squirt, *Styela clava*, which comes from overseas, can also completely smother mussel lines and competes for the tiny phytoplankton on which mussels feed.

It is widely spread throughout the Hauraki Gulf, in Lyttelton and in Tutukaka Marina in Northland, but has not yet been reported in the Marlborough Sounds. It has been the target of a biosecurity response since mid-2005.

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