



## News

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### Barge a potential hazard on the doorstep of the Greenshell™ mussel industry?

In October 2001, the local harbour master noticed a mysterious growth occurring on his wharf pylons in Whangamata Harbour, North Island.

While taxonomists agree that the specimen is a colonial ascidian (*Didemnum* sp.) or commonly known as a "sea squirt" and has never been described anywhere in the world, they disagree on its origin: is it native or introduced to New Zealand?

Given the *Didemnum* sp. preference for living on artificial structures and its fouling/smothering capabilities, Greenshell™ mussel growers are naturally concerned about its potential to establish in mussel farming areas.

The National Institution for Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) confirmed using DNA analysis that the same *Didemnum* sp. found in Whangamata Harbour also occurs in Tauranga, Wellington and Nelson. Taxonomists believe the same *Didemnum* sp. discovered in New Zealand suddenly appeared in north east of the United States and Canada around the same time (October 2001).

In late December 2001, a team of Cawthron divers discovered the *Didemnum* sp. on the hull of a barge near Picton, Marlborough Sounds during a routine survey in search of newly arrived marine organisms.

**Ashley Coutts** is undertaking his PhD at Cawthron, investigating the biosecurity risks associated with fouling organisms on towed vessels visiting or operating in New Zealand. He conducted a quantitative survey of the fouling on the barge in February 2002, estimating that three tonnes of the *Didemnum* sp. exist on the bottom of the barge, and a further half tonne has fallen off the barge onto the seabed below.

The barge was likely to have been colonized by the *Didemnum* sp.

during its visit to Tauranga between June and October 2001 and survived the slow 5 knot voyage to Picton soon after.

The Ministry of Fisheries is presently investigating the distribution of *Didemnum* sp. in the Marlborough Sounds to ascertain the risk to the mussel industry. If the results from this investigation reveal that the *Didemnum* sp. does not occur throughout the Marlborough Sounds, attempts will be made to successfully eradicate the *Didemnum* sp. from both the barge and seabed.

Watch this space.....

**further info: [Ashley Coutts](#)**

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