

# Sea squirt eradication project wins Award

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## **Plastic baleage wrap is used as a deadly weapon against an invasive marine sea squirt, by the supreme prize winners in this year's Marlborough Environment Awards.**

The Didemnum Working Group was last Friday [May 4] awarded the supreme and habitat enhancement prize, for its industry-led vendetta against Didemnum vexillum. The prize is \$2000 from the Marlborough Research Centre Trust and HortResearch, plus a \$1000 category prize for habitat enhancement from Grove Mill Winery, owned by the New Zealand Wine Company.

Didemnum was first found in the Marlborough Sounds in 2001, on a steel logging barge originally from the Philippines. It thrives on underwater surfaces like wharf piles, boat bottoms, mussel lines, salmon cages and submerged trees.

Covering undersea objects like poured yellow wax, the sea squirt is a serious threat to the \$180 million marine farming industry, says Aaron Pannell who is managing a Didemnum clean-up for the Group. It covers mussel lines, eventually dragging shellfish off the ropes and onto the seafloor.

Mr Pannell predicts that left unchecked, Didemnum will become an ecological problem, spreading onto pebbly seashore and slow-moving species like crabs and crayfish. It has already been found on seaweed and rocks.

Last summer a \$90,000 control operation in Shakespeare Bay, near Picton, involved wrapping 12 jetties, 46 moorings and 190 wharf piles with plastic baleage wrap and covering 11,396 square metres of seabed. Thirty nine mussel lines were also treated (wrapped in plastic sleeves) and two infested trees removed from the water. Follow-up will cost \$15,000-\$20,000.

The plastic wrap stops the Didemnum from both feeding and breeding, Mr Pannell explains. Control is carried out during the sea squirt's relatively short reproductive stage, over the summer months.

Members of the working group are the New Zealand Marine Farming Association, Aquaculture New Zealand, Port Marlborough, the Marlborough District Council and the Cawthron Institute.

The aquaculture industry has so far spent \$250,000 in cash and kind on Didemnum control. Partly because the pest was discovered just before Biosecurity New Zealand was formed, there has been relatively little Government funding as like gorse and rabbits, it was not regarded as a new threat. Also, there has been debate over whether Didemnum is a native or introduced species; an argument which Mr Pannell sees as largely irrelevant due to the economic and ecological threat it poses.

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