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ENVIRONMENT STORY

Sea squirt smothers mussel farm

11 May 2006

By SONIA O'REGAN

A marine pest has smothered a mussel farm in the Marlborough Sounds.

Picton's Port Mussel Company general manager Terry Schwass said the didemnum vexillum sea squirt had smothered his 3 hectare farm in Otanerau Bay. He said the pest posed a grave threat to marine farming and urgent action was needed.

"It obviously has the potential to smother mussel crops," Mr Schwass said.

A working group set up to manage the threat of the pest to the region's mussel industry announced today it had developed an 11-point action plan.

The group said two mussel farms in the outer sounds had been significantly affected by the organism.

The working group, comprising representatives from the Mussel Industry Council, Port Marlborough, the Marine Farming Association, mussel farmers, the Department of Conservation and the Marlborough District Council met yesterday to develop an action plan.

Marine Farming Association spokesman Graham Coates said the organism had spread in the past summer, but winter offered an opportunity to develop a management plan and start control measures.

Mr Schwass said crew workers had noticed an unusual growth on the farm before Christmas.

"By New Year it was totally inundated with the stuff."

Mr Schwass said he was fortunate that eight of the farm's 10 lines were ready for harvest.

"We are getting them off as fast as we can while the pest is still in its winter dormancy," he said.

He expected to harvest 350 to 400 tonne from the lines, but would not be reseeding.

Port Mussel Company services farms for its share farmers and harvests between 3500 and 4000 tonne a year.

The loss of the farm, which grosses about \$280,000 annually, accounted for about 10 percent of its operations at this stage, Mr Schwass said.

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He believed the pest found its way into Ontanerau Bay on a contaminated salmon farm in 2003.

"I only learnt of this stuff'as a potential threat to our industry at the beginning of this year, yet it's been there since 2003."

King Salmon was unavailable for comment today.

The didemnum vexillum sea squirt was first discovered in the sounds in December 2001 on the Steel Mariner moored between Shakespeare Bay and Picton.

Mr Coates said the pest had been noticed growing in a wide ranging number of sites around Queen Charlotte Sound this year and appeared to be growing more profusely.

He said he was delighted at the council's involvement in the working group, saying the input of the Mayor Alistair Sowman reflected the concern with which the council was approaching the matter.

The first steps will be to remove the organism in known locations, and to ascertain how far it has spread.

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