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ENVIRONMENT STORY

Port Nelson squirt to be checked

19 June 2006

By VANESSA PHILLIPS

Port Nelson may have an infestation of an invasive sea squirt which has been found at Port Tarakohe and is threatening marine farms in the top of the South Island.

New Zealand Marine Farming Association chief executive Graeme Coates said it was proving difficult to identify whether a sea squirt found at Port Nelson was the troublesome *Didemnum vexillum*.

He believed the sea squirt was well established at the port.

Cawthron Institute biosecurity expert Ashley Coutts said the sea squirt looked like *Didemnum vexillum* and he thought it was that species, but he could not be certain.

"I'm 99 percent sure but there's a little element of doubt."

Mr Coutts planned to send a sample to a United States expert on sea squirts and said it could be another month before he got a result.

He said he had seen the sea squirt on wharf piles at the port for the past few years but an Australian expert in sea squirts believed it was not *Didemnum vexillum*.

Since concerns in New Zealand had been revived about the sea squirt, which could smother marine farms, Mr Coutts decided to take another look at the species at Port Nelson.

A *Didemnum vexillum* working group would be approaching the Nelson City Council to see if it could help manage or eradicate the sea squirt if it proved to be *Didemnum vexillum*, Mr Coates said.

Marine farmers have agreed on a code of practice for reducing the spread of the sea squirt around Tasman and Marlborough's coastal marine zone.

The code requires farmers to clean any structures they move from infected areas to other areas and to inspect structures for the squirt.

Mr Coates said the industry wanted to eradicate new infestations of the sea squirt as quickly as possible and over time eradicate it in areas where it was substantially established.

Mussel farmers would be removing the sea squirt found at Port Tarakohe by cleaning structures they could take out of the water, or smothering it on structures that could not be moved.

The Tasman District Council would also be approached to see if it

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would contribute to the cost of managing or eradicating the pest, Mr Coates said.

The organism has also been confirmed at six sites in Queen Charlotte Sound and three in Pelorus Sound.

Mr Coates said eradicating the sea squirt in the top of the South Island was likely to cost several hundred thousand dollars.

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The Nelson Mail

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