Alert level three could bring a welcome relief for seafood

The Prime Minister’s announcement yesterday around exactly what services would be permitted to operate under Alert Level Three has been welcomed – for surety alone.

Whilst the ability for seafood retail businesses to open directly to the public will still not be possible under Level Three, the go ahead for ‘click and collect’ will be a welcome relief.

The decision on whether Level Four will be lifted will be made at Cabinet on Monday.

Keith Mawson at Egmont Seafoods says he processed more than 1000 online orders last week. With his retail business closed he is trying to push everything online – and that has meant real challenges. In his words, this is not organic growth but a tsunami. He says the telephone traffic is also up with the elderly struggling with no online access. Also, people at home with time on their hands means he is fielding significantly more phone calls to assist them with their online orders.

It is a story echoed around the country. Harbour Fish in Dunedin is servicing the South Island via online deliveries and has had to cap its daily despatch to keep up.

In Gisborne, Salve Zame of Gisborne Fisheries says their East Rock brand which delivers fresh tarakihi, snapper and gurnard around the North Island has seen significant growth in home delivery demand. However, he says it has put some acute pressure on operations and customer service functions and they will wait to see where things settle before making major changes to the online side of the business.

Mawson agrees that COVID-19 is likely to permanently change consumer habits. The ease with which online or click and collect delivers their food will be a game changer.
Currently, more than 23 New Zealand seafood companies are providing an online service. A link to those companies can be found [here](#).

While business as usual may still be a long way away, the additional flexibility afforded under Level Three will be vital to survival for our companies. Clarity from the Government around what is permitted or expected in each level is critical. The Level Four lockdown came at us fast and furiously – and right before Easter – and many struggled to get systems in place. Even those who already offered online purchasing of seafood admit moving everything to online was challenging. Couriers, packaging, phone systems and ability to keep staff safe while dealing with a 20-fold increase in online business was testing.

Should a decision to move to Level Three be made on Monday, the prospect of opening our retail businesses up for customers to order online and collect from the premises, albeit without any contact, will ease some of the pressure.

Ultimately though, the opening of our retail outlets must be what we continually strive for. The discussions will continue in Wellington to allow whole food retail outlets such as butchers, bakers, fish mongers and fruit and vegetable stores to open with strict distancing measures.

This is a move that will open up supply chains, provide valuable retail opportunities for fishers, relieve pressure on supermarkets and online businesses and bring a sense of normality back to our regions and suburbs.

In the meantime, let’s all hope Level Three eventuates soon.

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**Black petrel returns to Great Barrier Island**

One of the Hauraki Gulf’s iconic black petrels caught by a boat in Ecuador in 2007, has been found alive with its partner at a breeding burrow on Great Barrier Island.

Seabird scientist Biz Bell was astonished to find the bird alive.

“Despite the crew caring for the bird on their boat for four days we had presumed it had died because it had never been seen again back at the colony in the intervening 13 years. We were over the moon,” Bell said.

The Auckland Zoo Charitable Trust has recently supported an outreach initiative to encourage Ecuadorian fleets to adopt seabird smart fishing practices to help protect the seabird.

The Trust have already funded satellite tracking of young black petrels leaving their nest for the first time. It was found the birds flew 12,000km straight to Ecuador, into waters with a high number of fishing boats.

The outreach programme has been undertaken by the Southern Seabird Solutions Trust.
“Fishers are more open to hearing messages from their peers so we thought it might work to have a kiwi fisher ask his South American counterparts to join him in looking after black petrels,” convenor Janice Molloy said.

“Adam Clow who fishes out of Whitianga has become an absolute devotee of the birds after spending time at the colony with researchers. So we filmed him on his boat talking about his respect for black petrels and the measures he uses to reduce the risk of catching them.

“We have voiced over the film in Spanish and with the support of extension officers we will be able to get this in the hands of South American fishermen. We want to see how this is received and build on this first initiative.”

The Trust has organised multiple visits of local longline fishers to Great Barrier Island after seeing the interest Adam took after spending time at black petrel breeding grounds.

Two staff from Lee Fish also spent a night at the colony recently.

Lee Fish operations manager Tom Searle said his company are in support of the trips because of the big impression it has on young fishers.

“When they later see the birds around their boats, they know there is a chick dependent on them and this makes the fishers extra vigilant with their fishing techniques,” Searle said.

Seabird scientist Biz Bell was surprised to find the black petrel alive on Great Barrier Island after 13 years without being seen at the colony. Photo; Ed Marshall.

Mussel line workers' creative covid-solution
The social distancing dilemma for Sanford’s lockdown workers has been solved by their significant-others.

Government’s announcement that essential workers must keep two metres apart meant Sanford workers Phil Hawke and Les McClung were not sure how they would continue to operate.

The pair worked in a tight space on a boat checking mussel lines in the Marlborough Sounds. They considered taking the boats out alone, but that would go against company policy.

The solution – merging the home and work bubble by having each man team up with his wife.

The idea meant staff would be meeting both the company’s safety requirements and the government’s, keeping the risk of infection low.

Sandy Hawke and Annie McClung are now working on board mussel-sourcing boats with their husbands, visiting the farms, pulling up lines to check the size and condition, before directing the harvesters on where to go.

The new recruits were inducted to the vessels, introduced to the basics of driving, deploying the anchor and entering data. While not part of the job description, the quality of lunches on board the vessels had improved considerably.

Hawke said her new gig was "very different to hair dressing". "Being out in the fresh air, I'm lucky I can do this," she said.

But being married to a seaman for more than 30 years meant she was well accustomed to boats.

Annie McClung was a former nurse and worked as a gardener, but that was non-essential during lockdown.

"It's good for me to get out of home, into the scenery. Being an ex-nurse, I just want to put a plug out to all the essential workers, the nurses and doctors working at the coalface. It must be quite daunting for them."

Les McClung said they were privileged to be working out in the Marlborough Sounds and that his new colleague had picked up the job well.

Sanford aquaculture manager Ted Culley commended Phil and Les’s creativity, saying it's proved to be an excellent solution to the problem.

"We're really grateful for the guys coming up with that idea, because it's outside the square thinking. And we're really grateful to Sandy and Annie, that they're prepared to do it, and from what I hear doing a very good job of it."
Les McClung says his new colleague, and wife, Annie McClung has taken to the job very well.

Photo; Scott Hammond.

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**Sustainable Seas Challenge - Innovation fund**

The Sustainable Seas Challenge is calling for expressions of interest in proposals that will contribute to building a blue economy in New Zealand, with blue economy being defined as marine activities that generate economic value and contribute positively to social, cultural and ecological wellbeing.

Details on the Innovation Fund can be found on the [Sustainable Seas website](#).

Calls for Expressions of Interest for projects close at midday, 18 May 2020.

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**News**

Hungry hoiho at Dunedin’s Wildlife Hospital have received a helping hand in the form of a large donation of fish, *Stuff* reported. With its usual suppliers operating with limited capacity, the hospital asked Fisheries New Zealand for assistance. The request was shared with the wider industry and Sealord offered to donate 37 boxes (the equivalent of one tonne) of southern blue whiting. The hospital currently has eight penguins in hospital and another 28 in rehab at the private conservation reserve, Penguin Place, hospital trust manager Jordana Whyte said. Hoiho maintain a strict diet, eating only certain types of fish, "which are ideally small, thin and whole", Whyte said. Each hoiho munches through a 25-kilogram box of white fish per day. Whyte said there was normally no issue sourcing food, but Covid-19 had interrupted supplies. The Wildlife Hospital, a veterinary facility, is able to continue operating during the nationwide lockdown. Sealord chief operating officer Doug
Paulin said the company was happy to support the penguins and the hospital. "We’ve been supporting a number of causes and communities across New Zealand facing challenges due to Covid-19. It shows even animals are not immune to the impact."

One of New Zealand’s biggest seafood companies has thrown down the gauntlet to South Cantabrians to take up a career at sea, Stuff reported. At a time when job prospects appear gloomy, Sanford has up to 30 positions every month for people who are interested in working on a ship/ There’s always great opportunities with us, deep water fleet manager Darryn Shaw said. "We are keen to get the message out there that we will support anybody interested in coming to sea," he said. The pandemic has created a couple of busy weeks for the company, reassuring crews that there are systems in place to keep them safe from the coronavirus. "Most of the large vessels we have go to sea for six weeks, so we have to protect the bubble they are in," Shaw said. "Effectively half our fleet is in a bubble. They've hardly touched land. They have no effective coronavirus implications, so the first thing is to protect that bubble to make sure they’re in a pretty special place."

Various positions are available - from people who have tickets (qualifications) down to those who have never previously been out at sea. "We normally replace five per vessels per turnaround so we’re looking at 20 to 30 lower ranked and other positions a month."

Covid-19 had brought on substantial operational changes, both at sea and on the factory floor. The key is effectively implementing the changes, Shaw said. "It's not business as usual for us. We have 220 people at sea at any one time. We've got up to 40 crew on most of our large factory trawlers. They go out for six weeks at a time, they live on the boat 24-7, that's a tight bunch of people. If we have an outbreak in there, we've got a significant area of high risk. That's why nothing has been left to chance." The company also follows-up with families to make sure they know their loved one is safe and that there’s the capacity to communicate with them. In Timaru, Sanford site manager Grant Day said the factory was not currently recruiting because it could not accommodate more people on the floor. "We physically have to observe social distancing so can't fit more people in," he said. "We have plenty of work and are managing the flow well. We are running at about 80 per cent of normal capacity."
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