Fishers and farmers lead economic recovery charge

With New Zealand peering into an economic abyss as restrictions on many businesses continue, there is reason for optimism coming out of the primary sector.

The fishing industry was the first to feel the effects with rock lobster exports into China and, while it is not fully recovered indicators are pointing in the right direction.

The numbers of vessels in the New Zealand fleet halved at the height of the COVID-19 lockdown but have clawed their way up to around three quarters of the fleet now out fishing. Grappling with social distancing rules and finding PPE were just some of the challenges. Disappearing local markets was another. The recovery, in part, is due to the agility of inshore operators to find alternative local markets and sell direct to the public online.

The deepsea fleet faced different challenges as the global markets for its fish began to falter. New Zealand’s largest markets; China, Australia and the United States were all affected as borders slammed shut. Refrigerated container supply dried up as companies rushed to preserve the fish they couldn’t export and containers that had managed to get out of the country couldn’t get back in.

However, slowly markets are reopening. Rock lobster is returning to the tables in China as the country first to succumb to the virus becomes the first to recover. Australia, like New Zealand, has weathered the pandemic better than most countries in the world and the border has opened for New Zealand seafood. The United States will be slower to recover.

The announcement last week that 56 new flights would leave New Zealand for Australia, Asia, Middle East and the US was the stimulus New Zealand’s primary sector needed. The $330 million International air freight capacity scheme aims to take our freight out and bring
essential medical supplies in. While nowhere near the hundreds of flights flying cargo out of New Zealand pre-COVID, it is the fillip needed to get close to business as usual.

Export statistics released this week make us cautiously optimistic, although only second quarter numbers will tell the true story.

The figures for the three months ending March 2020 show New Zealand exported 77,230 tonnes in 2020 compared with 75,430 in 2019 which was up 2.39 percent by volume. The overall export value of $477.75 million in 2020 compared with $499.75 million in 2019, down 4.4 percent by value.

However, there has been real pain in some sectors, particularly those selling live and chilled product into China such as rock lobster, pāua and oysters.

If the recovery in our markets continues, it will not just be seafood that will cushion the economic blow to New Zealand from coronavirus, but all of the primary sector.

Beef exports in March rose three percent in volume and 14 percent in value as compared to last March. Sheep meat exports rose four percent in volume and three percent in value compared to the same time last year.

Strong demand for New Zealand food globally remains. During February and March, New Zealand’s overall export revenue across the primary sectors (meat, dairy, seafood, forestry fruit and vege) was similar to exports for the same period in 2019.

There is a genuine feeling amongst the fishers, farmers and growers in New Zealand that our contribution is valued much more than it was five months ago. That the COVID crisis has caused a reset – a realisation that primary producers really are the backbone of this country.

Sealord staff get innovative for covid-safety

Sealord staff have been getting innovative during the COVID-19 pandemic, drumming up ideas to overcome operational barriers.

Chief operating officer Doug Paulin said the company had benefited from its essential service status, which enabled it to continue operating at level 4 after health and safety measures were put in place.

“That really was the biggest thing that saved us — that we could reassure people that it was safe to come to work — because by far the biggest risk was getting people to come to work,” Paulin said.

The Nelson-based company has adapted well to the challenges of alert levels 3 and 4, implementing an array of measures to keep its site and staff safe.

A Share Your Innovation competition for employees has contributed to covid-safety too.

Sealord capital and engineering manager Adrian McGillan placed first for his idea to create a drive-through temperature checking station at the entry to Sealord’s site. This
significantly reduced the time it took for staff to transition from their home bubble to their work bubble and reassured staff they were safe on-site as everyone is checked inside their cars before entry.

“Originally, everyone would be walking through the gate at 3.30am — cold — walking up to the cafeteria and then having to wait another 10 to 15 minutes together, so I thought there had to be a better way,” McGillan said.

The original procedure took 45 minutes to process around 60 people. Now, individuals could be processed from the car park in a matter of seconds and a whole shift could be processed within no more than 15 minutes.

McGillan proposed the idea on March 18 and the first shipping container arrived the next day. A second container was added soon after to allow for a temperature re-check station.

“That was problematic in that the machines used to measure people are somewhat impacted by the temperature of your skin and if you're walking around all cold then it actually doesn't work at all, so this has been a godsend in reality,” Paulin said.

“If you drive up and don't pass, especially in the morning shift or if someone's biked in, there's a heat pump and a couple of chairs where they can sit down and warm up a bit,” McGillan said.

A farm drenching gun has also been stationed to offer contactless decanting of hand sanitiser from large industrial containers into smaller plastic bottles provided for individual staff use.

Sealord project co-ordinator Row Forbes was another idea-winner.

Her idea was for staff to use clear PVC screens in two of the site’s fish processing plants, recommending a local supplier who was able to install the screens in the weekend leading up to alert level 4.

Another Sealord competition, Best Home Office, has seen ideas like ironing boards used as stand-up desks and tents set up in gardens as makeshift office spaces by those with children at home.

Paulin said the competitions have proven to be a “critical” way of maintaining engagement with staff, a number of whom are working from home.
Sealord's Julien McLaren, left, Adrian McGillan and chief executive Doug Paulin at the checkpoint set up in their car park. It includes a hand sanitiser refill system and temperature check.
Photo; Martin De Ruyter, The Nelson Mail.

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**Seafood Conference 2020**

Due to the recent COVID-19 (coronavirus) events, Seafood New Zealand wish to advise that this year’s Seafood Conference, scheduled for the 5th and 6th of August in Wellington, is cancelled.

While we are disappointed the 2020 conference will not be taking place, we will be creating a conference edition of the Seafood magazine in August. This will feature stories from some key speakers that were scheduled to talk.

For any questions regarding the conference edition of the magazine, please contact Seafood New Zealand’s business manager, Karen Olver, on 027 436 5273.

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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
News

Seafood company Yellow Brick Road has expressed its disappointment in the delay in delivery services amidst covid-19, Newstalk ZB reported. Since the country moved into Alert Level 3 nearly a week ago courier services have seen delays due to the surge in demand. Yellow Brick Road national sales manager Martin Bosley said there have been multiple occasions where fish hasn’t turned up on time or has gone missing. "They are out there saying things are absolutely fine and its going really well and there’s pressure on the system, but if you’re someone like us trying to ship fish around the country, then we are just getting hampered by the fact that we are losing money every day that we try to do so,” Bosley said. His courier company told him 25 percent of his freight was currently going missing. "The whole system's totally dysfunctional. It's pretty frustrating when you're trying to work, trying to get your business going, and trying to keep people employed."

Emirates SkyCargo will be launching four weekly cargo flight services to New Zealand to help connect Kiwi businesses to key trading partners across the globe. Effective as of May 3, the carrier is operating three weekly Dubai-Auckland-Melbourne-Dubai flight rotations and a once weekly Dubai-Sydney-Christchurch-Sydney-Dubai flight service operated by its Boeing 777-300ER passenger freighters. The service will provide a vital cargo lane for high quality exports from New Zealand including food items such as chilled meat, honey, dairy products and seafood to various destinations in the Middle East and Europe. It’s also expected to help transport pharmaceuticals and medical appliances to markets in the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

Authorities have nabbed a group of poachers in the Coromandel after they were spotted diving for pāua, kina and crayfish, NZ Herald reported. Local police and a Ministry for Primary Industries officer were called to Paku Hill, near Tairua, on Saturday morning, after witnesses reported a group of men acting suspiciously. The officer arrived to find four men diving in the water gathering seafood. Among them was a Hamilton man, a 33-year-old
gang associate, who was "well-known to police," a statement said. After a six-hour wait, the group emerged from diving and were taken into custody. Their plunder - 150 pāua, 284 kina and five undersized crayfish were seized and returned to the ocean. A total of $2750 worth of fines was divided among the group and their dive gear and a vehicle was seized. MPI chief compliance officer fisheries, Jason Howat, said it should serve as a reminder to poachers that they should expect to be stopped and inspected at any time. "People who continue to abuse our fisheries will be caught and dealt with accordingly," he said.

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