



THE UPDATE

Captain's Blog



Getting locals into the seafood industry - the promise, the plan, and the progress

In the midst of last year's COVID-19 pandemic, the government threw the seafood industry a lifeline by allowing hundreds of foreign workers – mostly Ukrainian and Russian – an exemption to fly into New Zealand to crew the massive BATM vessels lying idle at our ports.

It was a decision that was politically fraught, and credit should be given to Immigration Minister Faafoi for his courage in making it. To the man on the street, the idea that hundreds of foreigners were being allowed into New Zealand to work was outrageous, given many kiwis had lost their jobs in the pandemic.

Like all things, the situation was much more complex.

This week, the Ministry for Primary Industries publicly acknowledged the very good reasons the exemptions to the 570 crew were granted. In an article in *Stuff*, it was pointed out that the move protected \$380 million in exports and saved 400 land-based jobs held by New Zealanders.

The decision, however, came with a caveat. In return, the government expected the industry to make a concerted effort to increase the number of Kiwis employed, particularly in seagoing jobs.

There are many reasons New Zealanders do not want jobs at sea; seasickness and time away from their families being some, however pay isn't one of them. These are highly skilled and highly paid jobs and anyone who tells you companies are employing foreigners because they can pay them less is ill informed.

Convincing Kiwis that working in the seafood industry, including going to sea, is a great career option was always going to be a challenge and New Zealand's seafood companies know the requirement to pass stringent drug and alcohol tests is a major impediment to full staffing.

This industry is not alone in this dilemma. Most primary industries will tell a similar story; however, the industry accepted the challenge and is now undertaking a concerted effort to attract New Zealanders to the industry.

In conjunction with, and part funded by MPI through the Opportunity Grows Here site, Seafood New Zealand put together an advertising campaign on recruitment for the industry, which has been running on digital channels since December.

Early indications of the success of that campaign are promising. Enrolments at the Westport DeepSea Fishing School have exceeded expectations, being higher than what they were this time last year, although there are still places available. Separately, individual companies are supplementing the Seafood New Zealand and MPI campaign with advertising of their own.

It will not be a short-term fix, nor will we realistically ever see a full Kiwi workforce in the seafood industry, but this concerted effort to dispel some of the myths is overdue and will pay dividends.

This collaboration with MPI and the Government has been welcome. It reflects a new, and more engaged relationship between the industry and its regulator.

The seafood industry is a solid export earner, a great employer, and the linchpin of many small New Zealand communities.

Working together will strengthen that.

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