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EDITORIAL

INDUSTRY SKILLS A PROBLEM FOR ALL

At a recent Maritime New Zealand industry forum meeting in Auckland, industry participants highlighted the concerns over skill shortages and lack of new entrants to the broader industry.

The seafood industry itself identified some of these problems at its own recent conference in Wellington, particularly regarding the in-shore fishing fleet. In the past decade there have been few new trawlers built, with many existing fishermen struggling to survive or even pay their current maintenance bills, without considering replacing their vessel.

Granted, the high cost of fuel is crippling the total industry, and while it is an easy target, it may not be the key cause of our industry's ultimate demise. During the SeaFIC conference workshops, the subject of the high cost of leasing quota from the quota owners was raised, with many fishermen now preferring to stay tied up rather than go fishing for nothing.

The message to the quota owners was very clear. Reduce the cost of Annual Catch Entitlement and allow the catching sector (the fishermen) to make a dollar, because if you don't there will be no fishermen within a very short time to catch your quota, and so this investment will be worthless.

Interestingly, the conference also raised the issues of quotas for recreational fishing charterboats. There was no suggestion on how charterboat owners might get access to quota, but there was a strong push to control this sector of the maritime industry and force these operators to pay their share of fisheries management. The message is clear for these charterboat skippers, who will ignore it at their peril.

At present the charterboat industry is so diverse that they have no hope of fighting the inevitable unless they unite and speak with a common voice.

The New Zealand Marine Transport Association is fully aware of the risks, threats and dangers associated with any quota system on the public's recreational fishing rights. To be fair to the association, this is a big issue, and it has to decide whether it can justify spending members' money on important issues for the charterboat industry when this sector gives the NZMTA such little support.

It pains me to say, but the free lunch is over for these owner/operators and skippers, and their best and easiest course of action is to join the NZMTA and speak as a united voice that commands respect from politicians.

Now, back to skills shortages. In reality, the industry is facing a competence shortage rather than a certificate shortage. The industry is full of romantics. But these older new entrants into the industry will not be man-

ning our fast ferries, tugs and barges, or possibly even our tall ships.

This raises the issue that the broad Inshore Launchmasters Certificate needs skills-based recognition. A person can serve all their time in a small charterboat on Auckland Harbour, gain their ILM certificate, and at some stage in the future decide they would like to operate a much larger vessel, even one of Real Journey's 44m passenger ships in Fiordland.

The risk the industry faces is that the current shortage of skilled seafarers will leave operators facing two options: employ new emigrants with suspect qualifications, or employ ILM-certificated masters and run the risk of promoting them to a level of their own incompetence through lack of training.

Even the NZMTA's efforts to create a new entry qualification, Inshore Deckhand, is facing constant bureaucratic problems in getting it through the government system. It is essential that all sectors of the industry address this issue collectively. It is essential that we convince the government and our politicians of the importance of the maritime industry to the New Zealand economy. If we fail to do this simple task, we may well not have an industry in the future. In this issue, Captain Tim Wilson, the head of the New Zealand Maritime School, paints the picture admirably in his column.

But how do you get an industry that is so diverse and fragmented, with each sector battling its own issues, to pull together? We are informed that 97 percent of all New Zealand's imports and exports are carried by sea. Tourism is one of New Zealand's largest earners, and our maritime industry makes up a significant part of this industry. Passenger transport, coastal freight, commercial fishing and port services are all part of this collective dynamic.

Might I suggest that Maritime NZ has a responsibility not only to look after safety within the industry, but also its well-being. With the current skills shortages we face, our industry will become a safety risk unto itself in the future.

I believe Maritime NZ should take a proactive role in pulling the industry together by hosting a maritime conference involving all participants where safety, skills training, economic returns and future viability, our importance to the government and the national economy and many more issues can be discussed openly, with outcomes being delivered to the politicians, in an effort to get informed political decisions that will assist the industry in the future.

Keith Ingram, Editor