



BY KEITH INGRAM

The old adage, “idle hands get into mischief” is frequently the truth surrounding many successful events. One such event was the Kingfish Go Wild campaign carried out during June, July and August.

In early June I was working in my office when the phone rang and my good friend from the north, Ross Davey, advised me that he had just been offered 20 tonnes of kingfish for crayfish bait.

This had come about because the Parengarenga fish farm was closing down its operations due to serious design faults in the plant and equipment as supplied by the Danish company Inter Aqua Advance Aps, known as IAA.

The key problem was that no section of the farm could be isolated for repairs and maintenance. This was on top of the fact that the production levels were less than two-thirds of the claims projected by IAA.

The farm owners have decided that while they will cease trading, all creditors will be paid. The farm will be drained and repairs started while a new buyer is found.

A call to the farm manager, John Ellis, revealed that he still had over 30 tonnes of kingfish that had to be removed before the farm was drained in less than two week’s time. If he could not sell the fish, his only option was to bury them, so he had decided that even selling them for \$1 kg as cray bait was better than just digging a hole.

That night, I hit the internet within the recreational fraternity, advising them of the farm’s plight and suggesting that the recreational sector purchase the fish for release into the wild. By mid-day on Wednesday I had \$8000 in pledges, and by Thursday this had risen to \$15,000. By Friday we had \$22,000 and the project looked do-able.

I made a further call to the farm seeking advice on the fish and how much would we have. John Ellis was enthusiastically supportive, as his alternative was not a nice option. Meanwhile, the enormity of the task ahead became fundamentally clear. Not only did we have to get these fish inspected, we needed to negotiate a myriad of paperwork with officials from the Ministry of Fisheries, Biosecurity New Zealand and local authorities.

This project could have been stonewalled at the start by the bureaucratic process. However, we must acknowledge and thank

all those officials who facilitated our applications and got our approvals within a few days of the request.

Because the National Institute for Water and Atmospheric Research had bred these fish, which were only in effect one step away from the wild, as their parents had come from the Mokohinau Islands, I contacted NIWA’s aquaculture manager, Michael Bruce, appraised him of what I hoped to do, and asked if it was achievable.

“Yes,” he said. “But there is a risk, and any process of tagging and transporting large fish is a costly exercise, and not normally done. The transporting of fish at any stage is fraught with risk and the larger the fish are, the greater the risk.”

The alternative of having 1000 schoolchildren walk down Northland’s dusty roads, each carrying a plastic bag of seawater and one fish, did not bear consideration.

Yes, you could say that Michael Bruce brought me down to earth with a reasonably large thump. But while doing so, he agreed that it was achievable and that NIWA would give whatever technical and professional support it could to ensure that these fish were saved and released into the wild.

Here was a one-off opportunity to release large numbers of tagged fish in several locations around the northern coast of the North Island.

While the recreational fraternity has an excellent kingfish tagging programme in place, this tagging effort is spread throughout the year at various locations of one or two fish here or there. We could see the benefits of releasing 300 or 400 tagged fish at a time to determine what their movements and future would be.

With this in mind, it was decided that we would try and tag 25 percent of the fish selected as suitable for release by NIWA’s scientific staff.

NIWA already has kingfish transporting tanks designed to transport thousands of fingerlings from its hatchery at Bream Bay at Marsden Point to kingfish farms in the north and the Marlborough Sounds. They were cautious about transporting large numbers of large fish, but were prepared to give it a go.

By this time, while we were in a position where we could purchase the fish, the costs of anaesthetising, tagging and transporting these fish were mounting to the level where the



The kingfish are delivered to the Raglan sea cage



Fisheries Minister, Jim Anderton, congratulates Keith Ingram on his initiative

project would have failed before it got past first base, had it not been for my approach to the commercial industry for possible support.

On Monday morning, a phone call from Eric Barrett, the Chief Executive Officer of Sanford Limited, started with a number of questions and closed with, "Keith, you have your money. We are prepared to offer \$30,000 to the Kingfish Go Wild campaign as part of a shared fisheries project."

This was amazing. Sanford had matched the recreational communities' donations and the project was now a runner. The task ahead would primarily be driven by the professional staff from NIWA and the Parengarenga Fish Farm Limited. Lawson Cartage came on board and offered their eight-wheeler truck, which the fish tanks were designed to fit on, along with the drivers, at cost.

When Waiheke Shipping was asked about the possibility of getting a barge to take the truck and fish out to the Noises group of islands for the Hauraki Gulf release, the Company Director, Brett Subritzky, said, "Keith, you have the barge."

This enthusiasm for the task of saving the kingfish and contributing something back to a shared fishery was picked up by all who embraced the project. New Zealand Fishing News and Fishing Coast to Coast not only made donations, but also provided excellent editorial coverage. This in turn led to exposure in mainstream media from the Northern Advocate, the New Zealand Herald, the Waikato Times and many smaller, local papers. Both TV One and TV3 ran special news clips on their six o'clock news programmes.

The recreational fishing community, led by many of the fishing clubs, was instrumental in raising the large sums of cash needed to pay for the fish and other expenses.

The clubs in the north, led by the Bay of Islands Swordfish Club, raised some \$9000, the Outboard Boating Club in Auckland raised \$5000 and the Raglan Sportfishing Club raised \$9000. This, along with many smaller donations, only demonstrated the willingness of the fishing fraternity to help.

The first release in the Hauraki Gulf was attended by the Minister of Fisheries, the Hon Jim Anderton, in what was one of Auckland's typical clear winter days. This release was followed by others in the Far North, Houhora, Mangonui, Whangaroa, the Bay of Islands, and many other minor releases as the farm was slowly emptied.

The west coast release at Raglan posed some interesting challenges. Not only was there a significant temperature difference that required the fish to be held in a sea cage to enable them to acclimatise, the cage also had to be built by the locals and a special permit obtained from Environment Waikato. The end result



A tagged kingfish



Jim Anderton releases a kingfish

was the successful delivery of over 1200 fish, 400 of them tagged, to Raglan.

We were always going to have a problem with the large fish on the farm. However, the campaign's high media profile brought out new clients who sought to purchase fish for sale in Europe, plus various wholesalers and retailers, at a far greater price than what we had committed to pay.

These additional purchases provided extra funds for the farm, and also contributed toward finding a productive solution to the problems we were dealing with. At the end, some fish were unsuitable for release or sale to the markets, and these were sold to fishermen.

There were no direct mortalities during the transporting process, which is a credit to NIWA's professionals and Lawson Cartage. There were three mortalities out of 1150 fish in the Hauraki Gulf, caused by one stunning itself on the ship's side, and two getting stuck in the transfer pipe. No reported mortalities came from the other northern sites.

The kingfish released into the cage in Raglan were tired but healthy. Unfortunately, in our inexperience, we did not appreciate the effects of the tidal flow through the cage at the wharf. On day four, some of our fish were showing signs of stress and a number of mortalities appeared. We were actually tiring our fish out, as they were constantly having to fight the current in conditions that they were not normally used to.

After taking professional advice, the decision was made to release these kingfish, as they would have already become acclimatised. Apart from a few mortalities on the nearby beach directly after the release there have been no further reported incidents.

Already the success of the project is being demonstrated by the number of tagged returns being reported from Houhora and the Bay of Islands. One fish travelled over 25 miles from its release point at the Noises to Coromandel. These fish were released healthy and well. Unfortunately two further kingfish were not so well, as they were caught in a set net on nearby Otata Island within two days of their release.

All in all, the project is an excellent example of what can be achieved when two groups worked together in a shared fisheries project.