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WE FACE INTERESTING TIMES

As we went to press we were advised of concerning news of the loss of a yacht that sank off Fiji on October 12 after striking a reef. Unfortunately, it would appear that their lifeboat also sank before they could be rescued the following day. The end result being that they were rescued by another yachtsman after spending more than six hours in heavy swells and shark infested, reef strewn waters.

It was reported at the time of rescue that the one New Zealander and two Australians may not have lasted much longer than another hour. The survivors were concerned with the lack of emergency response from the Fijian search and rescue authorities as the disaster was rapidly unfolding off the coast of Fiji. It would appear that they had no fuel to put in their vessels, there was no airlift capability and the survivors were advised later that the Fijian authorities could not get their men out of bed.

The local authorities in Suva, both the police and the navy, clearly made the best possible effort they could. Unfortunately they were critically hampered by a lack of training, a lack of resources and a lack of a ready response plan. The Fijian SAR team were literally scrambling to find fuel and crew for their boats.

Rescuer, American sailor, Maurice Conti, speaking from Fiji, said he believed the political situation had a lot to do with any lack of action by Fijian authorities and irrespective of what anyone claims, the net response was very little happened.

This raises the question of the responsibility of both the New Zealand and Australian rescue authorities. It also begs the question of, if both governments are putting foreign aid into Fiji, given the political/military climate, could this not be allocated purely for search and rescue purposes to ensure the travel safety and likelihood of rescue of all international seafarers transiting Fijian waters thus ensuring that we at least meet our international SAR obligations.

Closer to home Grant Dalton needs to be congratulated on his ability to pluck a rabbit out of the America's Cup hat with his successful effort in bringing to Auckland's Harbour the new Louis Vuitton Pacific Series match racing early in the new year. This will bring a welcome boost to the northern charter boat community and the local economy.

As we speak the yachting fleet has doubled in size with the event looking to have the potential of revitalising the

excitement of an America's Cup challenge back in our waters.

While on charter boats, the Ministry of Fisheries is looking to license charter boat operators, especially those participating in recreational fishing. Please read the full report on page 34 for a complete overview. In saying this, I must reiterate that if the charter boat operators do not respond raising your concerns and offering alternative suggestions, apart from telling the Ministry to piss off, you will run the risk of being dished up whatever the Ministry decides.

In moving around the traps it is obvious that the international credit crunch has hit our local communities hard, especially the recreational boating market. However there has been a plus as some of the outfall of this development is presenting opportunities for the commercial industry. As dollars tighten in many pockets and prices fall, commercial operators now have an opportunity of capitalising on some of the benefits this brings. Like, chandlery, electronics and the range of products as retailers try to shed unwanted stock. Labour rates are falling. Gone is the cost plus expectation among many as more realistic charge out rates for goods and services attract meagre commercial dollars. Which is opportune as the summer season approaches for our social and fishing charter scene and more so the tuna trolling fleet which experienced an excellent season last year making a bit of money and is looking to repeat this experience this season.

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the pending elections. Irrespective of your political persuasion the word on the waterfront is that folk want to see change. Whether the government can convince the waterfront community that they have the ability to change their ways will be a question on many lips. National say they are ready and capable of change, change that will improve the average New Zealanders lot. The minor parties meanwhile may promise the earth but at the end of the day it will come down to the individual's choice. Even if you intend to be at sea on election day, remember to cast a special vote to ensure that you have had your say. If you don't vote, you have no right to grumble later.

Keith Ingram, Editor