



MUSSEL FARMING QUALITY ASSURANCE PROGRAM REAPS REWARDS

A workshop to discuss the Victorian Shellfish Quality Assurance Program (VSQAP) was held at MAFRI in Queenscliff on Friday 28 June 2002. The workshop was attended by commercial mussel farmers, the Peak Body for aquaculture, the Victorian Aquaculture Council (VAC), Fisheries Victoria (FV), the Marine and Freshwater Resources Institute (MAFRI), and the contractors Water ECO-science (WES).

Fisheries Divisions, Manager of Aquaculture, Mr Anthony Forster announced the excellent news that the two commercial mussel-farming areas adjacent to the Bellarine Peninsula at Clifton Springs and Grassy Point had been given approval to export mussels. This follows an extensive period of monitoring and assessment conducted by WES, that gave these two areas the highest possible water quality rating for shellfish growing areas. The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) who audit the Victorian program every year recently advised that these areas were now fully approved.

The Executive Director of the VAC, Mr Louis Vostermans emphasised the critical importance of this monitoring program to ensure consumers that the highest quality assurance standards are being applied to commercial shellfish aquaculture in Victoria. He particularly praised the role of Mr. Neil Hickman from MAFRI in assisting with the development of the National Standards and guidelines that will be the basis for shellfish quality assurance programs in all Australian States and territories.

The mussel farmers listened to presentations from Dr Terry Walker and Ms Rebecca Hayman (WES), Mr Neil Hickman (MAFRI), Mr. Louis Vostermans (VAC), and Mr Anthony Forster, Mr. Peter Appleford, and Mr John Mercer (FV). Of particular interest to the farmers was the news that monitoring of the remaining mussel aquaculture areas at Dromana and Flinders was well advanced, and that management procedures were in place to ensure that mussels from all growing areas comply with the same high standards.

Mr John Mercer (FV) gave a practical demonstration of how a special web site developed by the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) for Fisheries Victoria was used to manage harvesting in all commercial growing areas. This initiative now allows Fisheries Victoria to close all mussel-farming areas based on rainfall that is reported on an hourly basis. This minimises risk by immediately closing farms without having to wait for microbiological analysis of water or mussels that can take several days. Mr Vostermans emphasised that by minimising risks to consumers the mussel aquaculture industry would be in an excellent position to comply with new food regulations that will be introduced in the coming year.

By virtue of the VSQAP, the Victorian shellfish quality assurance program now provides an extensive database of marine environmental information collected over more than a decade. In this regard, the shellfish industry continues to serve as a 'canary in a coalmine', indicating the state of marine environmental health. It is an example of an emerging primary industry providing ecological, economic and social benefits while ensuring development on an ecologically sustainable basis.

For more information about this project, please contact Neil Hickman at MAFRI on 5258 0111.