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Hon Michael Wood
Minister of Transport
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Tēna koe Minister

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Support for vessels out of port areas

Cook Strait has a rough reputation, evidenced by the number of wrecks with many having resulted in significant loss of life. The last major casualty event was the sinking of the Wāhine in 1968. As a result of the ensuing enquiry, the then Wellington Harbour Board commissioned three tugs that had towing capability. The last of these tugs left the Port in 2014, having been found to be too low powered for larger ships.

The 1989 move from Harbour Boards to Port Companies saw a change in focus to the commercial aspects of operating ports. This has meant safety management outside of the Port itself – supporting seagoing vessels – was not relevant to CentrePort’s tug replacement business case. Similarly, Port Marlborough’s tug is suited to towage within Picton Harbour but not Cook Strait.

This lack of out of port support capability for the Cook Strait shipping remains a concern for Greater Wellington and Marlborough District Council - both councils bordering this vital sea corridor. The serious failure of the Kaitaki in January followed by two more ferry breakdowns in February has undermined our communities’ trust that in time of need, shipping in Cook Strait is supported and passengers’ safety is protected.

Together the Interislander and Bluebridge ferries carry around 1 million passengers across Cook Strait each year. Over 250,000 cruise ship passengers are visiting each summer with that number increasing. Other shipping is either passing through the Strait (including large bulk carriers between Australia and South America) or passing by the adjacent coastlines. Despite this level of traffic, and the legendary winds and tidal currents, there is neither the legislative requirement nor any physical resource to provide support for vulnerable or disabled shipping.

In our view, this is a completely inadequate situation that is undermining public confidence in our government to manage a well-known risk and prioritise public safety. Cook Strait is a vital part of New Zealand's national infrastructure, being effectively the marine section of State Highway 1. Just as the government oversees safety on the state highways, so it should support safe shipping in one of our busiest marine corridors.

This capability gap is well known to government agencies. It was highlighted by a report on availability and suitability of assets Maritime NZ commissioned and received in 2022. We expect that the upcoming report on the Kaitaki incident will once again point out this gap in our provision for the safety of shipping.

While Greater Wellington and Marlborough District Council believe that meeting this need is a core role for central government, we offer our harbourmasters' knowledge and experience to help deliver a pragmatic and cost-effective solution. We are aware that a dedicated salvage tug is not a realistic proposition; there are other options to provide for the need while making sure a suitable vessel has a "day job" outside emergencies. The CentrePort and Port Marlborough teams would provide valuable input into these considerations.

Minister, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with you. Like you, we are aware of the risk to ships - passenger and freight alike - of going aground in Cook Strait, and we know from experience the severity of consequences. This is an opportunity for local and central government, ship and port operators to come together and work towards an enduring and sustainable outcome.

Ngā mihi



Daran Ponter
Chair
Greater Wellington



Nadine Taylor
Mayor
Marlborough District Council

CC: Mayors of Wellington Region