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Covid-19: 450 foreign mariners to go through MIQ before joining NZ fishing boats

Steven Walton

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A public health assessment has been completed for the groups and has not raised any risk issues, according to MIQ officials. (File photo). Photo: BRADEN FASTIER / Stuff

Hundreds of Russian and Ukrainian mariners will once again use managed isolation (MIQ) facilities over the next 10 weeks, almost a year after two health care workers caught Covid-19 from fishermen working for the same companies.

But this time around there are stricter MIQ processes in place, and a large number of the mariners have already been fully vaccinated.

Some 160 mariners have already arrived at MIQ in Christchurch, while a 222-strong group will arrive next month, followed by another 68 in November. The mariners will work on boats owned by Independent Fisheries, Sealord and Maruha Nichiro.

A public health assessment has been completed for the groups and has not raised any risk issues, according to MIQ officials.

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Last September, another group of foreign mariners for the same three companies sparked an outbreak of Covid-19 in MIQ that infected 31 mariners and two health staff. Several changes to MIQ processes were made in response.

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The fishing companies say foreign mariners are critical to the survival of New Zealand's deep-sea fishing industry, which is part of a primary sector struggling to attract New Zealand workers.

Allowing the mariners to travel to New Zealand last year protected \$380 million of exports and saved the jobs of 400 Kiwi workers in port towns such as Lyttelton, Timaru and Nelson, according to the Ministry for Primary Industries.

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Independent Fisheries managing director Mark Allison said 225 of the 450 mariners arriving in the next 10 weeks would work on three of his company's boats.



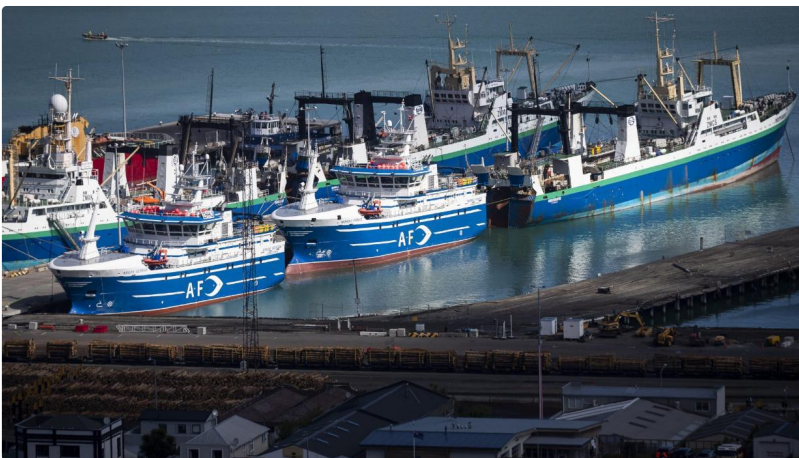
Minister for Oceans and Fisheries David Parker announces an inquiry into the seafood industry.

Allison said 99 per cent of the mariners working for Independent Fisheries were fully vaccinated. He was not sure which vaccine they had.

The foreign mariners had a technical skill set that was lacking in New Zealand, Allison said.

“They are trained mariners, they have done years of sea service and qualifications to take these roles.

“Without these vessels ... fishing here with foreign crew, a lot of jobs on land-based operations for Kiwis would be lost,” he said.



Fishing boats, including an Independent Fisheries boat on the right, tied up at Lyttleton Port last year. Photo: ALDEN WILLIAMS / Stuff

Sealord chief executive Doug Paulin said about 80 of the foreign mariners would work on one Sealord vessel.

Paulin said he presently only knew the vaccination status of 25 of the workers. They 25 had already arrived in MIQ and were fully vaccinated with [the Russian Sputnik V vaccine](#).

Sealord needed the foreign workers to remain economically viable, Paulin said.

“It’s tens of millions of dollars in lost revenue and lost profit [without these workers]. As it is, deep water fishing is a very low margin business.”

Sealord chief executive Doug Paulin says the company would struggle to make a profit without foreigner mariners crewing one of its boats. Photo: Braden Fastier / Stuff

Paulin said there was a raft of vacancies in the deep-water fishing industry because there were no New Zealanders to fill them. Sealord currently had 45 vacancies.

In July, the Government announced [a ministerial inquiry into migrant labour in the seafood sector](#), which included deep-sea fishing. The inquiry is set to determine how the sector could have a more resilient workforce with more Kiwis.

Some deep sea fishing companies had [been accused of deterring Kiwi workers](#) with unfavourable job advertisements, a claim denied by the companies.

The latest group of foreign mariners secured their places in MIQ through a [group application process](#).

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For these applications, officials decide groups to recommend for approval by a ministerial group, which is led by Immigration Minister Kris Faafoi.

Brigadier Rose King, the joint head of MIQ, said the mariners’ would be at facilities with other returnees, but would be on a separate floor or wing wherever possible.

King said the mariners would have a pre-departure Covid-19 test and another test on arrival in MIQ.

During their stay, the mariners would have individual rooms and [those who smoked](#) had been given rooms with a balcony or secure patio to minimise movement through corridors.

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