

New adventures for LONG SERVING CEO

Marlborough Shellfish Quality Programme CEO Helen Smale has resigned her position to “pursue new adventures”.

Helen has made a number of enduring contributions to the New Zealand aquaculture industry. Most notably, she identified very early the risk to the industry from the mouse bioassay method for monitoring marine biotoxins.

“The methodology wasn’t too much of a problem for the Northern Hemisphere industries that dominated shellfish production, but for us in New Zealand it was quite simply a nightmare with a lot of associated risk and huge costs to industry.” Helen says.

Not only was the methodology prone to false positives and insensitive, meaning the level of detection was close to the regulatory level, but there was an emerging animal ethics issue as well. Helen advocated internationally for the adoption of a chemical based test methodology, worked with industry to raise their share of the development costs, and then alongside the Cawthron Institute and regulatory authorities led on behalf of industry the development and adoption of the new chemical based biotoxin measurement methodologies.

“This revolutionised the industry,” says Helen. “It almost overnight eliminated product recall, saving the industry hundreds of thousands of dollars each year and removed animal ethics risk for the industry at the same time.”

In addition, the new methodology provided industry with a predictive tool that reduced harvest disruptions and allowed better risk management decisions to be made. The new methodologies have now been adopted throughout the world including by the Australian, European Union and United States food safety authorities.

Helen worked has also worked as assistant executive officer of the New Zealand Marine Farming Association and New Zealand Mussel Industry Council. “Those were exciting times,” says Helen. “The industry was still in its pioneering years and we were all involved in world leading developments, whether it was farming technology, separating *Gymnodinium catenatum* cysts from Kaitia spat or introducing industry training. There was a huge burst of innovation during that time.” Helen was a part of the team that led the development of unit standard based industry training and then worked on secondment to SeaFIC managing the implementation of the training. Alongside that she project managed the development of the Queen Charlotte College Aquaculture Academy and served on its board until her MSQP role became full time.

Helen said that leaving was a bitter-sweet experience. Following careers in science, audiometry and dairy and food quality assurance, Helen joined the aquaculture industry in a part time role 18 years ago. “As we confronted each new challenge I became more and more immersed in the aquaculture industry.”



MSQP chairman, Wayne MacDonald acknowledged Helen’s contribution to MSQP and the industry over more than 17 years, saying that she has been integral in establishing MSQP as a model of best practise. “We wish her the very best in her new endeavours.”

Helen said that it had been a rare privilege working with the MSQP members. “Aquaculture is an exciting industry filled with innovative and energetic people. It has been fabulous working with them and helping them build their industry. Many are now life-long friends and I look forward to keeping in touch.”

Helen’s background in quality assurance saw her rapidly promoted to managing the Marlborough Shellfish Quality Programme. The programme manages the food safety compliance of the shellfish growing waters across the Top of the South. MSQP is widely regarded as the world leader in its field. This new position saw Helen chair, manage and serve on various national and international advisory bodies including representing the New Zealand shellfish industry at international forums and as a member of the advisory committee of the International Conference for Molluscan Shellfish Safety. Helen also served a two year term as chairman of the advisory committee. She remains the only industry person from New Zealand to have been appointed to the advisory committee and one of only two internationally.

Helen says her interest in the aquaculture industry is by no means at an end. She believes that the recent Fonterra issues have highlighted just how important food safety programmes are to food sector industries, not just from a regulatory perspective but also from the consumers’ perspective. “I’m not suggesting that we flash more dollars around but I believe very strongly that we can extract more value from the

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investment that industry has already made and the expertise that has been accumulated. Consumers are much more interested in the assurances that we provide than we realise.” Businesses, suggests Helen, need to look at how their quality assurance and food safety programmes offer opportunities to provide consumers with the confidence that is now more and more part of their purchase decision making process.

Helen will now be focussing on her role at Forté Management – management and marketing consultants, the consulting firm she has been a director of since 1991.

Helen notes that while it sounds clichéd, it is the people that she has worked with over the years that stand out.

“I want to thank the many people that I worked with and who supported me in my role over the years. We were a great team. You have my admiration and appreciation.” 