

NEWS

Seaweed business makes waves

Sven Carlsson

SEAWEED harvesting is thriving on the East Coast although the owners of a Waihau Bay business say the Covid-19 pandemic has caused them to stop and think about the security of their business, leading to diversification.

Paul Houston and Simone Rankin have operated P&S Seaweed Harvesters for 19 years, starting the business when they returned to the Coast from Australia with their first child.

Harking back to their childhood, they remembered a great grandfather who used to collect seaweed and, after a big storm, collected some of their own which they attempted to sell.

Ms Rankin said they soon learned that this was not the way to go about things if they wished to start a business.

Now the pair have the fishing permit that allows them to collect the seaweed and the licensed fish receiver licence that allows them to on-sell the product.

"We've found our passion and it's right at our front door," Ms Rankin said.

When the **OPŌTĪKI NEWS** visited, they were working to complete a two-tonne order that had to be delivered within the week. They had 16 people collecting seaweed for them, from Opōtiki to Tolaga Bay.

As professional collectors, their business can only harvest seaweed that has dislodged naturally, either as the result of a storm or underwater currents.



A decade ago, Ms Rankin said their main problem was supply. But, after realising the currents and weather conditions would be different around the East Cape and that

by collecting in many different bays they would have a more consistent supply, they overcame this problem.

Fertiliser has long been the mainstream

use for the seaweed but when Covid hit, with its impact on businesses around the country, the couple said they were "kicked up the bum".

NEWS

on the Coast

COTTAGE INDUSTRY: Paul Houston and Simone Rankin have created a viable business right at their doorstep.

Photos: Sven Carlsson E1840 073

"We had to do a business contingency plan, leading to diversification," Ms Rankin said.

Luckily, new areas of demand for seaweed were opening up and the business is now targeting high-value markets, such as bio-pharmacies and health supplements.

She said some customers wanted the seaweed whole while others wanted it processed, which added value.

"People think it's easy work, but we have stringent requirements for the collecting and maintaining quality," Ms Rankin said.

"Once the seaweed is ripped off, it will remain active for a couple of days and we try to collect it within 24 hours - we've got to pounce."

The decision of what dislodged seaweed to pick up is the first step of their grading process.

"You're looking at the colour and cleanliness - dunking it in seawater to start the cleaning process," Ms Rankin said.

"We go for high quality and once the seaweed comes home it will start composting, so we hang it up for drying - to get the air, the wind and sun on it."

Often working 18-hour days, the pair will "baby-sit" the harvest during the drying process.



COLLECTION POINTS: By collecting seaweed from several different bays, a higher reliability of supply is attained. Photo supplied

"We pride ourselves on delivering a quality product," Mr Houston said.

After 24 hours of drying, they cut off the root and trim the stalk. Again, timing is everything and they must ensure the seaweed is kept dry, because it's hygroscopic, meaning it attracts moisture from the air.

The couple are proud of what they have achieved for their family and community.

"Our sons were brought up on the beach and they are still helping out."

"The seaweed collection business has created full-time employment for both of us and we are now looking at hiring factory workers," Ms Rankin said.

People interested in supporting the expansion of the business by collecting seaweed can contact Ms Rankin and Mr Houston on 021 269 5902.

DRYING PHASE: The collected seaweed is bundles and left to dry.

