

Deep sea diving expert disputes anti seabed mining claims

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Former commercial diver Dougal Fergus worked for almost 40 years off the South Taranaki coast. (File photo) Steve Wilson

A deep sea diving expert has dismissed claims from opposition groups that seabed mining in the South Taranaki Bight would have detrimental effects on the environment.

Dougal Fergus has spent 40 years working as a commercial diver and salvager, including long periods near and on the South Taranaki Bight.

That included seven years working on the bight's seabed taking "several thousand" samples for Trans-Tasman Resources, the company which plans to vacuum up 50 million tonnes of seabed sediment every year for 35 years, extracting iron, vanadium and titanium for export.

A fast-track panel hearing date for the project is expected to be released soon.

"There is nothing on the sea floor but black sand where they want to work," Fergus said.

Based in Wellington, Fergus started professional diving on the Waipipi Iron Sands project off the South Taranaki coast in 1976.

In 1980 he bought into Marine Construction Ltd, which was later renamed New Zealand Diving and Salvage Ltd, which he ran until 2018 when it was sold as a going concern.



A jack up rig used by experienced commercial diver Dougal Fergus off the South Taranaki coast. Supplied

He worked on the installation of the Fonterra and South Taranaki District Council outfall off Hāwera where he also carried out yearly inspections.

His work for Trans-Tasman Resources involved using a machine the company invented to take 5m cores, with the work monitored by a camera mounted on the core sampler.

“This enabled us to see the sea floor, when visibility allowed, which showed nothing but black sand,” he said.

He said he wanted to share his experiences so people had an “informed” view.

“It is a shame so many people have been given so much misinformation,” he said.

Representatives of environmental groups Project Reef, the Ngāmotu Marine Reserve Society and Protect Our Moana have collectively challenged Trans-Tasman Resources, which had publicly stated there was no significant marine life in the vicinity of project.

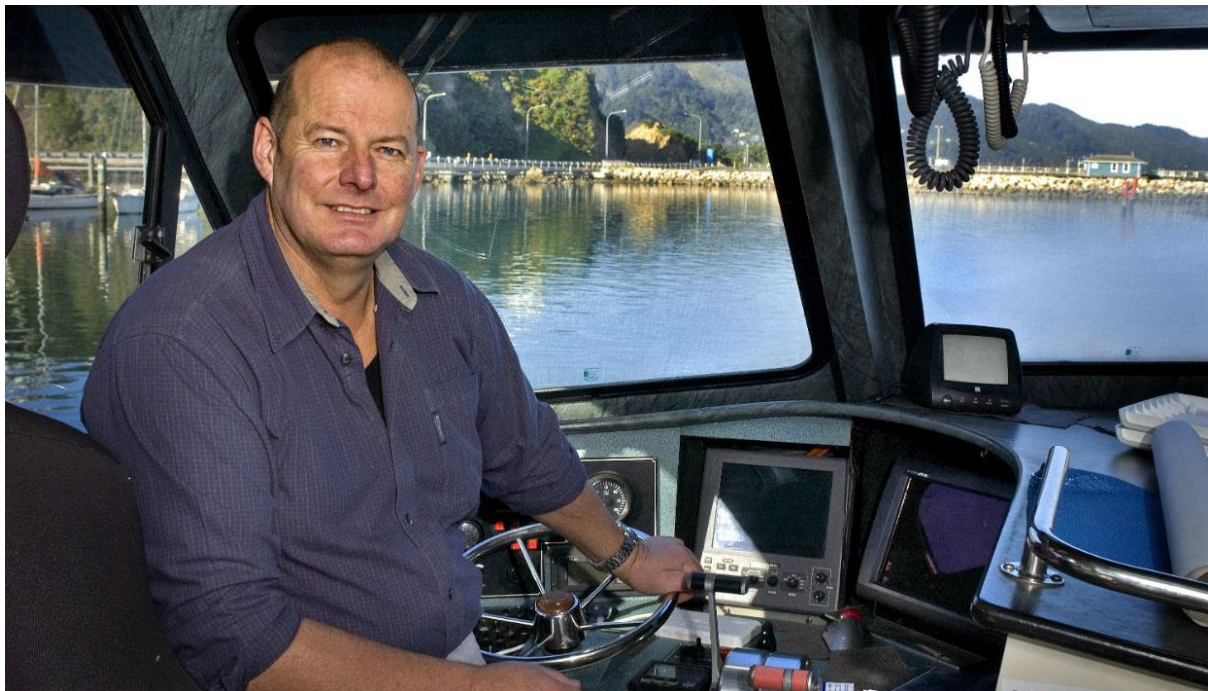
Project Reef's Karen Pratt told the New Plymouth District Council that it had collected data for a decade and shared images from reefs that extended offshore from Pātea that revealed “stunningly beautiful and vibrant healthy life to be found on South Taranaki's offshore reefs”.

The studied Pātea reef is 11km offshore, while TTR plans to mine in an area 22-26km offshore.

All eight Taranaki iwi had publicly opposed the project, as have the South Taranaki and New Plymouth district councils. Some commercial fishermen have also expressed concern about the impact mining would have on the South Taranaki fishery.

“If some of these groups wanted, I would be happy to talk to them as I have been there and seen it,” Fergus said.

What he had not seen was any aquatic life on the sea floor, apart from the “odd sea lice” which sporadically came up in core samples.



Fergus said in all the testing they did on the South Taranaki Bight all they found in samples was sea lice. (File photo) Steve Wilson

“There is nothing living on the sea floor because the sand is so aggressive,” he said.

“[And] We never had a whale come past in all the years I was out there,” he said.

Fergus also described the significant sand drift on the sea floor, which would build up metres high after any storms, would be many times greater than any plume from the seabed mining project’s operation.

“The dirty water after a storm from the rivers and churned up sea floor goes out for miles, all the way up the west coast,” he said.

“The sand movement out there is absolutely horrendous.”