

## By email

5 February 2026

Hon Chris Bishop  
Minister of Transport  
[C.Bishop@ministers.govt.nz](mailto:C.Bishop@ministers.govt.nz)

Tēnā koutou Minister

### **Need for enhanced maritime emergency response in Cook Strait – protecting lives and the economy**

We are writing to express serious concern about the Government's recent decision to terminate the contract for the MMA Vision open-ocean tug in February.

The Government's decision to enter into an agreement via Maritime New Zealand for MMA Vision to be on station was the consequence of multiple near-miss incidences in the Cook Strait Te Moana-o-Raukawa over the past five years, in particular the recommendations of the TAIC inquiry into the MV Shiling incident. While by no means a full or permanent answer, it represented an understanding of the seriousness of this issue, a willingness to identify possible solutions and meet reasonable public expectations.

Successive governments have vaunted the Cook Strait as part of State Highway 1 – unfortunately without the ability to call the AA or dial up a tow truck.

### **Cook Strait – an economic lifeline and a treacherous stretch of water**

The Cook Strait is not just a stretch of water - it is the lifeline connecting our two main islands. The Cook Strait is *an essential connection for the movement of our goods and services*, according to Rt Hon Min Peters<sup>1</sup>. And he's right - each year, over one million passengers travel on Cook Strait ferries a year, and an additional 500,000 cruise ship passengers pass through the Cook Strait during the season supporting our tourism industry –our second largest industry with total tourism expenditure of \$44 billion a year. Thousands of tonnes of freight move daily between the two islands, underpinning supply chains for agriculture, food, fuel, and essential goods. The InterIslander alone carries \$14 billion of freight a year.<sup>2</sup>

The Strait is a key infrastructure route, and its safety is seen as a core government responsibility, similar to road safety.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered to media at the announcement of the decision on the future of the interisland ferries, 31 March 2025  
<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/rail-ferries-and-straightforward-infrastructure>

<sup>2</sup> Interislander Ferries and Terminals Detailed Business Case, KiwiRail, 3 June 2021 [https://www.transport.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/11\\_Detailed-Business-Case\\_Interislander-Ferries-and-Terminals.pdf](https://www.transport.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/11_Detailed-Business-Case_Interislander-Ferries-and-Terminals.pdf)

It is also one of the most dangerous and complex stretches of water in the world to navigate, particularly in poor weather<sup>3</sup>. Increases in ocean temperatures will lead to more frequent extreme weather events, including storms, which will amplify the treacherous nature of this busy stretch of water.

### **Four million people will travel by ferry between now and the arrival of the new ferries in four years**

The Government's view of new ferries with enhanced safety features as a future mitigation for Cook Strait resilience does not tell the whole story. The new ferries are still four years away and between now and then around four million people will travel on the ferries alone through the Cook Strait.

Until then we have an aging fleet of ferries plagued with a series of well documented breakdowns travelling through a notoriously dangerous stretch of water carrying thousands of New Zealanders and visitors.

In addition, the InterIslander ferries are not the only vessels using the Cook Strait – we still have people travelling on BlueBridge Ferries and cruise ships, as well as commercial boats and fishing vessels passing through the Cook Strait an area that “presents a particularly heightened risk”<sup>4</sup>.

Witness the events with the MV Shiling and the environmental damage that could have been wrought on our coastlines should that ship have foundered<sup>5</sup>. An inquiry by TAIC into the Shiling, recommended strengthening NZ's salvage and rescue capability.<sup>6</sup> Maritime NZ's response to this recommendation was to “contract the provision of services for emergency ocean response and salvage capability (EORC) provided by MMA Vision for up to 20 days per month in the vicinity of the Cook Strait until June 2026. With the ability to extend another year”.

### **New ships are not immune to safety issues at sea**

It's also important to note that new ferries are not immune to teething trouble and significant problems. The Wahine was only two years old when it lost location information, [capsized](#) and sank in the entrance of [Wellington Harbour](#). New ships often have teething problems, and while these should go away with time, we do not know what form they may take. In Aratere's first six to 12 months of operation, there were incidents that could have been disastrous, had the timing and location of the incidents been slightly different.

While we acknowledge the Government is making an investment in safety that is within your control through the new ferries, those ships are only part of the issue. The most recent breakdown was a StraitNZ ship and there are other ships with a high tonnage of cargo and large numbers of passengers passing through the Cook Strait every week.

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<sup>3</sup> Briefing no. MNZ 24-025 from Maritime NZ to Minister of Transport [https://www.maritimenz.govt.nz/media/voxl4eec/emergency-towing-capacity\\_f36702\\_21-may-2025.pdf](https://www.maritimenz.govt.nz/media/voxl4eec/emergency-towing-capacity_f36702_21-may-2025.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Briefing to Minister of Transport from MNZ and MoT , page 2, section 2, dated 12 November 2024

<sup>5</sup> [MV Shiling to stay put overnight after ocean-going tug reaches ship | Stuff](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Container vessel, Shiling, Loss of control Wellington harbour, 15 April 2023 | TAIC](#)

## Reliance on using ‘existing vessels’

There is reference in the Cabinet paper <sup>7</sup> to incidents being resolved by “relying on commercially available vessels to provide towing responses if required, noting these might not always be available in New Zealand waters”.

One of those vessels has left New Zealand and the other is likely to leave by July 2026 and “cannot be relied on in the future”<sup>8</sup>, according to the Ministry of Transport. Without those vessels in NZ waters, it would take five days (in good weather) for an EROC vessel, most likely from Australia, to reach a stricken vessel<sup>9</sup>. Outside of that you are relying on harbour tugs that are not equipped or crewed for open water work and vessels where weather conditions are frequently outside of their operating parameters.

There are two local firms that could provide “first strike” (Maritime NZ’s suggested initial response level) support capability for Cook Strait, one would cost around \$80m over 10 years as indicated as the initial expectation for the MMA vision and the other a significantly lower cost. Neither of those options would match the MMA Vision for size but would have better availability, have day to day work to keep the vessel and crews busy and both would be a significant improvement on the current situation in the Cook Strait. We encourage the Crown through its agencies to engage with these firms.

The absence of a dedicated emergency tug or rescue capability in the Cook Strait poses unacceptable risks:

- **Human Safety:** A major mechanical failure or grounding in severe weather could endanger hundreds of lives. The Strait’s notorious conditions mean that without rapid intervention, the consequences could be tragic.
- **Economic Impact:** Cook Strait ferries and other vessels crossing or passing through the Cook Strait carry millions of dollars of freight every day. A single day of disruption would result in lost productivity and logistics delays.
- **Environmental Risk:** A grounding or fuel spill would result in costly clean-up operations and long-term ecological damage, as well as international media coverage affecting our tourism industry.
- **Climate Risk/Resilience:** Extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change, and the water temperature is heating up - increasing the likelihood of more frequent strong weather events. An emergency response capability that the New Zealand Government can stand behind is not just a safety measure - it is a climate adaptation strategy. Investing in resilience now could reduce future disaster costs and protect both lives and livelihoods in the face of more extreme weather events.

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<sup>7</sup> Cabinet paper entitled *Cessation of work on levy funded emergency ocean response capability on Cook Strait*  
[https://www.transport.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Cessation-of-Work-on-Levy-Funded-Emergency-Ocean-Response-Capability-in-the-Cook-Strait\\_Redacted-v2.pdf](https://www.transport.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Cessation-of-Work-on-Levy-Funded-Emergency-Ocean-Response-Capability-in-the-Cook-Strait_Redacted-v2.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> MoT briefing on Emergency Ocean Response Capability for meeting of Weds 16 October 2024

<sup>9</sup> Emergency Ocean Response Capability – Detailed Business Case, Ministry of Transport [Emergency Ocean Response Capability Cook Strait project](#).

Given these risks, we urge the Government to reinstate funding and deploy a dedicated emergency tug for Cook Strait, ideally by extending the MMA Vision contract in the short term, while continuing further research and analysis on more affordable options for example commissioning an equivalent vessel at a better price.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss options and next steps.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Ngā mihi



**Daran Ponter**

Chair

Greater Wellington Regional Council

[Daran.Ponter@gw.govt.nz](mailto:Daran.Ponter@gw.govt.nz)



**Nadine Taylor**

Mayor

Marlborough District Council

[mayor@marlborough.govt.nz](mailto:mayor@marlborough.govt.nz)