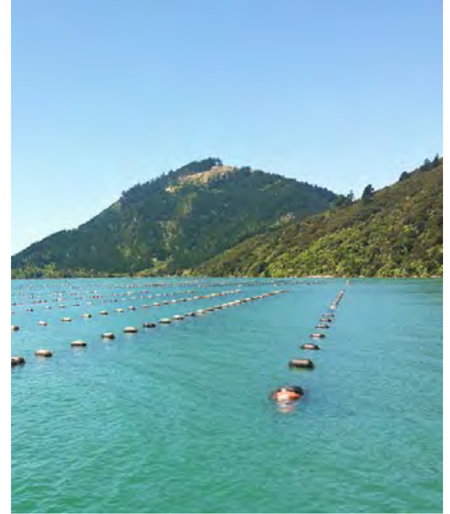
Jim Jenkins working at New Zealand Salmon in 1983.

Applying coir for spat settlement to the first spat collection ropes in 1974.


Mussel farms in the Marlborough Sounds

US pragmatist became NZ catalyst

Bill Moore

A backpack, a sense of adventure and a passion for aquaculture combined to turn young American Jim Jenkins into a pivotal figure in New Zealand aquaculture.

Forty-five years after he arrived in this country, 70-year-old Jenkins was honoured with a Seafood NZ Longstanding Service Award, reflecting a contribution that the scientist attributed to his practical ability as much as his painstaking research and experimentation.

"I'm a pragmatist and my talent has been problem-solving," he said in an interview at his rural home near Blenheim.

He was in the advanced stage of terminal cancer when interviewed and sadly, he died just as this issue was being prepared for printing.

Jenkins was seduced by the lure of aquaculture as a student at the University of Washington. Even though the US hadn't really cottoned on to its possibilities, it excited the young man, who was drawn to what hatcheries could offer, partly because "I loved stainless steel pipes and plumbing – that was me".

But with the US industry mainly beach oyster and clam farming, when he graduated he took his marine biology degree to Alaska and a job defining pollution issues around a pulp mill.

"I had very little qualification to do that. But I gave it a shot, and then I got back to my dream stuff, aquaculture, so I was bringing oyster spat up from the States and hanging it off the wharves."

This soon led to getting a closed salmon hatchery started up again as a sideline, and the realisation that he didn't really like the pulpmill work.

So in January 1972 Jenkins came to New Zealand with a backpack and a plan to meet as many industry people as he could to learn about aquaculture here.

He recalls that "fisheries research had its own little cocoon of protected PhDs" and he didn't fit in, armed only with a bachelor's degree. But Fishing Industry Board head Jim Campbell helped him from the beginning, providing introductions to people around New Zealand.

From that came a job investigating the potential for trout farming. The same year Labour was elected and put an end to plans for that sector, but by then Jenkins had his career underway.

Looking back he said the trout prohibition was the result of "inherent bullshit" and a powerful anti-trout farming Acclimatisation Society lobby which made too much of the issue. In any case, "salmon tastes better", he said.

That's where the focus shifted, first to ocean ranching – releasing salmon smolt from hatcheries to return to their home rivers from the sea – and then to farming the fish in sea cages.

Jenkins represented the FIB at meetings with acclimatisation societies, pointing out that ocean ranching might enhance the sport fishery.

He also began working on mussel farming research and development in the Sounds. In the late '60s some mussel rafts had been put in, but no spat was being caught and those involved had resorted to scraping mussels off the rocks. Campbell had envisaged the New Zealand industry following Spain into using rafts.

"They're big, ugly things – very very dangerous, I thought," Jenkins said.

Nobody had any idea of how to get natural spat. But with his knowledge of oyster spat work in Washington State, and listening to young marine scientists after his field trips to the Sounds, he began to identify greenshell mussel spat among the plankton in the Sounds, towing a net to gather them. That led him to put ropes into the water for spat collection, working with others to develop frizzy rope that mussel larvae like to settle on.

It worked, and as word got out that mussel farming could succeed, more

and more people got interested.

Seeing the potential and knowing how slowly the wheels of science and bureaucracy turn, at one point Jenkins got his reports read out on a popular Wellington breakfast radio show and soon investors were queuing to get into mussel farming.

"A lot of people were keen. I had one of those new photocopying machines and I could crank out an application. They paid $50 for the application and $50 to advertise it, and they could get a mussel farm."

The problem was that although the Marlborough harbourmaster, Don Jamison, wasn't opposed to the farms, the Ministry of Transport wouldn't let them go ahead.

"There was shellfish farming with leases up north, and a lease meant boats couldn't go through. They said, 'We can't do that, the boats have got to go through these farms'. We

finally had a meeting and I said licenses would be fine. It took just one meeting, so everything became licences," Jenkins said.

"It was working – the ropes were just covered in spat. People were smiling, it was something they'd never seen – and they they started looking at farms. The first ones were coming through around '77-'78. By '81 production just went through the roof."

However, having the mussels was one thing. What about markets?

"There was no demand," Jenkins said. "The product was so beautiful – how could you not love these beautiful mussels? Plus mussels are probably the heaviest crop any marine farm could every carry. We were all going to be millionaires.

"The tonnages were coming through … it looked really, really amazing. It exploded, with really no place to sell. The restaurants didn't have mussels on their menus – there were a lot more scallops and the oysters were coming down from up north from the oyster farms that were set up 10 years before. Of course the restaurants were pretty crappy in those days. It was a funny time."

Jenkins was also the man who initiated the use of mussel floats – perhaps the single biggest reason that farming was able to expand so rapidly.

He had seen oysters being farmed using floats in Japan, and grew increasingly concerned about the dangers to boats if large concrete rafts became the preferred mussel farming method in New Zealand. They were just at the height to "take heads off" if a pleasure boat crashed into one, he said, with the danger of such an accident heightened at night.

"I think it would have been a huge public shock if that became the only definition of what mussel farming was."

After a second trip to Japan in 1974 he told Campbell, "we've just got to get some of these floats".

"He was going to Japan and had all these squid fishermen contacts. Within a week he had it jacked up for 50 floats to be loaded aboard a squid boat. They landed in Wellington. Jim did a great job to get them in."

They soon became the industry standard.

Jenkins wrote the 1979 industry handbook *Mussel Cultivation in the Marlborough Sounds* and became a mussel farmer himself. But he and his wife Robyn, heavily mortgaged on their Kenepuru family home and the mussel farm, were hit by the lack of a market, just like the other farmers. He was also feeling the strain of being at the centre of the rapidly-growing mussel industry.

He had worked with Jamison on figuring out the best sites, and it had gone smoothly.

"After 100 farms it was starting to be a bit like a gold rush and I was finding it hard to keep everyone happy," he said. "I just wanted to get out of it."

In 1981 he took up the offer to switch to salmon farming at Stewart Island, first managing a farm owned by BP and then being hired by the newly-listed public company New Zealand Salmon to set up and manage a new farm.

The three years he spent there provided the income and breathing space to "save our butts", Jenkins said, and when they came back to Marlborough mussel farming had become profitable.

A growers' cooperative he helped set up at the beginning of the '80s sold out to Sanford and Jenkins joined other growers in becoming a supplier to the big public company.

He came back from Stewart Island to start up Regal Salmon, now a part of the public company New Zealand King Salmon, the country's biggest salmon farmer.

"I got partners together and it was just step by step by step to get through, we had all the sites in place, and I thought all the mistakes had been made and we could move on, but in '89 the grand algae bloom at Stewart Island just killed everything, all the farms down there just died. That really changed everything for the future."

Jenkins, who identified Tory Channel's currents and water temperatures as providing the best salmon farming site in New Zealand, was a director of Regal Salmon until 1992.

He left feeling defeated and broken-hearted.

"I felt it was my baby … I brought people in, brought more people in, and finally you realise they've closed the door on you."

By this time the mussel farm was providing the family – the couple had three school-aged children at this point - with sufficient income for Jenkins to return to university. He went to Otago and over four years completed his master's, concentrating this time on oysters.

He'd spotted pacific oysters on a concrete weight back in 1977, and co-wrote a paper on the new arrival with John Meredyth-Young, proposing that farming it be approved.

MAF said no.

"Well, '77, '87 … by '93 they still had a ban on it. It started to show up on the shoreline and beaches. I thought, 'Is anyone going to make a decision on this thing?' So that's when I did my master's."

The then Fisheries Minister Doug Kidd was sympathetic, Jenkins said.

"In about two years I had enough data to give to them and then they opened up the farming of the pacific oyster after that."

The first FIB mussel line in the Marlborough Sounds, 1975.

Jim and Robyn Jenkins pictured at their rural property near Blenheim earlier this year. Picture: Bill Moore

Disillusioned with the effects of the Resource Management Act on aquaculture, Jenkins pulled back from his involvement in the industry in 1997, and in more recent years farmed cherries on a second property just outside Blenheim.

He said the Act swept away the previous cooperation within the mussel industry that had allowed gradual growth, creating a stampede as people competed for water space.

"It was just chaos, the councils couldn't deal with it and I don't think anyone knew what to do next."

His concerns about industry expansion remain. He said he didn't think pollution from salmon farms – a current hot subject – would be a major problem, noting that what comes down the rivers into the Sounds during floods is probably far more damaging.

But the physical presence of marine farms in waterways meant future growth should be carefully controlled, he said.

"It needs time. Look at the marinas - Havelock Marina had one jetty when we started, now it's massive.

"I think aquaculture shouldn't be privileged. It's great what it's done, but to say we're going to have a billion dollar industry at the expense of the public use of the waters, I just don't think that's New Zealand.

"I've kept my newspaper clippings, the first one is from the *Marlborough Express* and I said that we could have a mussel industry of 800 tonnes – if you'd said 60,000 tonnes then, all hell would have broken loose."

After helping to found and develop New Zealand mussel, salmon and oyster aquaculture and experiencing the highs and lows of 45 years, Jenkins said his best memories were from the pioneering days when a keen young American brought his knowledge and passion across the Pacific.

"I loved the early mussel years of research – discovery, success. It could have failed. "

And he still had that backpack, tent and sleeping bag that he brought with him in 1972.