

Yellowtail kingfish producer Indian Ocean Fresh Australia 'pushes pause' for at least 12 months

WA Country Hour / By Joanna Prendergast

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Erica Starling and Justine Arnold from Indian Ocean Fresh Australia with some of the last fish harvested from the Geraldton fish farm. (ABC Rural: Jo Prendergast)

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Western Australia's only yellowtail kingfish aquaculture producer has stopped farming, citing COVID-19 disruptions and a global oversupply of fish in aquaculture facilities.

Indian Ocean Fresh Australia owner and managing director Erica Starling said she was 'pausing' her operation off the Geraldton coast until the aquaculture sector recovered from the pandemic.

"Once the hospitality sector was shut down in April in the early stages of COVID that really just disrupted everything," she said.

"The bulk of our customers are in the east, so the hospitality industry closure really impacted us."

Ms Starling said the second wave in Melbourne further hampered the industry.

"Melbourne is the heart of our food culture here in Australia — that's just been mind-blowing, it's devastating mentally for people in business," she said.

Key points:

- Indian Ocean Fresh Australia says it will stop trading for 12 months amid market instability and oversupply
- The fishery's hiatus could impact upon Geraldton, where it deals with many businesses
- Owner Erica Starling says the farm will retain all its equipment and breeding stock

"It goes all through the supply chain."

Ms Starling said yellowtail kingfish were not suitable for the retail trade, due to the flesh oxidising after cutting, and therefore could not rely on supermarket sales to carry the business through food service shutdowns.

The company has been commercially producing fish off the Geraldton coast since 2016 and has won numerous awards across Australia.



Yellowtail kingfish ready to be harvested. (ABC News: Chris Lewis)

A very difficult decision

Several months ago Ms Starling and her team decided not to restock the pens off Geraldton with fish that would have been grown out for harvest next year.

"I just said, 'You know what, I just don't think we'll be able to sell these'," she said.

"As we started to see in July and August the results coming out of other companies ... it was pretty clear that there is fish all around the world in sea pens across a range of species, there is going to be trouble in the market," she said.

But it was not an easy decision to step away.

"They're a big part of my life — [the fish] have dominated my life for over a decade now," Ms Starling said.

"I've got two boys, they're the real life, and they've probably taken second fiddle at a lot of times, simply because the fish are very demanding.

"It was a very hard decision to make, and one of the other hardest decisions was the impact on our staff and on our team.

"We also have a very big footprint in terms of the local business that we use."