

## Perspectives: The five regions that may lose visitors if Interislander problems persist

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**Five regions could suffer if inbounders decide to avoid KiwiRail's Interislanders, writes Tourism Export Council of New Zealand chief executive Lynda Keene.**



ITOs may avoid KiwiRail's Interislanders if problems like Friday night's groundings persist.  
Image: Skyworks

We were disappointed to hear that there has been a mechanical matter on the *Aratere* vessel and hope that Interislander and KiwiRail can resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

Like many in the industry (and in New Zealand) we have been concerned about the ageing Interislander fleet and potential impact on ability to transport visitors and freight across the Cook Strait in the event sailings are cancelled due to mechanical difficulties.

TECNZ was pleased to see new ferries were on order and for them to come into service in 2025 and 2026. Despite thinking the new ferries might be bigger than expected and that there would only be two ferries instead of three, there was a sense that, 'good, there is a plan, and the ferries looked great'.

Inbound Tour Operators (ITOs) were just waiting for imagery and more details to start promoting to their offshore travel partners for future bookings. We were excited that the new ferries would enhance the quality of cruising to/from Wellington and Picton through the beautiful Queen Charlotte Sound and add to New Zealand's global reputation as a great touring experience.



Lynda Keene

Unfortunately, this has not come to pass, which potentially may impact future international visitor bookings. Whilst we appreciated the new government axed KiwiRail's Inter-island Resilience Connection (iReX) project funding due to cost blowouts in December 2023, we assumed the government already had a plan B in place. We assumed wrong and this was most worrying.

ITOs sell New Zealand 1-2 years in advance, and they need certainty to share with offshore travel partners what can be included in future itineraries. If the government cannot make a decision quickly about what plan B is (try to reinstate former order of two new vessels and infrastructure needed) there are five regions that may be impacted with less visitors for years to come.

If ITOs cannot have a firm product or experience to include in visitor itineraries (they are already selling the 2025-2026 and 2026-2027 seasons in advance) then Wellington, Marlborough, Kaikōura, Nelson-Tasman and the West Coast regions may see a decline in international visitors because ITOs will instead have to look at flying their visitors from Rotorua direct to Christchurch or Queenstown rather than cruise across Cook Strait to ensure security of travel in their itineraries. This is a very serious matter for those that are investing in new visitor product, for RTOs and operators promoting the regions offshore and for communities.

We believe the Interislander Kiwirail Working Group had just submitted the plan B to government before the *Aratere* grounding. We urge the government to make a decision quickly on what the next iteration of State Highway 1 passenger and freight services across Cook Strait will look like soon and wish the Interislander teams all the best with delivering on that decision as expediently as possible.