

Maritime NZ Charges KiwiRail Over Ro/Ro Grounding

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by [The Maritime Executive](#)



Aratere aground, 2024 (MaritimeNZ)

New Zealand's inter-island ro/ro ferry operator KiwiRail is facing charges following accusations of endangering the safety of passengers after one of its ferries grounded in June last year.

Maritime NZ said it has filed two charges against KiwiRail after completing investigations on the grounding of ro/ro ferry *Aratere* north of Picton on June 21, 2024. At the time of the incident, the ferry had 47 people on board. Luckily, all the passengers and crew were safely returned to shore with the ferry being refloated the following evening using two harbor tugs.

Following the completion of what it is describing as "comprehensive and wide-ranging" investigations, Maritime NZ highlights that it has filed charges against KiwiRail under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. The charges relate to alleged failures by the operator to keep crew and passengers safe while onboard the ferry.

Though Maritime NZ said it cannot talk about what its investigation found, the Transport Accident Investigation Commission (TAIC) released its interim factual report on the incident in October last year. The report indicated that the 25-year-old *Aratere* grounded because the crew did not know how to turn off the vessel's autopilot when they realized she was heading towards the shore.

The incident occurred just weeks after *Aratere* had received a new steering control system to work with the ship's autopilot and integrated bridge navigation system. On the day of the

incident, a master who was re-familiarizing himself with the ferry after commanding other vessels was controlling the engines and piloting.

“This was a complex incident and an important investigation given it focused on KiwiRail bringing in new systems to older vessels and broader safety management. It required us to look at systems, policies and procedures, culture, within KiwiRail in relation to the incident,” said Kirstie Hewlett, Maritime NZ Chief Executive.

The lawsuit is the latest facing KiwiRail. In September last year, the operator was ordered to pay US\$266,000 in fines and costs in relation to a January 2023 incident involving its ferry *Kaitaki*.

KiwiRail is facing *Aratere*-related charges at a time when it is planning to take the vessel out of service. In May, the operator announced that the ferry will retire in August after a career spanning a quarter of a century. Having entered service in 1999, *Aratere* has been Interislander’s only rail-enabled ferry-making 24 crossings on the Cook Strait route per week. The 184-meter (604-foot) ferry has a capacity of 600 passengers, 30 trucks or 230 cars, and 28 rail cars.

The 17,816-tonne ferry has had a troubled career characterized by technical problems, engine failures, and the grounding in June last year. Due to her troubled history, some suggest that the ferry is jinxed, resulting in the nickname “El Lemon.”