

Paspaley Pearling charged over pearl diver death

ATTENTION ALL BUSINESS OWNERS

A two-year investigation into the death of a pearl diver off Western Australia's Kimberley coast has culminated in a criminal charge against the company, Paspaley Pearling.

Jarrold Hampton died in April 2012 while diving for pearls from a Paspaley-owned boat about 160 kilometres south of Broome. He was employed as a drift diver, which involved collecting shells from the sea bed while being towed underwater. It was his second day on the job.

Crew members helped Mr Hampton, who had made an emergency ascent to the surface, but he died at the scene. Preliminary investigations found his death was consistent with drowning.

WorkSafe WA commissioner Lex McCulloch confirmed it had charged the family-owned company with one count of failing to provide and maintain a safe working environment. "The investigation was a significant and complex one involving extensive WorkSafe resources," he said.

"The matter is now in the hands of the courts, and WorkSafe will not make any further comment."

The family-owned company faces a maximum penalty of \$200,000 under the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

Since the accident The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) is calling for better regulation of the pearl diving industry. MUA assistant national secretary Ian Bray said it was "unclear why pearl diving companies were allowed to self-regulate when the rest of the commercial diving sector - deep sea offshore, scientific and onshore - have proper set rules on work standards and safety".

The Commission for Occupational Safety and Health initiated the formation of a working group to consider a Commission Code of Practice for pearl diving in August 2012.

However a spokeswoman for WorkSafe said the process was deferred in December 2012 because "the commission did not want to risk prejudicing any prosecution action that might be undertaken." The case will come before Broome Magistrates Court later this year.

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Contacts

matilda murley

mailto: matilda@conceptmarketing.com.au