

**Media Advisory:**

Māui Drone Project Launch Event

The Maritime Room

Princes Wharf, Auckland

**Embargoed: 26 February 2021, 1pm**

**KIWI COLLABORATION LAUNCHES INNOVATIVE TECH THAT COULD HELP SAVE THE  
WORLD'S MOST ENDANGERED DOLPHIN**

*An unique partnership is launching a way to watch Māui dolphins from the skies, catalysing efforts to bring them back from the edge of extinction.*

Only around 63 Māui dolphins remain, putting the world's most endangered dolphin on the brink of extinction. With little time to save this native taonga, WWF-New Zealand spearheaded a new collaboration between Government, scientists & technology experts - MĀUI63, and fishing companies - Moana New Zealand and Sanford Ltd. Using cutting-edge drone technology, the Māui Drone Project is working to help these dolphins thrive again in New Zealand.

The pilot project led by WWF and launching today, is using an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capable of finding and following Māui dolphins using artificial intelligence developed by MĀUI63, a non-profit organisation. The Māui Drone Project will further test and validate the technology, and tune it to be an effective tool to fill critical science gaps.

Marine mammal expert and MĀUI63 Co-Founder Dr Rochelle Constantine explains why this project is so essential, "The drone technology produced in this project will help to fill critical science gaps about Māui dolphin distribution and how they use their habitat."

"We currently don't have a robust understanding about Māui dolphin distribution particularly during winter months and at different times of the day and night. Of critical importance for conservation, we don't know how often dolphins use some areas that fishers are operating in, which is where there could be remaining risk of entanglement," says Dr Constantine.

Building this science could mean the difference between extinction and survival says, WWF-New Zealand CEO Livia Esterhazy, "With only around 63 Māui dolphins left, lack of data about where Māui dolphins swim and how they use their habitat is simply no longer acceptable.

"If we don't remove all the threats they face and protect the right places, and Māui dolphins become entangled in fishing gear, or are harmed by seismic surveying, we could lose them forever. Their population is that critical."

It's not just about building science, continues WWF, but also about finding new ways to take action, "We are out of time for status quo conservation approaches, so we are paving a new path. By breaking historical roadblocks between industry, environmental NGOs and Government, we can work together to create the best outcomes for Māui dolphins. The drone has been a catalyst for this collaboration."

MĀUI63 co-founder Tane van der Boon says the data from the project will be publicly available, “One of the unique aspects of this project is that the data will be made publicly accessible as a rich source of learning for curious scientific minds, innovators, conservationists, industry and policy makers.”

“For the first time, this technology has the potential to provide detailed information about Māui dolphin habitat-use, population, and even reproduction - by enabling identification of mother and calf pairs. As we are storing the camera footage in the cloud, it will be available to train Artificial Intelligence to identify many other types of marine species such as other dolphins, seabirds, sharks and whales. The science potential seems limitless to us.”

Fishing companies, Moana New Zealand and Sanford, are exploring how to translate the drone technology into action on fishing boats, to reduce the risk of Māui and Hector’s dolphins coming into contact with fishing nets. These two companies committed to their own Māui Dolphin Protection Plan five years ago and continue their quest for knowledge and regeneration of precious dolphin populations.

Steve Tarrant, Chief Executive Officer of Moana New Zealand, says supporting innovation that aligns with the company’s values is important. “Kaitiakitanga is at the forefront of our kaupapa, so when we heard about the Māui Drone Project we threw our support behind the research team,” says Mr Tarrant. “We all have a role to play in protecting these taonga species.”

Clement Chia, Chief Operating Officer at Sanford, says Sanford did not hesitate to support the project. “With Māui dolphins on the brink of extinction, we want to be certain we are doing all we can to keep them safe,” says Mr Chia. “We are keen to openly explore how data from the drone could help our vessels avoid the risk of encountering these dolphins.”

## **ENDS**

**To learn more about the Māui Drone Project, please attend our Launch event:**

### **The Maritime Room**

Princes Wharf, Auckland CBD

26 February 2021

12:30pm arrival, event begins 1pm.

### **PARKING INFO:**

[Downtown Car Park](#)

[Wilson Parking](#) on Princes Wharf

### **Further information:**

Māui dolphins live in a small stretch of ocean off the West Coast of Aotearoa’s North Island.

The Māui Drone Project will:

- develop a model and methodology for drone-based aerial surveys of Māui dolphins, looking at aspects such as population abundance and spatial distribution

- develop drone capability to predict dolphin movements, and track dolphins – enabling more accurate habitat models, and improved Government risk assessment science
- explore how the technology and science developed in this project can be used by Moana and Sanford to help ensure their fishing operations are not overlapping with Māui dolphin habitat.
- WWF-New Zealand is managing this year-long project, with funding and support from the Ministry for Primary Industries through its Sustainable Food & Fibre Futures Fund. The project partners include science and technology innovators MĀUI63, and fishing companies Moana New Zealand and Sanford Ltd.

The new Government measures under the [Threat Management Plan](#) significantly reduces risks to Māui dolphins. This new project will test and develop tools to provide new data about habitat use, where they swim in different times throughout the year, their population size, reproduction (via mother and calf counts), and feeding habits – all of which can be used to build on and improve threat management and conservation action.

Initial testing of the drone shows the AI technology can distinguish Māui and Hector’s dolphins (which look identical), from other species with over 90 percent accuracy. Flying high overhead with a 50x optical zoom camera, the UAV can find, follow, and film for up to six hours. This technology ensures dolphins remain undisturbed because the UAV flies at a high altitude (120m+).

#### **AVAILABLE ASSETS:**

video and broll available in [dropbox](#)

#### **Media contacts:**

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