

Concrete sector safe in future pandemic

Gavin Evans - Fri, 22 Oct 2021

Concrete producers and other building suppliers can operate safely during a future pandemic and the Government needs to shift away from arbitrary lockdowns as a way of managing those risks, MPs were told yesterday.

Manufacturers and building sector players were frustrated in August when the Government again shut down all firms barring food makers, energy providers and other 'essential' operations as part of their level-4 response to the latest covid outbreak.

Concrete NZ chief executive Rob Gaimster says the country's 260 production facilities are capable of operating using the safe distanced working protocols developed last year with WorkSafe and Construction Health and Safety New Zealand.

He told Parliament's Transport and Infrastructure Select Committee that batching plants may have only one or two operators and they are in turn separated from the delivery truck drivers arriving to collect loads.

The same is true of deliveries to building sites.

"It can work," Gaimster says. "There aren't that many people there."

Supply constraints

Gaimster was speaking as part of a presentation to the committee on recent supply chain issues for the construction sector.

Nick Collins, chief executive of Metals NZ and a member of the Manufacturing Alliance, told the committee that the responsiveness of officials has improved greatly from last year.

But he says the Government must gain a better understanding of the construction sector's critical supply chains. There also needs to be a shift from blanket shutdowns so that firms that can operate safely can make their own risk-based decisions to do so or not.

"Why are we allowing food manufacturing and cosmetics and all sorts of strange things to be manufactured under level 4 but we can't make building products?"

"The mere fact that we haven't had transmission in manufacturing businesses says that manufacturing understands this stuff and can manage risk."

Protocols work

Last year, wood processors and other manufacturers lobbied hard to be allowed to use the same safe-working practices approved for the food sector and associated activities like packaging plants and logistics providers.

They were rejected despite the hundreds of millions of dollars lost in domestic and export sales and in avoidable Government support payments for lost wages.

Talks to develop a better response post-last year's lockdown didn't go far. Officials indicated they didn't believe another level-4 lockdown would be activated, Collins told the committee.

This year, officials allowed Golden Bay Cement, the country's sole cement maker, to keep operating pending the site being formally added to a list of exempt firms that also includes New Zealand Steel, methanol-maker Methanex and the Tiwai Point aluminium smelter.

Only when the rest of the country went down to level-3 in September did the Government relent and quickly allow some Auckland cladding and insulation makers to resume operations as building supplies around the country dwindled and construction work ground to a halt.

Impacts

Collins says even the industry had failed to appreciate some of the impacts of the split alert levels around the country and the regional boundaries they created.

He and Gaimster both cited steel reinforcing mesh as an example. While NZ Steel was making billet, the smaller Auckland manufacturers who then turn that into mesh remained shut.

"The floor of a house is the first thing that goes down. If the floor can't go down, nothing else can happen," Gaimster says.

Mesh supplies are back to normal but "it just shows what happens when we go into a lockdown."

While officials have proven more flexible and active in their recent responses, Collins says a broader review of the pandemic approach is needed.



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Factfile information

Organisation [Golden Bay Cement](#)

“What’s missing is we’re not doing risk planning around these things happening again.

“If we plan, we won’t get the plan 100 per cent right, but we will have sorted out the majority of the issues.”

Master Builders Association chief executive David Kelly says the industry cannot afford another lockdown and ways must be found to keep sector supply chains operating during any future events.

For longer term resilience, he says the country probably also needs to reduce its reliance on Auckland as the manufacturing centre of the bulk of its building materials.