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# Hard task to stay afloat

## Tourism operators welcome new packages but

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ARUN SINGH MANN  
AND JEREMY PIERCE

A GRATEFUL Cairns tourism operator who labelled JobKeeper "an absolute lifeline" is preparing for life without the subsidy she believes should be maintained through a more targeted approach.

Ocean Free and Ocean Freedom owner-operator Taryn Agius said her long-term business has been running without profits and in survival mode for about a year — a period she did not initially anticipate.

With JobKeeper set to stop at the end of the month, Ms Agius said she'd hoped it would continue after a year of "changing goalposts" that hadn't really allowed her and husband Perry Jones's business to return to full swing.

"We're grateful for every lifeline we're given — all the relief from the port authority and GBRMPA (waiving) fees and rent — it has all collectively helped us survive but assistance in wages has meant we have been able to at least maintain a skilled core staff and operations," she said.

"So from the start of the COVID crisis, we initially lost

the international market, then we had interstate border closures, followed by intrastate and finally total lockdown. Every time we marketed to get the right demographic, the parameters were shut down on us."

Ms Agius said she believed Cairns could return as a popular international destination, but felt there was still about a year before that happened.

She said she welcomed the federal government's recent \$1.2bn support package announcement, but hoped it would consider a wage subsidy extension due to ongoing border changes.

"Aviation absolutely has to survive, so we're happy that aviation has been given a leg-up, because Cairns is heavily reliant on it," she said.

"The goalposts keep changing but our goal at the moment is to be operating three days a week and keeping our crew happy and giving them enough work. We haven't made any money, but our aim is to try and survive and keep the core crew operating."

"I think there could be a very targeted wage assistance for those people who are doing the right thing with it."

The looming end of the



JobKeeper initiative on March 28 has many in tourism circles fearing an industry Armageddon amid predictions up to 25,000 Queenslanders in the sector alone could lose their jobs.

An owner of a Cairns adventure company which has already lost access to the JobKeeper subsidy has a dire

warning for the tourism industry when the scheme is terminated next week.

Roderic Rees, whose Cairns Adventure Group runs Foaming Fury and Raging Thunder rafting operations at Barron Gorge, has already felt the impact of losing JobKeeper after changed criteria made his workers ineligible at the

beginning of the year. With his workforce virtually halved, he had a blunt warning for others in the industry fearful of what might happen once JobKeeper winds up.

"There's a cliff face coming, make no mistake about it," he said. "Get ready to start haemorrhaging money."

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