

“The Irish regulatory system for salmon farming is a shambles”

“The Irish regulatory system for salmon farming is a shambles and whatever shape it has, has been continuously amended over the years to suit the interests of certain actors within the sector”, Niall Greene, chair of its Board told the Annual General Meeting of Salmon Watch Ireland at the Limerick Strand Hotel on Saturday 30 January 2010.

The following is the full text of Niall Greene’s address:

“Overall 2009 was not a good year for salmon stocks with a further apparently steep reduction in the number of fish returning to the coast. There were some exceptions but by and large most rivers reported very poor spawning numbers and this will have a knock on effect in future years. The immediate result is a reduction in catch quotas for 2010 which will be a disappointment to anglers and to commercial fishermen alike but in the recreational sector will hopefully result in a heightened emphasis on catch and release.

“Clearly salmon are facing major new challenges at sea. While the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation’s SALSEA programme, in which the Irish Marine Institute has played a prominent part in both its conception and execution, will cast some light on the factors at work here, there may be very little that can be done to directly influence those causing damage. Indirectly, however, it is clear that we will have to place even greater emphasis than heretofore on maximising the productive capacity of our rivers and the number of smolts returning to sea. We now have numerous examples throughout the North Atlantic area of how measures to enhance the quality of spawning and rearing habitats and protection measures can greatly boost production at relatively low cost.

“Within Salmon Watch Ireland our major emphasis in 2009 has been on the continuation of our campaign for the better regulation of salmon farms. The damage which sea lice concentrations associated with inappropriately sited and poorly managed farms does to migrating salmon and sea trout smolts is now incontrovertible. In Norway some effort has been made to restrict the siting of farms near salmonid rivers but in Ireland (and

Scotland) the problem is being effectively ignored by the regulatory authorities. In Western Canada there are also sea lice problems associated with Pacific salmon and the Canadian Prime Minister has initiated an enquiry into the issue. Salmon Watch is contact will the international efforts to bring order to this sector through the Pure Salmon network.

“In Ireland much is made of protocols and data collection from the farms but in reality nothing happens and the published data shows that virtually the entire salmon farming sector operates outside the parameters established in consultation with the salmon farming industry – and even those are at levels which are far too high to support a sustainable relationship between wild and farmed fish.

“In 2009 Salmon Watch lodged a formal complaint with the European Commission about the manner in which Ireland is managing this industry and its failure to have proper regard to the Habitats Directive in that process. Later in the year we made a further, supplementary submission. The Directorate General for the Environment has recently confirmed to us that this complaint is now being handled in an expedited process with the Irish government. This may seem to be rather slow progress but our complaint is only one item in a much wider assessment of how Ireland is managing all aspects of its aquaculture sector within the requirements of the Habitats Directive. It is worth recalling here that it was the Habitats Directive and the need to comply with its terms which eventually brought about the demise of drift netting.

“In truth, the Irish regulatory system for salmon farming is a shambles and whatever shape it has, has been continuously amended over the years to suit the interests of certain actors within the sector. The regulatory resources devoted to it are totally inadequate for the realisation of its potential within a sustainable framework. By no means all of the participants in the sector are cowboys but it does seem to have more than its fair share of operators who have absolutely no regard for the regulations (however inadequate) within which they are supposed to operate. And no one in the State sector is holding them to account.

“Simon Ashe, acting for both the Ballinahinch Fishery Cooperative and Salmon Watch Ireland has done trojan work in uncovering how the salmon farming industry operates. His main channels have been Freedom of Information Act requests and Parliamentary Questions, tabled mainly by Deputy Ruairi Quinn. These activities have been slowly bringing positive results in Bergthraboy Bay which hopefully, in conjunction with our efforts on the Habitats Directive front, will bring results also for hard pressed rivers all along the West coast.

“Another one of our priorities has been on cormorants. In conjunction with the European Landowners Organisation and many, many others, Charles Keane has been successful in getting the attention of the European Parliament on the problems caused for fisheries generally throughout Europe by what appear to be exploding populations of cormorants. On the domestic front Charles has had discussions with the National Parks and Wild Life Service, the Central Fisheries Board and Bird Watch Ireland about developing a national policy on the question, the European Commission having made it clear that they do not see any possibility of having a pan- European approach to cormorants.

“Last season was our third in Ireland without licenced drift nets in operation. There are anecdotes about the occasional transgression around the coast but the regional fisheries boards and their staffs have done a very fine job in ensuring compliance with the ban. That does not mean that there have not been hiccups and people will be aware that, in conjunction with the Kerry Anglers Federation, Salmon Watch took a High Court case to prevent the South Western Regional Fisheries Board from licensing mixed stock fishing in Castlemaine Harbour. Legislative action brought an end to that crazy initiative but there is no doubt but that the High Court action (which resulted in a moot outcome because of the new legislation) was an important factor in overturning the SWFRB plan.

“More recently we have had a further proposal from the SWFRB for mixed stock fishing in Castlemaine. In addition, there have been noises from Pat the Cope Gallagher MEP and Joe McHugh TD, both in Donegal, in support of a campaign by former driftnets men

for a limited restoration of salmon fishing from the islands. While one can certainly have sympathy with the former driftnetters in their efforts to augment in their livelihoods, it borders on unbelievable that two senior public representatives would contribute to the creation of expectations that can never be realised and of further disappointment for people on the islands.

“Salmon Watch continues to take an active part in the work of the influential NGO group at the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) in conjunction with the other Irish observers, especially FISSTA and NARA. In 2009, Bob Wemyss represented the organisation at the meeting in Norway where the core theme was fisheries management. This is an area in which Ireland, following the end of mixed stock fishing and the adopting of single stock management, is now an example of best practice in the North Atlantic area. In 2010, however, the theme will be aquaculture where Ireland will be at or close to the bottom of the league and where the Government will be under considerable pressure in its submission to describe the current situation and to say what it is going to do about it. The Irish and Scots NGOs (who are cooperating closely) will be leading the charge on this issue at NASCO.

“This year if all goes to plan will see the enactment of the Inland Fisheries Bill and the establishment of a centralised management system for our inland fisheries under Inland Fisheries Ireland. This development has been strongly supported by salmon interests who could see that seven semi-autonomous regional bodies around the coast was not an appropriate structure for managing migratory fish. That is not to say that there was not a great deal to be admired in the work of the regional boards and especially among those that fostered a cooperative working relationship with the “private sector”, principally angling associations and fishery owners. In the regional boards, and in the soon to be in the unified structure, Ireland has a cadre of able, professional and committed people with whom we look forward to continuing to work.

“Salmon Watch is a relatively small organisation with limited resources and we cannot pretend to be on top of all of the issues influencing the future of the Irish salmon. But by

identifying key issues, such as salmon farming, and focussing attention on them we can make a difference. We will continue to do so.