

## Fish stocks

THE ILLEGAL netting and commercial sale of wild salmon in the southwest of the country has amounted to a long-running scandal. Because of that, a decision by Minister of State Conor Lenihan to open a draft net fishery for this endangered species in the Castlemaine area of Co Kerry has all the hallmarks of a badly considered political “stroke”. Mr Lenihan dressed his decision up as scientific management and set a catch limit of 800 salmon for this year.

The shabby nature of the exercise is clear from the fact that this is a mixed-stock fishery and the allocation of the catch between commercial fishermen had not been agreed. Salmon stocks in two of the five rivers flowing into the bay are so low they have been closed to all fishing. The other three have healthy returns. The South Western Regional Fisheries Board, which opposed a ban on drift-netting for salmon in the teeth of scientific advice some years ago, supported the decision.

In recent weeks, Fianna Fáil backbenchers have complained about the “over-regulation” of commercial fishermen and small farmers by Government. There is a danger that, in an attempt to regain political support, Ministers may ignore long-term considerations such as sustainability and conservation. Of particular concern in that regard is a widespread belief that Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries Brendan Smith is preparing to reopen a commercial sea bass fishery.

This valuable inshore species was driven to near-extinction by commercial activity two decades ago and the Government was forced to impose a total ban on trawler catches. Rod and line angling, with strict limits on size and catch numbers, continued. Since then, there has been a gradual recovery of stocks. But because growth rates are so slow – a five kilo fish may be 18 years old and Ireland is at the northern limit of its range – the fishery remains extremely vulnerable.

In the south of the country, commercial interests have lobbied for a reopening of the fishery for some years. As a result, the Marine Institute was asked to provide scientific advice. Two years ago, it concluded that total available stocks were likely to be less than 100 tonnes and that there was “no prospect of a sustainable commercial fishery for bass”. In view of this information, it would be a disgrace if Mr Smith surrendered to political pressure and reopened the fishery to trawlers by permitting bass to be taken as a by-catch. Such action would be equivalent to the “scientific management” of wild salmon introduced by Mr Lenihan in Co Kerry.