

SALMON WATCH IRELAND

Salmon Watch Ireland slams ministerial statement on salmon farms and sea lice.

(5 January 2011) – The following statement was issued today by the Board of Salmon Watch Ireland:

“On 22 December last the Minister of State, at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF), Mr Sean Connick TD, issued a statement with the headline ‘Minister Connick welcomes improvement in sea lice management on salmon farms’. Minister Connick has responsibility for the licencing and regulation of salmon farms within DAFF. The occasion of his statement was the publication by DAFF of its annual report on the incidence of sea lice in salmon farms and on progress on the implementation of DAFF’s ‘Strategy for improved pest control on Irish salmon farms’, published in May 2008.

The point at issue between the Minister and Salmon Watch Ireland, and others concerned with the protection of wild salmon and sea trout, is the harm being done to wild salmonids by inadequately regulated salmon farming. The environmental impact of salmon farms is considerable and, in Ireland, virtually uncontrolled with the sea lice concentrations generated by farms having a lethal impact on juvenile salmon and sea trout migrating to feeding grounds in the sea in late spring each year. These impacts have been well researched in all major Atlantic salmon farming countries (Norway, Scotland, Ireland and Canada), including within studies funded by the EU Commission.

The reality is that the regulation of the salmon farming industry in Ireland is a shambles at virtually every level and does no credit to any of the political, administrative and technical public servants responsible for designing and implementing an effective regime for its management. Until there is a serious and honest effort to address all of the issues associated with the industry then its potential for orderly development (which has been the subject of numerous reports over the past twenty years) will never be realized and serious and unnecessary damage will continue to be inflicted on wild salmonid stocks.

In fact, there is little for the Minister to welcome in the DAFF report and rather than commending its authors he would have been well advised to have demanded answers to some serious questions about progress in eliminating the negative environmental impacts of salmon farms. There is, for instance, no comment anywhere in the Minister’s statement or in the report to the fact that the Irish authorities are being vigorously pursued by the EU Commission to bring the management of salmon farms into conformity with EU Habitats Directive protections for wild salmon, on foot of a complaint lodged with the Commission by Salmon Watch Ireland in 2009.

What is clear from the report is that the impact of sea lice infestation on the salmon being farmed is the primary driving force for action by DAFF and the industry and that the now well researched and understood impact on migrating wild salmonid juveniles is very much a matter of secondary concern. Among the recommendations made in the report is one that ‘the Monitoring Regime and Pest Control Strategy be further

developed to accommodate the growing trend towards organic farming'. What this actually means is that the chemical treatment of sea lice should be curtailed so as to maintain the organic status of certain farms rather than being driven by recorded sea lice levels and the needs of the wild stock. This reflects a stance of DAFF going back at least as far as the 2008 report.

The bias in favour of the salmon farming industry is also evident from another recommendation in the report that 'the requirement to carry out mandatory treatments would be waived....on a case by case basis' where the treatment of large fish and/or fish due for imminent harvest is involved. In fact, the report records that such a waiver process, for which there is no formal provision in the current regime, is already being implemented: the report claims that in respect of Kilkieran Bay early harvesting of fish was carried out in 2010 as a result of two successive treatments for sea lice not having reduced the levels to the required limits. The sites in Kilkieran Bay had, in fact, been treated seven times before harvesting took place and this was done in any event at the same time of year has had historically been the case for harvesting at these sites.

In his statement the Minister professes himself to be heartened by 'a sustained reduction in the level of egg-bearing lice on farms in spring time'. If he believes that then he must not have read the report itself which records that of the inspections carried out on farms in the Galway/Mayo area during the critical spring period in 2010 (when junior salmon and sea trout are migrating to sea) it was found that in 61% of cases sea lice levels exceeded those that trigger a requirement for treatment and over the year as a whole 53% of inspections detected excessive sea lice levels. To the extent that there was an overall, national reduction in average sea lice levels (a fairly meaningless metric given that the impacts are local) it can in the main be traced to a reduction of production and, therefore, of sea infestations in Kilkieran Bay which has had a particularly bad record over many years.

It is noteworthy that the membership of the National Implementation Group, composed of public servants and private sector representatives, is confined to those concerned with the production of farmed salmon. There are no members drawn from those in either the state or private sectors who have a role in wild salmonid protection and development. Consequently, neither the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources nor Inland Fisheries Ireland, which have responsibility for inland fisheries, have any say in either the formulation or evaluation of measures to combat sea lice or mitigate other negative environmental impacts of the salmon farming industry. The whole history of the past 30 years of salmon farming regulation in Ireland suggests that this exclusion is not an accident."

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NOTE FOR EDITORS: Salmon Watch Ireland is a membership organization concerned with the conservation of the Atlantic Salmon and its restoration to abundance in Ireland. Its predecessor organization, Stop Salmon Drift Nets Now, led the campaign for the abolition of fishing for salmon off the Irish coast, an objective which was achieved in 2007. In 2009 Salmon Watch Ireland lodged a complaint with the EU Commission about Ireland's failure to abide by the requirements of the EU Habitats Directive in the regulation of salmon farming in Ireland and this is currently being pursued by the Commission with the Irish Government.