

SALMON WATCH IRELAND

Remarks by Niall Greene, Chair of Salmon Watch Ireland to the Annual General Meeting of the company held at the Silver Springs Hotel, Cork on Saturday, 21 May 2011.

2011 is a critical year for salmon conservation as it is the first in which we should see a multiplier effect resulting from the retiring of drift nets in 2007 – the year in which we should see a significant return of the progeny of the additional fish that survived to spawn in 2007. It is far too early to draw conclusions but I think it is fair to say that most of us are somewhat bewildered by the uneven effects we have seen to date in the four years in which we have had no legal fishing for salmon at sea. There seems little doubt, however, that a massive effort will continue to be required by all in the state and private sectors to increase the natural capacity of our rivers to achieve the highest possible sustainable levels of smolt production.

Regrettably, in too many of our salmonid rivers there may seem to many to be little point in increasing smolt production if the migrating fish are to be slaughtered by clouds of sea lice generated by poorly sited and even more poorly managed salmon farms in our inshore areas. During 2010 and throughout this year Salmon Watch Ireland has persisted with its campaign in this area, concentrating in particular on our complaint to the European Commission on the failure of Ireland to respect Art 6 of the Habitats Directive in the regulation of salmon farming activity.

Through the use of the Freedom of Information Act we have established that the Department of Agriculture failed to relay to the Commission the views of the Department of Natural Resources and of Inland Fisheries Ireland on the issue of salmon farms when they were responding to the Commission about our complaint. We short circuited the process by sending the Commission the papers which we had obtained. Earlier this year, we have had the almost unprecedented action of Inland Fisheries Ireland feeling obliged to complain in a public statement about the failure of the Department of Agriculture to involve it in the regulation of an industry which has such a deleterious impact on the wild stocks for which IFI have statutory responsibility.

We have said many times and in many places that the siting, management and regulation regime for salmon farms in Ireland is a total shambles. Unless he sorts it out in full and generous conformity with Ireland's national and international obligations then the new Minister for Agriculture, Simon Coveney, will not realise the ambition he announced on a recent Frontline programme to grow Irish salmon farming in line with Scotland. In fact, if he follows the Scottish model he will be adopting an exemplar that may be even worse than Ireland in its impact on wild stocks.

Salmon Watch has appealed, as has the Waterville Fishery Development Group, against the amendment of the Deenish Island salmon farm licence and we expect the Aquaculture Licensing Appeals Board to hear these appeals shortly. Again there was a blatant failure by the Department of Agriculture to follow the processes laid down in the Habitats Directive.

Inland Fisheries Ireland came into existence in 2010 and the new management team seems to be well established and operating effectively around the country. To date, I think we have all seen a degree of openness and willingness to engage that, while available in some areas, was

not universal throughout the organisations which IFI has replaced. We look forward to the formalisation of the consultative forum, the publication of the IFI strategic plan and their policies on key species, especially salmon.

IFI like all state bodies is already greatly constrained in its operations by the reductions in public expenditure. This is not going to get better during this decade. Consequently, if IFI are to meet their priority obligations to conserve and protect species they are going to have to engage in a more collaborative way with the private sector – with clubs and associations, private owners, national federations and organisations like ours – if they are to get the best bang for their very scarce bucks. In many fields of activity IFI will have to become more of an energiser and facilitator of activity rather than a doer of everything if they are to optimise the value of the very great resources of research and management which lie within the organisation.

The continuation of commercial fishing for salmon in some estuaries remains a matter of contention for many anglers. In Salmon Watch Ireland we have to date taken the view that so long this activity is carried out within the total exploitable catch limits set by the Standing Scientific Committee and does not involve the danger of exploiting stocks that are under stress then it is tolerable. The publication by the Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources of legislation that would, subject to a 30 day consultation period, permit the resumption of draft netting in parts of Castlemaine Harbour is a development that we will have to assess carefully, particularly as many feel that it could be a precursor for similar developments elsewhere. IFI have published all of the data and analysis behind the decision of the Minister on their website. This is a very welcome development and one which should assist those who wish to make submissions to the Minister. Salmon Watch encourages all those with an interest in the fisheries that make up the Castlemaine complex to do so within the 30 day time limit and to test the Minister's declared intention to give careful consideration to them.

Throughout the year Salmon Watch Ireland has continued its work on the development of a comprehensive statement on salmon conservation policy. The initial phase of collating the up to date situation on stocks and the factors impinging on them is virtually complete and we have to date had two Board meetings to discuss the policy ramifications arising from the background data. We hope to be in a position to publish a comprehensive draft document by the end of the summer and to consult widely with interested parties and organisations on its content before arriving at a final document around the end of the year.

The Board has decided not to attend the 2011 NASCO conference which will be held in Greenland, notwithstanding the fact that it will be considering matters to do with the impact of aquaculture on wild stocks. This decision is in part driven by the very high cost of the Greenland expedition and also by the fact that while NASCO is a very important networking opportunity, the lack of political will by the governmental delegations to really take on the issues affecting salmon in a purposeful way makes it a pretty ineffectual way of dealing with even major issues. It is worth remembering that despite many years of banging on about drift netting at NASCO by Irish observers such as FISSTA, NARA and Salmon Watch it was actually action through the European Commission that brought about the demise of mixed stock fishing. We will, of course, remain engaged with NASCO and will be represented at the SALSEA conference in La Rochelle in October, but we will be careful about the extent to which we devote scarce resources to it.