

Submission to Independent Review of Aquaculture Licensing

By

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Background

Ireland has the potential to produce greater quantities of high quality, environmentally sustainable, aquaculture products.

The poor legislative structure and lack of true government (political and civil) has prevented expansion and in most cases even reduced the industry.

The government and its Officers have prevented the renewal of existing and the issuing of new licences essentially for the last 20 years. Its behaviour and attitude to aquaculture is at odds to the way in which, for example, the Department of Agriculture interacts with this industry it regulates and supports.

In contrast, during that time, all other major aquaculture producing nations have seen significant increases in output – even as the regulatory and environmental frameworks have been strengthened. In virtually all cases the government and industry have worked together to ensure that expansion is controlled and sustainable.

Norway in 1996 produced less than 300,000t of salmon, in 2016 it produced 1.25 million tonnes. Chile, less than 100,000t in '96 and now 400,000t. North America, 50,000t in '96 and now nearly 150,000t. UK, 70,000t in '96 and now 170,000t.

Ireland produced about 15,000t of salmon in 1996 and in 2016 it produced 14,000t.

The Faroe Islands in 2006 produced 18,500t and by 2016 it is producing over 70,000t. It is a small archipelago of islands in the North Atlantic with a land mass of 1,400 sq km, Ireland is 70,000 sq km.

It is important to state that these countries have stringent license and environmental legislation with thorough monitoring and enforcement. Their analysis has found that aquaculture is a significant contributor to the local community, local and national economy and is in balance with the environment.

So, why is Ireland so different?

Over the last 20 years the Irish state and many of its departments and agencies have not, at best, backed the industry and, at worst, have actively undermined and thwarted it. Rural coastal communities have suffered as a result of this with the loss of substantial all year round employment, while the economy has suffered due to the loss of significant export potential.

This has been achieved by the government department responsible for supporting, developing and regulating the industry acting as a barrier to growth by preventing the issuing of license renewals and new licences, all the while disregarding the significant scientific evidence that demonstrates that aquaculture is sustainable. Evidence that has been accepted by all other EU and EEA countries.

In most cases the relevant governments have established that Aquaculture is a significant and critical area in which a new economic sector can develop.

In the case of Norway, which has a huge fishing industry, the government actively pursued a proactive aquaculture policy to ensure that its overall fisheries production would become its main industry once oil began to reduce.

It did this by investing in all aspects of production and environmental research so that its then fledgling industry could develop in line with local community needs and ensure that the industry could overcome issues that arise for any developing industry. It has allowed, in the case of salmon production, for sites to become economically viable by producing to a sites allocated maximum standing biomass, reviewed on environmental grounds.

The Norwegian government bodies with responsibility for monitoring and regulating the industry have developed a strong relationship that is transparent to all stakeholders and ensures that the industry is supported in challenges that it faces while ensuring that the environment and local community is not negatively impacted by the aquaculture operation.

Ireland is under significant economic pressure, not least due to Brexit, but also with the threat posed by possible changes in the corporate tax structures of other countries like the USA. Ireland has an extensive freshwater and seawater resource. It needs to realise that supporting an industry that has been shown to be sustainable in many North Atlantic coastal communities will have significant local and national benefits.

To achieve this it must realise that a licence to produce has to be an asset to the licence holder, it must give security of tenure so that investors can be sure that they can continue to operate for a significant time in order to produce a return on investment, especially if it involves risks at sea.

A factory has a licence to operate for as long as it continues to operate with the law and regulation. Accepting that aquaculture utilises a state resource, why should it not get a licence to operate for as long as it does so within the regulations.

What need to be done.

1. It is essential that the government champions the development of the industry and actively encourages local community to participate in discussions concerning the potential for development in their locality.
2. The government must develop a National Strategy on Aquaculture that can be used as the map for local discussion. Based on peer reviewed scientific economic and environmental evidence, this should lay out how aquaculture can be established in communities.

3. Aquaculture licences must be for a long duration. Production cycles are multi year, often 3 to 5 years. A licence should span at least 6 cycles and typically last 18 to 30 years. This is essential to ensure that the holder has security of tenure and that the licence is viewed as an asset (for as long as the licence conditions are adhered to).
4. Each licence should have the possibility of having the produced volume increased, during the life of the licence, once the environmental conditions are met.
5. Environmental conditions must be clear, species specific and based upon sound scientific fact. Environmental reviews should be in-line with relevant species production cycles.
6. Licence applications should a standard and cost relative to the size of the proposed enterprise. Generic, scientifically accepted, common information should be accepted in EIS reports to reduce cost.
7. Licence decisions should be delivered within 6 months of receipt of an application that meets the agreed standard.
8. All aspects related to a licence application should be dealt with by a single government entity. This entity must be staffed with personnel that fully understand and support the National Strategy on Aquaculture (see point 2)
9. Licence Appeals must be dealt with by a properly resourced and balanced appeals board.
10. Appeals must be determined within a statutory 6 months.
11. The government must establish and support a mechanism for ongoing research and development of existing and emerging production and environmental issues to ensure the continuing sustainable development of the industry.
12. Licence conditions must reflect the benefit of economy of scale. In particular for seawater salmon farming, a greater cross community benefit is achieved by having a smaller number of larger sites based on maximum standing biomass. These sites require broader service support and in Norway have led to the development of a significant service industry.