

To: Independent Review of Aquaculture Licensing  
C/O Deirdre Morgan – Secretary to the Independent Review Group  
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine  
National Seafood Centre  
Clonakilty, Co. Cork  
P85 TX47

9<sup>th</sup> February 2017

A chairde

I am writing to make a formal a submission/observation with regard to the Independent Review of Aquaculture Licensing. While I am concerned with the whole aquaculture licensing process, my observations mostly relate to my local area in Donegal.

With regard to delivering the licence determinations in a “timely manner” and to identify shortcomings including “bottlenecks” – there is an assumption there by the Department of Agriculture, Marine and Food, that the problem is that aquaculture licenses are not getting approval quick enough. The review committee should take note that there is widespread opposition to aquaculture in the country, especially to oyster farms and farmed salmon units. There is widespread fear in coastal communities about the impact of aquaculture on the social, economic and environmental aspects of our world. Bottlenecks, as far as coastal communities are concerned, refer to the choking bottlenecks of our beaches and bays with aquaculture. The immediate problem therefore is that we have DAFM and government agencies all promoting aquaculture but they are also policing the applications for aquaculture, developer and producer – an obvious conflict of interest - that needs to be addressed. There needs to input, in the various stages from selecting an area for aquaculture application to the final determination, from environmental agencies like National Parks & Wildlife Services, An Taisce, Bird Watch Ireland. All these agencies have suffered cuts in recent years when their expertise could be used in the aquaculture licensing process. There needs to be a proper spatial coastal planning management plan, and proper regard to legislation. There also needs to be a plan for regular reviews, monitoring, inspection of sites and licenses. There should be a plan to restore areas that were given permission for aquaculture contrary to EU and national law, and areas where a proper assessment was not carried out.

The reason there may have been delays in licensing is because Ireland has such a poor environmental record and has been fined or threatened with fines by the EU already for not carrying out proper environment assessments with regard to aquaculture. The government complains about “complex environmental requirements” holding back the industry. It lists as a “threat” “spatial restrictions on aquaculture activities to protect Natura 2000 designated species and habitats”. Unbelievably the legislation for aquaculture licensing was even changed when Simon Coveney was Minister of Agriculture, following lobbying by the aquaculture industry to speed things up – and should never have been changed, and that should be review again. The government should be looking at the pros and cons of aquaculture from

the perspectives of sustainability and biodiversity – which is what the government purports to support, but actually is failing to address these issues in a meaningful way. There are many government backed reports about sustainable environments – but they appear to be just rhetoric. It's such sheer arrogance to sign off on so many aquaculture applications with "copy and paste" phrases like, "not likely to have any significant environmental impact" when the environmental impact is so huge, and so obvious.

There is now widespread opinion that our government, the DAFM, and also the IFA want to push to get as much aquaculture, as many oyster farms in the country as possible. There are large EU grants available – it doesn't make it right. We should take a timely step back and look at the implications for running with this. It doesn't make sense to wilfully ruin and destroy forever Ireland's beautiful coastline. Every month there is yet another licence application in – where another community's wonderful beach is under threat, and everyone from the very young to the elderly are so upset and people have to spend time trying to put in submissions (if the deadline has not already passed), trying to become experts in procedures in a few days. It all creates such conflicts in coastal communities. We in rural coastal communities really do want a sustainable future – we want tourism and fishing and some commercial activity. We do not want aquaculture. We do not want jobs at any cost.

Aquaculture is something that is being lauded as solving the world's future food problem – it will not, it will destroy it. It is a dangerous approach to be taken by the DAFM. There seems a plethora of reports regarding aquaculture and food production, littered with words like "sustainable" and "biodiversity" – but compliance and integrity around the actual licensing of aquaculture is lacking.

The review should look at the "sustainability" of aquaculture – how can an industry be "sustainable" if it relies on grants, if it has to stop producing frequently because of ever increasing bouts of disease and harmful algae blooms and mass mortality, if it is spreading disease, if it fails to adequately liaise with the public.

There needs to be good coastal spatial planning procedures in place to allow proper aquaculture licensing. These should in the very first instance look at all coastal areas of Ireland and assess any areas that should not have aquaculture by looking at potential adverse environmental effects and negative impacts to other coastal users – proper screening by coastal spatial planning.

Aquaculture should not be allowed in areas designated as SACs, Natura 2000 and proposed National Heritage areas, SPAs – neither should it be allowed in areas adjacent to, since sea life don't know the boundaries, they should be protected. Away from SACs etc there are many areas where aquaculture would be inappropriate. We need to follow an approach of conserving ecosystems and to minimise conflict with the environment and also to minimise conflict with coastal residents and users. We need spatial planning for our coasts, rather than this haphazard free for all at present.

In licensing we should first identify all users of the coastal area. An environmental assessment for all sites needs to be the norm. Aquaculture should not be allowed in areas with tourist facilities, residential housing, swimming beaches, harbours and piers, diving areas, etc, neither should they be allowed in areas of scenic beauty – which is our major asset.

Disregard of environmental law and a disregard to coastal users, cheap licenses, easy to get, has led to a rise in the number of applications, particularly from French businesses (and indirectly from China). If you can easily get a licence for around 100 euros, and have the potential to sell it on for thousands of euros, it is very tempting – and this is what is happening in our coastal communities. The licence applicant should be held accountable. If the licence is to be sold on, there should be more rules in place to screen potential buyer. There should be regular reviews and monitoring.

Licenses are being granted without proper regard to the suitability of the sites, and without due regard to the cumulative effects of all these farms, without due regard to who will ultimately benefit from this “food” production.

There should be an environmental management plan for each area with protection for the habitats and species, permanent monitoring and adaptive steps with regard to preserving ecosystems and ensure bio-security. There should be controls on areas for aquaculture licences to ensure social and environment considerations are to the fore. It should not be left to one Minister to make the final decision on granting a licence, but should be a panel with representatives from National Parks and Wildlife Service and An Taisce. At present the Minister, who is promoting aquaculture, is taking advice from other government bodies that are also promoting aquaculture – so it leaves us in a very vulnerable place.

Due regard should be given to those sites which were given licenses to farm in sensitive areas, with a view to restoration of the area. How many licenses were granted without proper environmental assessments, how many were granted when the government was in breach of EU law? It would be interesting to find what percentage of licenses applied for have been refused by the DAFM. Economical losses to coastal users, environmental degradation and a reduced quality of life to residents are all consequences of poor aquaculture planning.

High density of salmon and oyster farms and the risk of disease from these is a catastrophe for our environment. The government is allowing and facilitating these bad decisions. Basically at the moment anyone can for eg, see a lovely picture put up on social media of perhaps horse riders going across a beach – and be alerted to the fact that there seems to be a nice wide flat strand – I’ll apply for an oyster farm there. These precious areas should have our highest protection, but instead aquaculture licensing wants to make it easier to come into these precious areas.

Salmon farming has resulted in spread of infection and disease and devastation of the wild salmon and caused environment damage. There is a disregard by the government of all the research and literature about the impact of farmed salmon on wild salmon and sea trout, and the deliberate pollution of our seas with farmed salmon, a disregard of literature telling the negative consequences of allowing alien invasive species in the shellfish sector, which is alarming. Even more alarming is that these farmed shellfish and fish are being promoted by state agencies like Failte Ireland and BIM, but worse still, promoted as being natural and Irish and green – when it is none of those things. We will lose any credibility we have and any green and eco-friendly image we have if we continue to promote invasive alien species as natural and Irish. Oyster tourism trails promoting Pacific Oysters don't cut it – because they're not natural, not Irish, and are harmful to Ireland. We should be promoting our own lovely native flat oyster, “smaller and greener” as Food Wise 2025 states – instead we are promoting its extinction by allowing Pacific Oysters to be farmed here. Salmon used to be a delicacy in Ireland; we would look forward to the months of May and June in particular when we would get the first salmon of the year. Now our lovely salmon is lost, and the farmed salmon is the most derided food ever. We cannot pull the cotton wool over eyes to make believe that “organic” farmed salmon is good – it may be using some organic feed – but it is still farmed salmon with all the same problems. Sea lice infestation in salmon farming in Ireland is a major problem. BIM's “Taste the Atlantic” and Bord Bia's “Origin Green” needs to be revised to see what it really means to be Irish, green and sustainable – and only include the many genuine food products. There are claims that can easily be refuted in these marketing campaigns and we will lose credibility in food production if continue to mislead consumers.

The aquaculture boom in Ireland reminds me of the mistakes that were made with the building boom during the Celtic Tiger years – planning procedures were not properly adhered to, greed and disregard for social and environmental impacts was the norm - we were left with ghost estates and poorly constructed cheap buildings like blocks of apartments which are a fire hazard. Governments did not take responsibility to stop the madness –and the public was left to pick up the pieces and foot the bill.

Food Wise 2025 and the National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture Development stress that the way forward is all about sustainable food production and protection of the environment and biodiversity. The demand is for safe and nutritious food. Food Wise 2025 want “smaller and greener ways” to “deliver sustainable growth”, the NSPSAD want us to “think green”. In addition the Food Wise 2025 Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report talks about “improving environmental sustainability”. It says that they link with other government plans, like the “National Biodiversity Plan”, “Tourism Ireland Corporate Plan”, “Environmental Protection Agency SoE 2016”. All these reports, including the 2 to be considered here, all point to the importance of biodiversity and protection of the environment. It also says we all have a role to play in protecting and improving our environment.

Instead of running along with aquaculture like headless chickens from the Celtic Tiger – take a step back; take a look at all the research – look at what has happened around the world as the spread of disease and pollution is growing with intensive oyster and salmon farms. Look at what has just happened in Tasmania with the devastation of their oyster industry from the Pacific Oyster Mortality Syndrome POMS – (oyster herpes virus), a disease that has already wiped out oyster farms in France, New Zealand and elsewhere. In addition to POMS, another deadly bacterium, *Vibrio Aesturianus*, is also affecting oysters, with sudden death of adult oysters. Why are so many French oyster businesses relocating to Ireland? – because they have already been wiped out with disease in hatcheries there, and now they want to start somewhere fresh without disease. How long will we manage to survive until complete devastation, especially due to the current intensity and scale of applications? Because of the high mortalities in France, it is more difficult to find half grown oysters – so the French are turning to Ireland, who seem to have no problem with turning their country into one big oyster farm. There is a problem obtaining seed in France, again because of disease and mortalities, but what is going to happen in the future when there is no seed?

Oyster farmers in France have been devastated, businesses can't be sold on because they are no longer viable, loans still have to be paid – it is something that Ireland is walking into – and yet we could avoid it. Ireland is creating oyster farms to feed France and heading for disaster. It is not sustainable.

Aquaculture destroys ecosystems – with faecal material, contaminated water, introduction of diseases, creating harmful algae growth – contaminating shellfish and fish. But once the area is compromised, the aquaculture industry will apply for another licence down the shore, and head on into another destruction.

Aquaculture does not reduce pressure on wild fish – but instead it compromises wild fish. We need to strive to keep our seas healthy for wild fish.

Aquaculture leads to eutrophication of marine water, which means degradation of ecosystems, causing harmful algal blooms that cause shellfish poisoning in humans and danger to wildlife in and around coastal waters. Aquaculture also contributes to the acidification of oceans, which destroys fish, shellfish and the ecosystems.

Oyster farms are not sustainable – because they destroy large areas of beautiful coastline, ruin ecosystems and natural habitats, are very prone to disease and cause illnesses. We have always had oysters in Ireland but we have not had the scale and intensity that is currently being promoted in oyster farms. This will lead to similar problems as has happened in the farmed salmon industry, where farmed salmon is a now dirty word, and trying to change to “organic” farmed salmon does not make its reputation any better - organic feed being fed to lice ridden salmon doesn't make them better. The idea that oysters are clean because they “filter water” is laughable - where does the stuff they filter out go – into their bodies. Oysters have an ability to

keep different substances in their bodies, especially Cadmium which is implicated in the rise of autism, as well as being carcinogenic.

In addition most oysters are exported (most finished off in France, and sold as French oysters – so the French get a good deal and we mess up our beaches to provide them with a luxury food item in their restaurants). How many oysters does the average Irish person eat? Food production going into the future is about providing safe food for our citizens, not using our land and seas in a disrespectful way to make money. Priority should be given to the nutritional needs of the local communities.

Other areas for shellfish exports are China and Hong Kong. Applications have been put in for the Chinese market specifically targeting areas in the Northwest and West coast of Ireland. We are sacrificing our land and sea to feed wealthy financial hubs in Shanghai and China. This may provide a few jobs – but it is not what Food Wise 2025 and sustainable aquaculture is about. We should be looking at sustainable employment.

The IFA aquaculture industry are pushing this along, and the government is running with it without a strategic review of environmental impacts – and without recognising the futility of exporting oysters to the Chinese markets, when we should be looking at sustainable ways of producing good food for local consumption. Yet the lobbying from aquaculture industry is huge – and their main concern is that there are so many problems around SACs and Natura 2000! The government is trying to skirt around the “problems” of environmental legislation and ignoring and trying to change legislation to suit exports for oyster farmers.

When the aquaculture industry complains about not getting licenses approved quickly, the government’s response is that they are “resolving the licensing position quickly”. The industry wants a more simplified licensing system, without environmental constraints. Just like the building boom, entrepreneurs didn’t want to be constrained by planning and safety regulations.

The export markets only want our waters to create plump oysters – because their own waters have become so polluted they can’t manage to get “high quality” oysters anymore. Why should we sell our beaches for this, for a few miserable euros? It’s not as though we’re doing anything laudable like feeding the starving in Africa. We’re not even selling an Irish product, as most oysters are being exported via France and sold as “French” Pacific oysters.

There are enough oyster farms now. Do not license more and more because the unique clean product will have a short life, and prices will fall as they become less unique. And when we have messed up our shores, and as our sea temperatures increase, and disease and mortalities increase, markets will just move north – until the whole world is destroyed.

In areas in West Donegal that already have oyster farms, there has been a marked reduction in the local shellfish found in the strands. The local shrimp,

which has always been collected in a small seasonal way, is now greatly diminished and this happened in only a short time since the oyster farms were established. One of the pleasures of living and holidaying here is to go picking mussels, winkles and shrimps – but the oyster farms are destroying that.

The majority of Irish oyster farms now use the invasive non-native Pacific Oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*). This is a huge concern. It has already destroyed many areas in France. The Wadden Sea is covered in oyster shell reefs, which have destroyed the ecosystem that existed there. The Pacific Oyster was originally thought to be no threat to the native oyster, as it couldn't spawn in cold water. But with climate change, and the rise in sea temperatures this has proved wrong. Even the use of the triploid oyster has not prevented reproduction– as triploidy is not guaranteed to sterilize oysters, and they can and do revert back to a diploid state. Triploid oysters cannot claim to be sustainable.

*Crassostrea gigas* is listed as 'one of the worst 100 alien species in Europe' (DAISIE 2016). This invasive alien species is a threat to native European Flat Oyster (*Ostrea Edulis*), as well as native mussels, winkles, limpets, clams and seaweeds, altering and destroying ecosystems. Dead oyster shells form dense reefs, destroying the Sabellaria reef, and implicated in the destruction of the protected honeycomb worm, *Sabellaria alveolata*, protected by the EU Habitats Directive – but now under severe threat as a result of Pacific oyster farms. Licence applications need to be thoroughly monitored to see what species and habitats will be implicated in each area. The *Sabellaria alveolata* should be highlighted in aquaculture licensing as a species now severely under threat.

EPA funded research says, "The oysters also alters several biogeochemical properties and processes, potentially reducing the capacity of estuaries to support aquaculture and fisheries."

[http://www.epa.ie/newsandevents/news/2013/name\\_52400,en.html](http://www.epa.ie/newsandevents/news/2013/name_52400,en.html) We are funding this research, we should take note of its findings, and the finding of other research, when making decisions on aquaculture licensing.

The Pacific Oyster is particularly prone to disease and the future of oyster farming is threatened by disease. We are leaving ourselves open to having beaches destroyed not only by oyster farming, but also devastated oyster farms that will become coastal ghost farms and destroyed coastlines. Pacific Oyster Mortality Syndrome (POMS), the ostreid herpes virus 1  $\mu$ var (OsHV-1  $\mu$ var) is devastating oyster farms throughout the world. The virus also attacks other shellfish including clams and scallops.

Following huge mortalities of oysters from the oyster herpes disease in France in 2008, the disease has spread to Ireland. The intensity of oyster farming increases the risk of the outbreak. Measures were established in Ireland to try to prevent the spread of oyster herpes virus:

<http://www.fishhealth.ie/FHU/health-surveillance/oyster-herpes-virus-surveillance>

But climate change and rising sea temperatures seem to be the major cause: <http://www.agriland.ie/farming-news/carlingford-lough-oysters-die-in-hot-weather/>

Climate change best practice needs to be to the fore in the aquaculture industry.

Despite “disease free triploids”, the disease is rampant. Tasmania oyster farming has been devastated by POMS. Tasmania was thought to have cold waters that would protect them from the disease, but climate change has affected the temperature. The Tasmanian government are left with the problem of what to do with millions of dead oysters and shells, and finding compensation packages for oyster farmers.

<http://www.themercury.com.au/news/tasmania/tasmania-will-stand-by-oysters-growers-as-poms-virus-devastates-the-industry/news-story/6ea35481869db5820bd85800002e21c3>

It's not sustainable to continue with developing this industry.

In addition Pacific oysters are big and sharp and are a hazard to swimmers and other shore users.

The Irish government should therefore without delay seek to ban the use of invasive non-native shellfish in aquaculture licensing.

The Pacific Oyster should be added to the list of prohibited species, prohibiting its use for aquaculture in Ireland. This legislation would need to be updated in the Birds and Natural Habitats Regulations.

We have a very fine native flat oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) which we should be promoting – remember that Food Wise quote, “smaller and greener”. If we promoted the native flat oyster, we could have small cottage oyster farmers carrying out a business to supply to local restaurants. We could genuinely then promote Irish oyster trails – and this could be done out of season, to boost business in winter months, since oysters should only be eaten when there is an “R” in the month. The Irish flat oyster would command a bigger price and we could genuinely and happily label and promote them as natural Irish oysters. Instead we are promoting the Pacific Oyster, which is destroying native species, is not native and not natural and is genetically modified, even though the aquaculture industry doesn't like that word – it is true, its genetics have been modified – but aquaculture prefers genetically “improved”. We still have some of the last natural shellfish in the world – let us protect it, and not lose it forever.

Regarding scales of economics – oysters are becoming so prolific that the prices are falling per kilo for the farmers who sell Pacific oysters mostly to French markets. If we allowed and promoted only native oysters – we could keep them all for the Irish market – and they would not end up on Lidl's shelves for 10 a penny, next to the special offer farmed salmon. Like the supermarkets 49c carrots taking its toll on farmers, the oyster is taking a tumble in price, dictated here by supermarkets. But it could be different. We could strive to restore natural wild food. Now farmed salmon is as cheap as



chips, is harmful and tastes nothing like the real thing – the same will happen to all our shellfish, if we continue to go down the road of mass market fish farming.

The oystercatcher is one of our favourite birds in Ireland – and it has difficulty opening the robust Pacific Oyster shell, so in areas where Pacific Oysters are invasive, oystercatchers have to feed on open and diseased oysters. This will lead to the demise of the oystercatcher. Can we please not let this happen, help the Irish oystercatcher, and ban the Pacific Oyster.

With regard to birds – shellfish farming severely negatively impacts the breeding grounds and migration grounds of our birds. I regularly look out to scores of wild Brent geese and the like on our local strands. If the strand is to be covered in oyster trestles and the associated noise and activity and pollution, then this will displace the birds that use these strands. We also need more monitoring of bird numbers before aquaculture licences are issued – because we regularly see flocks of various birds on the strands, but locals don't log the names and numbers, but it is obviously a factor in deciding if a strand is suitable for aquaculture, so a bird monitoring programme should be put in place before licenses are issued.

All wildlife that live in the area should be respected and protected. We have huge variety of land and sea creatures. All special habitats should be respected and protected. We have salt marshes, sea meadows, sand dunes, sand flats, mud flats, rocky shores, sandy beaches, tidal beaches – a whole variety of habitats and species that live therein. They need respect and protection – they have not been getting this from current licensing.

With regard to sustainable food production going towards 2025 and beyond, our aim should be to provide safe and nutritious food for our people. The best way that can be done in a sustainable way is to have regard to the environment – to be aware of climate change, rising sea temperature, green house gas emissions – as in air miles, etc. In this regard, it is better to focus on slow food and slow fish - local and natural – and avoid foods like farmed oysters and salmon, which will negatively impact the environment. We should be promoting all kinds of local foods, for eg, it's nearly impossible to find garlic that is not imported from China in Irish supermarkets – we should be promoting Irish garlic, easily grown here, to go with our native Irish mussels and oysters. Keep small scale, green and unique, invest in food production that is local, feeds the community – that is what we have to do for our future generations. Making a quick buck here and now is not the way forward.

We need to be protecting our coastal waters by allowing natural shellfish be collected, let the smaller fishing boats fish, ban the super trawlers in our coastal waters. Let wild fishing flourish again in protected seas. Current thinking is that this would not be economical – but that is short-term thinking, greed and disregard for the environment and disbelief of climate change. In the long term we will all be better off – and we will leave a world that is safer for generations.

## Transparency and Fairness

The fact that so many people are unaware that licenses have been applied for means that the procedure is not transparent. In West Donegal there was uproar last October (2016) when 2 oyster farm applications were discovered for the most wonderful and precious strands - and there was very short time to put in objections. However when all this was going on, thousands of objects submitted, no-one, none of the politicians who came to view the condemned beautiful strands – no one saw or told us that there was in fact another 4 licence applications in – for 99 acres worth of oyster farms that had been granted for Braade Strand at Carrickfin, only 5 miles up the road! This shows that there is complete lack of transparency, complete lack of public consultation, complete lack of willingness to let the public know what is happening, or to let environmental agencies know what is happening – in fact there is a deliberate attempt to “hide” the applications - for eg, posting a licence application in a garda station – how many people would ever set foot inside a garda station, and even if they did, they would be there for some urgent matter and to think they would take time to read notices on boards - it’s a completely ridiculous procedure and needs to be reviewed.

Most approvals for aquaculture licences by DAFM has in the opening paragraphs: “I have considered the proposed aquaculture activity and determined that it is not likely to have significant effects on the environment and that an EIS is not required in relation to this application for the reasons outlined below”.

However it always beggars belief that it is determined that it is not likely to have significant effects on the environment or that no proper environmental impact assessment is needed, especially in these precious coastal areas. Then the “reasons outlined below” are always vague, like, “ visual amenity not affected”.

People are outraged, incredulous that planning could be granted to beautiful scenic beaches that are well loved and used by tourists and locals, beautiful habitats of sea meadows, abundant wild life, and waters abundant with sea life – are indiscriminately being ruined for ever – because the DAFM has deemed that aquaculture is the way forward, no matter what the cost to the environment and to coastal communities. It is criminal the damage that is being done to our coastal areas, it is bullying to ride roughshod over communities as they try to protect their precious strands.

Then trying to find why no Environmental Impact Statement is needed is like a maze, asking us to refer to “the findings of the Appropriate Assessment in relation to impacts on protected habitats and species”. (But where is the Appropriate Assessment? – we then have to go looking for that on the website). The conclusion statements are published – but when? Where? They are apparently put up on the DAFM website, where most people would not know to look or when to look, during the process.

There should be more clarity in decisions; proper consideration statements should read something like:

"I have considered the fact that wildlife including seals are protected in Gweedore Bay and that they do swim into the area proposed for oyster farming but I have decided that they will not be negatively affected even if they will lose their swimming and breeding grounds in Gweedore Bay, and may be injured or die by swimming around the spikes and oyster trestles" Simply to say that the oyster farms would be "non-disturbing" to the seals is not good enough. Another statement was "operators should note sensitive times of years for seals and continue to tailor their activities to minimize potential disturbance". So I just googled "sensitive time for seals" and found that "pupping" happens from May to July, and "moulting" from August to September.

So what should the oyster farmer be doing for 5 months in these areas between May and September? Are they going to be monitored to ensure they are curtailing their business? Are they compensated then for loss of business? How are these decisions monitored? Could it be that wildlife is not really protected in these licensing decisions? Wouldn't it have been better to refuse the licence in these areas?

Other reasons that the Ministers list such as: "no significant impact on recreational use", "visual amenity not affected", "minor risk of accidents" – should all be backed up by proper reasons and considerations, proper risk assessments, proper site visits by the Department. These beaches, these coastal areas are Ireland's "Amazon Forest", they are our "Great Barrier Reef" – these are our special environments. I'm sure if the decision makers would visit the area, go horse riding on the beach in question, sail a boat there when the tide is in, and so on – they might not be so quick and eager to grant a licence for that beach. There should be site visits by the decision makers.

Because when the public do finally see these "considerations" they are usually appalled that the licence was in fact granted without due consideration, but by that time it is usually too late, because the appeal date has gone – and nobody knew about the appeal because it was hidden in some obscure place.

Public consultation needs to be proper public consultation – that is liaising with local people and taking into account their concerns. Public consultation is not putting the application up on the DAFM website expecting the public to trawl through on a weekly basis, nor is public consultation putting a small notice in a small newspaper with small readership, or even putting a small notice in a small garda station in a small town. Public consultation must involve press releases to the media, announcements on TV and radio, the use of social media and the meeting with local people by the DAFM and National Parks and Wildlife Service, An Taisce and the appropriate bodies with regard to the environment.

Statutory consultation needs to be proper statutory consultation. Generic or “copy and paste” style assessments are not proper consultation. The laws of the land and the EU are there to protect us. Please heed that legislation. Saying, “I have taken into consideration the fact that there is a protected habitat / species in this area but I don’t think it will be negatively affected” – in not being fair to people, to wildlife, or to the environment – it is not paying proper consideration to the legislation that is there to protect us – Birds and Habitats Directives, Natura 2000, SACs, SPAs – Special Protection Areas. In addition there are a wealth of documents and research relating to the coastal habitats that will be impacted by large-scale oyster farming or salmon farming, which the department could refer to when making their considerations. The Minister needs to consider more than just the views of the IFA spokesman for aquaculture.

Proper decisions with regard to the law and the area should be made with reasons for coming to this decision. One of the Minister’s decision for recent approval of a large oyster farm was: “the nature and scale of the proposed development (1.395ha) is not out of scale relative to the body of coastal water where it is located”. But that statement did not take into account the fact that that application was one of 4 for that same strand, and that there is already an existing oyster farm on the strand – so add all those oyster farms together and the whole strand is covered – completely out of scale.

The DAFM and NPWS need to visit each area before making statements regarding visual amenity or environmental impacts in their decisions. The Minister wrote recently in a decision to approve a large oyster farms at Braade Strand in Gweedore Bay: “visual amenity — the 3 sites are not visible from public roads, they are screened by headlands and shore rock or by other oyster sites to the west. Landscape and visual impact of the development is and will be of slight or negligible significance.”

But Braade strand is very visible from public roads (and incidentally very visible from the air from Aer Lingus flights as they take off or land at Carrickfin Airport, which was voted the 7<sup>th</sup> most scenic landing in the world last year). The public road where the oyster farm will be viewed is the route to the Blue Flag Beach at Carrickfin where a past survey estimated around 4,500 visitors to the beach during the season. (Everyday locals walk this beach). These figures will no doubt rise as it is also on the Wild Atlantic Way, which has seen a rise in tourism for Donegal. So it really hurts local people when something like this, an untruth, is written and given as a reason to allow the development. Also being “screened by other oyster sites” should not be included as reason for approval. So when the public see things like that written as a reasons for granting, ie, “cannot be seen from the public road” – and the public know it can be seen from the public road. It means that when something is written like “the Mahair will not be negatively affected” – there is no trust that that is true, even though the person might not know, but just because they have seen other claims made which were obviously wrong – we have no trust in these vague environmental assessments.

The photo in the link below (2. Bathing Water details) shows the blue flag beach at Carrickfin on the left hand side, the airport in the middle, with the public road alongside, and Braade Strand on the right – the area where 99 acres of oysters farms have been granted (under appeal at present time of writing).

[http://www.bathingwater.ie/files/profile/BWPR00328\\_2016\\_01\\_profile.pdf](http://www.bathingwater.ie/files/profile/BWPR00328_2016_01_profile.pdf)

Each Blue Flag Strand has to be assessed and have this bathing water profile – this would be a good idea for aquaculture licences – where each proposed site had to have a similar detailed assessment, with photographs submitted with the application. While this will obviously be more expensive than sending off an email – the extra cost of this could be incorporated with the cost of applying for a licence.

The cost of an aquaculture licence needs to be seriously addressed - it is far too cheap. This has led to many people applying for licenses, and then selling them on at a profit, usually to large industrialists who are like vultures waiting for these rich pickings. Re-selling licenses is now getting a reputation as being a quick and easy way to make a profit. There needs to be monitoring of the sale of licences. Where a licence has been given – if there is to be a change of ownership, then that needs to be regulated. We can't blame local people for doing this, we don't blame them for working on oyster farms – it is the whole licensing system and the industry that is wrong and needs to be reviewed. Instead of pouring money into this, the government should be looking at good sustainable employment for local people that will not ruin the environment, and does not put local people, who just want to earn a living, at odds with their neighbours who quite naturally are opposed to the wide scale destruction of strands.

I read a report that “aquaculture activities are licensed by the DAFM and oyster fisheries are licensed by the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR). Is this old information? It's all so confusing.

More notice need to be given to the risk to users of the strand. For eg, the decisions made in oyster farming include: “the impact on navigation will be mitigated by appropriate navigational markings on the boundaries of the sites”. Have you seen the size of these trestles and the size of the spikes and the size of the oyster bags? What if a boat came in at speed into one of these bays? Or must leisure boats now stay away from these areas? And the phrase “minor risk of accidents” – doesn't tell us anything of the risk assessment. Could that a minor risk of major accident? If the whole bay is to be taken over by oyster farms, how is one supposed to carry on kayaking for example? And if my business is a kayaking business in the Gweedore Bay surely I will be negatively impacted? As well as an environmental impact statement, there needs to be a social impact statement and an economical impact state – that will cover all the “sustainability” of the operation.

One of the Minister's reasons for approval of an oyster farm was that “the area is not densely populated”. I fail to see how that is a valid reason but anyway Gweedore is the most densely populated rural area in Europe. Beaches being targeted by oyster industrialists are beaches that are widely

used, very visible and unique environments. For eg, the recent decision to grant a licence to 4 large oyster farms is in an area where the amount of footfall on Carrickfin Beach every day is huge, it is one of the most popular beaches for walking in Donegal. The intensive oyster farming to take place there will affect the water quality and will affect the status of this Blue Flag beach.

The Minister also says the absence of any “protected structure” is a reason to approve – but what if the area is one big protected structure, ie, a proposed National Heritage Area?

But even when there is a protected feature, for eg, a “protected habitat” and that protected habitat is flagged as being in the proposed development in the “Appropriate Assessment” – the decision still says that the protected area will “not be negatively affected”. For eg, there is an area of protected Mahair. To get to the proposed oyster farm, access to all business traffic and farm paraphernalia will be to cross the protected Mahair habitat to get to the oyster farm area. Yet the “Conclusion Statement “ says that the proposed access routes have been “considered” and, “The routes will follow existing tracks to the shore and no new routes will be created”. So this “protected habitat” is in fact not being protected, it is being compromised. Who will be there when a lorry comes with a load of something – to police that delivery, to make sure that the existing paths are not compromised? Decisions like that looks like we will have oyster farms at any cost – without having proper regard to EU law.

It is my observation that to ensure legally robust licence determinations having regard to EU and national law, that no area within SACs, Natura 2000, SPAs and other protected areas – none of these areas should have aquaculture anywhere near them, either in these sites or around the waters and lands adjacent to them.

Regarding licences that have been granted, there should be proper reviews, inspections – and proper consultation if a licence is to be reapplied for. Those licenses that have been granted, where there is obvious distress to local people, who found themselves too late to object – those should be reviewed with a view to overthrowing the licence – for eg, Linsford Beach in Co Donegal should never have been given over to oyster farming – it is a crime against God and humanity. The same goes for various farms around Donegal where people woke up to find an oyster farm moving in – the first they knew about it. This should never, ever be the case.

Since sustainability and biodiversity are high on the government’s policies – due regard should be given to Climate change. Donald Trump says he doesn’t believe in Climate Change. Our government says it does believe by producing National Biodiversity reports and so on – but actually it doesn’t believe in climate change, otherwise it would not be granting licenses to aquaculture which is a time bomb waiting to explode, with rising water temperatures and devastation of species and habitats and ecosystems. Shifts in ecological conditions because of climate change support the spread of pathogens, parasites, and diseases, with potentially serious effects on human

health, agriculture, and fisheries. We need to look to the future and have a government that takes on board the threats posed by Climate Change – it is not something made up by the Chinese. Ocean acidification is also on the increase – and by 2100 oceans waters could be nearly 150% more acidic than they are now (Carbon Program 2013). Acidification means oyster larvae can't build their shells in the low pH seawater, and also affects seawater food availability. Harmful Algal blooms (HABs) will happen with increased frequency and intensity with increasing ocean temperatures – resulting in destruction of oyster stock.

The Water Framework Directive (WFD) is another piece of EU legislation to protect our seas and aquatic environment. The government needs to adhere to EU legislation, to take account of climate change placing additional pressure on seas, species and habitats. Wildlife, marine ecosystems and biodiversity are all threatened by climate change – putting additional pressures on habitats already under threat by pollution, habitat loss and invasive species. A warmer, wetter climate will allow pests and diseases to increase. This means that biotoxins will be increasing in shellfish, and the need to close farms and dump shellfish will be forever increasing. We should be protecting what we already have, not further destroying.

The way forward is an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF) that recognises the destruction caused by single-species farming – as in Pacific Oyster farming, and salmon farming. EAF recognises that humans are a part of the ecosystem. So while aquaculture licensing and management is under the DAFM remit, it cannot work in isolation – it must work with other activities and agencies. Ecosystem management should consider the actual and potential effect of their activities on adjacent and other ecosystems and seek to limit damage.

Some locals arrange monthly clean up of beaches. We try to keep beaches clean. How come then, an oyster farm can be granted permission to wilfully pollute the beach? In addition to all the physical pollution there is noise pollution and smell pollution. There are too many shellfish and salmon farms around our coastal waters – they need to be severely curtailed. They are an eyesore and harmful to the environment.

With regard to Food Wise 2025 – and the DAFM promotion of oysters. How many oysters does the average Irish person eat per year? The aim is to produce good natural food to feed our people – instead we are destroying habitats to feed mostly people in expensive French restaurants. Local/national food production, with food that local people will eat on a daily basis, that is safe, natural and nutritious – that is what sustainable food production is, building healthy environments, land and sea. Keeping food production local and natural increases resilience in the face of climate change, while improving biodiversity. It is our human right to have food – and if we are concerned about sustainable food production, that is the way forward – slow food, local food. Shellfish and salmon farming is a deeply misguided way forward, not sustainable for a world that is facing hunger and ecological

crisis. Our future should not be in the low cost market of farmed fish, it is a bad road to follow; it has a poor reputation worldwide and has no happy outcomes.

The challenge of feeding people in the future lies in the health of our oceans and land, we need to work to keep healthy oceans and land – it will be got by abiding with the principals of sustainable food production, by promoting inclusive economic growth, environmental protection and social integration. Inclusive economic growth means benefiting every section of society – this will not be achieved by promoting oyster farms which provide a few casual (tide based) jobs, destroy the environment and cause huge divisions in local communities. The people of coastal areas want sustainable jobs; farmed fish does not provide that. In a few years the oyster farming business will be suffering huge losses from disease and areas will not be able to revert to tourism because beaches and habitats and species will have been destroyed in the process. Tourism and Aquaculture do not go hand and hand – aquaculture ruins tourism. I can assure you there would be no pleasure in showing tourists the sights of oyster farms, and ghost farms. There have been numerous mistakes in the past let us learn from them and not make the same now. We have a chance to change this licensing procedure to benefit the community.

At present licenses are granted for 10 years. This is way too long given the crisis in climate change and changing environmental factors. Also after 10 years what happens to the licence? It should not automatically be renewed – but should go through another rigorous environmental assessment.

Donegal is doing a great job in promoting itself, and accolades have been pouring in. We can earn far more from tourism than we ever can from aquaculture. We want our wild fishing back. We want to keep our beaches. Please let us have sustainable employment that does not destroy us and let us do what we do best which is enjoying and protecting our environment and sharing its loveliness with others.

Yours sincerely

Breda Smith