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Submission to the Independent Aquaculture Licence Review Group

As a stakeholder and rural business with a direct interest in the sustainable development of the Irish aquaculture sector I welcome the establishment by Minister Michael Creed TD of the independent review group on licencing. The issue of licencing has been the greatest obstacle and impediment to the development of jobs and exports from seafood, coastal areas and the fish processing sector in Ireland for two decades now.

I am an aquaculture license holder who has just been through the re licensing process. I operate a mussel farm and depuration/ packing facility in Roaring Water Bay where I employ 7 full time staff as well as taking on part time staff during busy periods.

The lack of progress in putting a workable system which has the confidence of all parties and stakeholders has discouraged investment and put a huge shadow over the confidence of the industry and the reputation of Ireland to deliver quality seafood. Our company and many others we know would welcome the opportunity to expand our business based on a strong primary production industry.

The place for aquaculture should always be with all other food products within the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine – only within this department will the sector be seen for what it is – a vital part of Ireland's food export offering.

But our colleagues in fish farming have had desperate problems developing to meet market demand due to the licencing process. This is quite different from dealing with the voices occasionally heard opposing marine farming. With a correct and fit for purpose process, all opinions can and should be heard and the gradual build-up of consensus and precedent over time should lead to quicker decisions having answered questions and developed policies in a systematic way.

The industry needs clarity – it needs to know how long the licencing process will take place and from the start what information it needs to submit instead of finding out piecemeal along the very long road laid out at present.

In summary my belief is that the aquaculture sector needs a properly managed licence system that has:

- Definite timelines
- A clear and transparent licencing application process
- A minimum of a 20 year licence
- Renewals of licences based on good standing, adherence to licence conditions and monitoring results
- Released the ability to seek funding from the EMFF for updating technology and equipment
- A reduction in the cost of the extremely complex Environmental Impact Statements required – it is easier to get a licence for a sewage treatment plant or a factory that to farm fish or shellfish at present.
- More experience of the business within the department itself – similar to the knowledge contained within other sections in relation to farming beef, sheep or dairy
- More transparency in the process for farmers and objectors alike – reducing the upset of local people who feel they are out of the loop and object because they only heard about an application at the 11th hour.

These are just some of this issues we need to see addressed and we have been waiting for action in this area for far too long. It is acknowledged government and EU policy to develop this sector but that aspiration needs to be turned into action for the sake of the next generation. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further input.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Whooley.

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