

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Video-conference with Aquaculture Stewardship Council, 24 April 2018

Salmon Farming in Scotland Inquiry

The Committee conducted an informal video-conference with two members of staff from Aquaculture Stewardship Council (Contessa Kellogg Winters, Communications Director and Michiel Fransen, Head of Science and Standards) as part of its inquiry into salmon farming in Scotland. This is a short note of the key issues covered during the discussion. The Aquaculture Stewardship Council sets standards for farmed salmon production and runs a certification scheme for farms that comply with these standards.

Work of Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)

- Manages and oversees standards for 8 species groups and seaweeds currently.
- Cover farms in Europe, Australasia, North America and across the globe.

Certifying salmon

- More than 600 farms in the ASC programme, salmon is a significant species and account for over one-third of ASC certified farms globally.
- Reasons for relatively low numbers of sites which meet standards include variations across the world in sea lice levels, farms' approach to seals, issues of smolt interaction with natural salmon.
- Very few sites certified in Scotland for ASC, although various sites in Scotland have enquired as to how they might become ASC certified.
- Have also spoken to the Atlantic Salmon Trust and other stakeholders about how Scotland can become more engaged.
- ASC does not take the position that non-certified farms are not responsible/sustainable. As a voluntary programme, it can only be said that those that achieve certification are environmentally and socially responsible according to the ASC standard. There is no way to judge the sustainability of farms that have not been audited.
- Various reasons why Scottish sites haven't pursued certification – including seal mortalities, the standard prohibits use of smolts out of water gates in open cage freshwater systems, which is a common practice in Scotland. There is a fear that young smolts will integrate with wild salmon and that should be avoided.
- ASC understand that companies may have nervousness about undertaking the application process given the risk of failing. Regardless of whether a farm becomes certified, all audit reports are publically available and farms may be hesitant to be seen as having failed. ASC therefore engage with individual salmon farms to provide advice on how they can work towards meet standards. Certification and assessment bodies that may ultimately perform the audit can provide a pre-application audit (desk audit) to give advice on likelihood of success. Full certification audits to establish whether farms meet standards are published.

- Any site can move forward for certification – this doesn't have to be done on a company wide basis. ASC also have an improvement programme in development.
- A large number of Marine Harvest and other companies in Norway have achieved ASC certification.
- Norway is recognised as a global leader in salmon farming and local practices are suited to meeting ASC standard through management of smolts, location of cages etc. However, ASC can't generalise that all sites in Norway are better than those in other countries.
- Some farms around the world have not met standards during application process, others which have had certificates withdrawn. These are shown on the ASC website – not intended to name and shame, but to show other farms what is required to achieve certification.
- Cannot claim that with ASC a site will not ever have an outbreak of disease – it does however give assurance that they meet environmental, social, and other standards. Never a 100% guarantee.

Sea lice

- Norway is leading on the reduction of sea lice globally, through for example, the placement of cages and process of smolt production.
- Salmon producers may take different approaches in different countries to deal with issues in line with different national regulations
- ASC standard is 0.1 sea lice per mature fish. Farms cannot also use any critical antibiotics (which are on the WHO list of antibiotics for human health).

Social responsibility

- ASC standards do not allow any endangered animals to be shot.
- Allow some culling but on very limited basis. The standard allows maximum of 2 marine mammals to be killed in any 2 year cycle.

Regulation

- ASC were asked why companies operating in several countries do not meeting the same standards in each of these. It appears that these companies don't standardise across the world – they meet relevant national standards instead.
- ASC does not have a great deal of knowledge about regulation in Scotland – aware of SEPA water quality regulations.
- Can learn a lot from Norway – they clearly understand that there could be consequences for this big income industry if they don't get it right. They therefore recognise benefits of being very rigorous.
- In Norway there are consistent regulatory requirements across each local area. There may be lessons to learn from Norway in this regard.

Consumers

- ASC cannot say that there is a price premium for certified sites, but market forces may begin to make this happen. More retailers are starting to require ASC certification in several countries.
- Retailers are increasingly requiring traceability.

- Retailers in some European markets – Germany, Netherlands etc –have ASC as part of their sourcing code. ASC can provide some sourcing info – feed issues etc. - which provide reassurance.
- Major retailers in the UK feature some ASC products, but not at the same level currently seen in Europe (exception is Aldi).

Branding/Provenance

- Norway has done very well by having consistently high consumer production – they represent their whole industry very well – and can trade on provenance of their product with assurance that they are highly regulated – other companies and sites around the world are starting to recognise this and the benefits this can bring on terms of jobs etc.
- Scotland branding is recognised as being very strong – important to try to retain this.
- Scotland - lots of job opportunities to produce fish efficiently and sustainably – but country must do it in the most correct way possible and get the social acceptance to flourish and grow. If companies are seen not to do so that may end in negative outcomes.

Global Certification Schemes

- Some Scottish farms are certified under other schemes. ASC offers a different certification from some of these – more stringent standards, metrics and records required, impacts must be measured, so it can be complicated to achieve. Producers may seek certification under other schemes which tended to be around before ASC. Certifications can be complementary – producers may obtain some other certificates – then pursue ASC.
- ASC recently released the finding of their farmers survey and upwards of 90% of farmers who responded, have more than 1 certification.

Benefits of salmon farming

- Include jobs, efficient production of animal protein and good use of space (keeping land free for crops and biofuels).