

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

### **SALMON FARMING IN SCOTLAND**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM JAMES HARMER**

##### **Re Question 5 Escapees from fish farms**

It seems clear from available evidence that there are many unknowns and uncertainties regarding the risks, which escapees pose to wild salmon. It is also very probable that all these are downside, with no obvious silver lining.

Last year on Mull some 30 tons of 6-8 lbs farmed salmon (pre-mature NOT tri or diploid) escaped, due to human error, from a cage some 5 miles seaward of a small salmon fishery, which has a large loch at its head. Hundreds were caught in the freshwater system as the farmed fish appeared to adapt to freshwater just as wild ones do (this incidentally surprised some experts). No doubt many more were eaten by seals, dolphins, eagles and otters, but this left thousands unaccounted for (small numbers were also found in two nearby rivers).

The relevant Government Departments showed little interest in finding out what happened to these fish, even though this was the first time such a situation has arisen in a system which is very isolated (a small fishery with the nearby rivers are some 20 miles away). Given the huge expansion plans of the salmon farming industry, this was particularly disappointing, as one might have hoped that every opportunity to pin down the unknowns would have been taken to maximise wild fish survival chances.

Wild salmon are threatened by rising water temperature and changing food supply patterns and the last thing they need is a massive surge in sea lice, disease and escapee risks. Given their challenging situation, the best hope for them to adapt to the future environment would seem to be to put a lot of effort into conserving, at the least, existing stocks. Siting the very large increase in cage area, which will be needed to enable the planned salmon farm expansion, in such a way that wild stocks are not imperilled would seem to be of paramount priority.

Just to stay where this industry is in terms of volume of escapees will mean upgrading management and improving processes. To do better would mean making even more improvements (the same applies to sea lice and disease control). One key issue is whether this industry is capable of such a rate of innovation, noting that there may not be strong economic motivation for the necessary changes.

We may be getting near a tipping point where the west coast of Scotland will have to choose between a much bigger salmon farming activity and a future for wild migrating fish there, noting that sea trout are already getting near extinction in many places. This

concern, maybe, should be explored in depth, independently of Government or Industry, before it is too late.

James Harmer

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