

Licensing System Needs Fundamental Overhaul



IFA President and General Secretary Visit Donegal Industry

Pictured at Carrigart hearing the concerns of industry are (l-r) Jerry Gallagher, ISA Chairman; John Bryan, IFA President, Brendan McFadden, local IFA branch chairman, Martin Coll, Mulroy Bay; Pat Smith IFA General Secretary.

IFA is calling for a fundamental overhaul of the system for processing aquaculture licence applications to allow coastal businesses to grow and provide vital jobs and exports as quickly as possible. At a meeting with new BIM chairman, Kieran Calnan and CEO Jason Whooley in Dublin IFA outlined the massive problems facing fish and shellfish farmers.

IFA Aquaculture Executive, Richie Flynn, said, "We have clear evidence that licence applications – even those outside designated areas – are being inexplicably held up solely by unnecessary red tape, bureaucracy and a lack of decision making."

"There are far too many agencies involved in deciding on licence applications who have no interest or responsibility for developing jobs and the rural and coastal economy. Licence applications disappear into a black hole for over seven years. It is impossible to build a business on this clearly broken system."

The IFA man said, "The contrast with our competitors in Scotland, where a 2,400 tonne salmon farm licence can be granted within 22 months whereas in Ireland it could take 84 months or more highlights the fact that it is the system which is making it uneconomic for our members to continue in business. What is all the more frustrating is that we have to turn valued customers away who are demanding more high quality Irish seafood which we are not allowed to grow because of this broken licensing system."

"Having the Government add this massive bureaucratic burden and uncertainty to small businesses is completely unnecessary. It is clear that Minister Coveney must sit down with his staff and work out how to remove the bottlenecks and get licences flowing immediately."

Having IFA as part of the automatic non-statutory consultation process would be one of many possible positive steps towards speeding up the process."

Grant Aid Scheme of No Use to Majority of Farmers

Responding to the recent announcement by BIM of the opening of a capital grant aid scheme to improve technical, quality and environmental standards in the industry, IFA Aquaculture executive, Richie Flynn, said the rules established by Minister Coveney's department on potential applicants rule out 95% of producers from access to the limited funds available.

The rules for grant aid insist that the applicant holds a "current licence" which is impossible to achieve at present, and also that the project be completed before the end of the calendar year, which is technically and practically unfeasible.

Mr Flynn said, "The prolonged and unnecessary delays in dealing with licenses are within the control of the Department of Agriculture, Marine and Food to resolve with the National Parks and Wildlife Services. The fact that they have not succeeded in issuing renewals to industry since 2007 is their fault. Now we have a situation where to avail of grant aid, the same Department are insisting on having an up to date licence, which is virtually impossible to achieve. It makes a mockery of the grant aid system and exposes the insanity of holding back an industry which can provide vital jobs and exports for our coastal peripheral areas."

"Our European competitors in the seafood sector have had access to funding since 2007 and have used that money to expand production and grow markets. In Ireland we have been mired in a bureaucratic argument between competing departments as to how to solve a problem created the government in the first place. The only victims here are those family businesses who struggle in tough weather

(cont'd) conditions day in and day out around the coast yet get no recognition by way of service or interest from the authorities.”

“The industry is wondering if the Department is deliberately trying to set up a situation where they have no choice but to give back their aquaculture budget to the Department of Finance for the 3rd year in a row. “

Mr Flynn concluded, “Fish farmers are perfectly legally entitled to continue their businesses under the 2006 Maritime Jurisdiction Act which negates any need for a “current licence” for grant aid. Many producers have new and exciting ideas for environmental, marketing and production techniques which would benefit greatly from access to a small amount of capital funding which is transparent, flexible and most of all available. Minister Coveney must re-examine his own Departmentally-imposed restrictions, which are not required by EU rules, and give a boost to a sector which has serious demand for its products and a bright future ahead if domestically imposed obstacles are removed.”

IFA meets new Dept Official

The creation of a new post to oversee grant aid, state agencies and policy issues relating to aquaculture has been welcomed by IFA Aquaculture. The organisation met with new Principal Officer, Colm McKiernan, in Clonakilty shortly after his appointment to brief him on current industry issues.

Disappointment at EU-US Organic Agreement

IFA has met with US officials from the London-based UK & Ireland food section of the US Embassy to try and resolve the failure to include farmed seafood products in the recent EU-US agreement.

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Useful statistics

Useful and up to date information on the state of world and EU aquaculture are available at these websites:

- www.fao.org/fishery
- http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/index_en.htm

Karenia bloom causes concern and highlights need for flexible approach

The recent Karenia bloom along the west and northwest coast, which causes mortality risks for wild and farmed fish and shellfish, has caused members deep concern. It also highlights the imperative for the licensing system to be functioning and flexible so that where possible stocks can be moved and that farmers can spread their risk by having stocks in multiple sites. Richie Flynn said, “The only priority today for rural and coastal communities must be to focus on jobs and exports. In order to do that we must have a functioning, efficient and flexible licencing system to give farmers options to grow, develop new techniques and supply the important processing sector. We have members who have been waiting up to 7 years for a response to their licence applications.” Minister Coveney and all the various state agencies who are associated with the industry, including the National Parks and Wildlife Service, must focus their attention on this area. Today there are shellfish dying in the west and north west due to a naturally occurring algae event; tomorrow there will be Irish companies dying because of an unnatural delay caused by bureaucracy and a lack of focus on the economic aspects of the seafood industry by the state.

Wild salmon decline linked to feeding grounds

Recent studies have clearly demolished the false impression that salmon farming has any impact on wild salmon stocks. Richie Flynn, said, “The strength of data and analysis clearly shows

there is no relationship between salmon farming and the abundance of wild salmon along our coast and that the problems for wild fish are found in the wild stock feeding grounds in the far north Atlantic.”

Mr Flynn continued, “There have been many attempts to blame fish farmers for wild stock declines. Yet the fact that our native rivers have been neglected, overgrown by trees and weeds and blocked, undermanaged and covered by dams and unsuitable concrete traps is always overlooked. It is a fact that those few rivers with modern electronic fish counters give the only accurate information on salmon stocks available. It is time that the European Commission looked into the governance and regulation of our wild fishery rivers to examine if they are in compliance with Environmental directives, in particular where any disturbance is caused by works carried out by state agencies which impact on freshwater pearl mussels and sensitive habitats.”

Stocks of wild salmon are increasing according to catch statistics and counter data barring some river systems along the east coast where angling is severely restricted and where no salmon farming takes place. Along the west coast, slaughter of wild salmon by rod and line is allowed in many rivers due to the abundance of stocks. In fact, the only scientifically proven human impact on wild stocks is by angling.”

Mussel Case Lodged

The European Mollusc Producers Association, Of which the ISA holds the presidency, has formally lodged the anti-dumping case against below-cost Chilean Mussels being dumped in the EU with the European Commission and opened negotiations with the Trade Directorate in Brussels.

**IFA Aquaculture, Irish Farm Centre, Bluebell D12
Ph 01-4508755
Email richieflynn@ifa.ie**