

## Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries & Maritime Affairs

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### *Aquaculture & Water Quality*

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Chair and Committee Members, thank you for inviting IFA to address you today regarding Aquaculture & Water Quality.

I am joined by IFA Aquaculture Vice-Chair Catherine McManus, and IFA Aquaculture Senior Policy Executive, Teresa Morrissey.

The Irish aquaculture sector is a vital contributor to the national economy, through sustaining coastal communities and providing a sustainable food production system making a valuable contribution to food security. Our members operate in some of Ireland's most environmentally sensitive waters and are committed to meeting the highest environmental and regulatory standards.

The Irish Aquaculture industry provides vital employment opportunities for rural coastal communities with over 1,800 direct jobs and over 15,000 indirect jobs in seafood processing and marine ancillary services sectors. Irish Aquaculture produce is worth €211 million in production value from a production volume of 38,500 tonnes, according to the latest [BIM Business of Seafood 2024](#), a significant contribution to local and national economic activity.

Irish aquaculture represents one of Ireland's most sustainable and carbon-efficient food production systems. The sector is committed to responsible production and to maintaining the highest environmental standards.

Today I wish to focus on the following areas:

1. Aquaculture and water quality
2. Shellfish Classification system
3. Pressures affecting water quality
4. The need for stronger engagement and policy coordination.

## **Aquaculture and Water Quality**

IFA Aquaculture believes it is important that public discussion around aquaculture and water quality is grounded in evidence. There is often an assumption that aquaculture is primarily a pressure on marine water quality. However, that narrative is incomplete and, in many respects, misleading when applied to the Irish context.

Shellfish farming, by its nature, provides environmental benefits. Shellfish are filter feeders that remove nutrients from the water column, improve water clarity, enhance bacterial denitrification and contribute to nutrient sequestration. In this sense, shellfish production can support improved water and habitat quality and assist in mitigating eutrophication pressures in coastal waters.

In relation to finfish farming, it is acknowledged that nutrient inputs require careful management. However, current Water Framework Directive classifications show Irish coastal waters to be primarily of high or good status for water quality parameters, including areas where marine aquaculture activities operate.

Irish salmon farming is predominantly organic and located in exposed, well-flushed offshore environments where nutrient enrichment risks are significantly reduced. Furthermore, the sector operates under extensive monitoring and regulatory requirements.

Aquaculture operators comply not only with the Water Framework Directive but also with the Habitats and Birds Directives, environmental impact assessment requirements, benthic monitoring, water quality monitoring, residues controls and sea lice management protocols.

Few sectors operating in the marine space are subject to the same level of environmental assessment and oversight.

This is further supported by the Shellfish Classification system.

### **Shellfish Classification System**

The Irish Shellfish Classification System is a critical food safety framework that determines the conditions under which shellfish can be harvested and marketed, based on ongoing monitoring of microbiological water quality. Classification status has significant implications for shellfish aquaculture producers, influencing market access, production costs, harvest planning, and business viability. The system is administered by the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) under food hygiene legislation derived from European Union regulations with the support of Marine Institute (MI), Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) and the Irish Shellfish industry (IFA).

The Molluscan Shellfish Safety Committee (MSSC) is a scientific and technical advisory group that supports the Irish shellfish classification process. The committee brings together expertise from government agencies (SFPA), marine science (MI), food safety (FSAI), and the shellfish sector (IFA) to review monitoring data and supports evidence-based recommendations.

Maintaining a robust, transparent, and scientifically grounded classification system is essential for protecting public health while supporting the sustainable development of Ireland's shellfish aquaculture sector.

The importance of maintaining high level of water quality in shellfish producing areas also has particular relevance due to the link between water quality and organic status for bivalve molluscs under EU Organic Regs.

Overall, the Irish Shellfish Classification System is both a food safety safeguard and a key commercial factor for the shellfish aquaculture sector, with the MSSC contributing scientific oversight that supports effective and credible classification decisions.

### **Pressures on Water Quality**

While aquaculture is often discussed as a source of pressure, IFA Aquaculture believes equal attention must be given to the pressures affecting aquaculture itself — particularly in relation to shellfish waters.

Ireland has 64 designated shellfish waters requiring protection to support shellfish life and growth.

In recent years, water quality deterioration linked to wastewater discharges and inadequate treatment infrastructure has had serious implications for shellfish-producing bays.

Elevated bacterial and pathogen levels, including norovirus risks, together with nutrient loading from wastewater systems and stormwater overflows, are increasingly affecting shellfish classification and market access.

This is not simply an environmental concern; it is also an economic and public health issue.

Where wastewater systems are under pressure, particularly following periods of heavy rainfall and flooding, untreated or partially treated discharges can compromise shellfish waters, disrupt production and threaten livelihoods.

Climate change is likely to intensify these challenges through more frequent extreme rainfall and pressure on ageing wastewater infrastructure.

There are physical, chemical and microbiological requirements that designated shellfish waters must either comply with or try to improve, as well as the establishment of pollution reduction programmes where required. In recent years, mis-management of discharge into designated shellfish areas has compromised the water quality in shellfish producing bays across the country.

Likewise, Finfish aquaculture producers, particularly freshwater aquaculture, are also experiencing increased water quality pressures where incoming water quality to freshwater aquaculture production systems is critical – freshwater aquaculture producers are investing heavily in monitoring and control technologies that assess incoming water quality and are also proactively monitoring and mitigating other influences and water quality pressures on rivers.

For these reasons, IFA Aquaculture believes that continued rollout and prioritisation of tertiary wastewater treatment — particularly adjacent to shellfish-producing bays and freshwater aquaculture sites — must remain a central objective of water policy and River Basin Management planning.

Protection of shellfish waters and freshwater aquaculture water-sources must be placed on a stronger legislative and management footing.

### **Engagement and Policy Coordination**

The final point I wish to make concerns engagement.

IFA Aquaculture welcomes greater recognition of aquaculture within water policy discussions. However, there remains insufficient structured engagement between the aquaculture sector and agencies responsible for water quality management.

The sector depends on clean water more than most, yet there is no consistent mechanism through which aquaculture producers participate directly in water governance discussions.

The industry should be included more directly in water governance and stakeholder forums, including discussions relating to implementation of the Water Framework Directive and marine water management.

We believe there is merit in considering a dedicated forum involving industry, State agencies and relevant Departments to strengthen coordination between aquaculture licensing, marine spatial planning and water quality objectives.

Those whose livelihoods depend on healthy marine and fresh waters should not be absent from decisions concerning their management.

Effective policy depends on collaboration and informed dialogue

### **Conclusion**

Irish aquaculture provides sustainable food production, supports resilient coastal communities and contributes positively to climate and environmental objectives.

However, the sector also depends fundamentally on clean, protected and properly managed waters.

IFA Aquaculture is committed to working constructively with Government, regulators and stakeholders to ensure that water policy and aquaculture policy develop in a balanced and evidence-based manner.

With appropriate investment, stronger engagement and coherent policy implementation, Ireland can both protect water quality and realise the full sustainable potential of the aquaculture sector.

We welcome the Committee's engagement on this issue and look forward to your questions.

## **References:**

BIM, 2026 – *Social licence improvement plan-For the aquaculture sector in Ireland*

BIM, 2025 – *Seafood Sustainability Progress Report: Aquaculture*

BIM, 2025 - *Business of Seafood 2024*

BIM, 2024 – *Annual Aquaculture Report 2024*

BIM, 2023 – *Carbon Footprint report of the Irish Seafood Sector*

BIM, 2023 – *National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture Development*

## **Background Information**

The IFA is Ireland's largest farming organisation, with 72,000 farmer members covering all production systems. The Association is structured with 947 branches and 29 County Executives across the country.

IFA Aquaculture is a consolidated representative body comprised of representatives from all sectors of the Irish aquaculture industry, this includes all stakeholders that farm fish, shellfish, seaweeds and for other novel species that may be cultured around the coastline of Ireland.

The National committee of IFA Aquaculture is comprised of representatives across all sub-sectors of Irish Aquaculture. IFA Aquaculture provides strong industry representation nationally and internationally, supporting the improvement and development of the Irish aquaculture industry and promoting positive aspects of Irish aquaculture.

IFA Aquaculture is a member of the Aquaculture Advisory Council in Brussels, the Federation of European Aquaculture Producers (FEAP), the European Mollusc Producers Association (EMPA), and the International Salmon Farmers Association (ISFA).

**ENDS.**