

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

Finian O'Sullivan IFA Aquaculture Chair

Pre-legislative scrutiny of Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2026

Tuesday 22nd September 2026

Chair and Committee Members, thank you for inviting IFA to address you today regarding the important process of Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Draft General Scheme of the Fisheries (Amendment) Bill 2026.

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

This draft legislation is particularly significant for the Irish aquaculture sector. It proposes substantial changes to the framework governing licence renewals, the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board, enforcement and the relationship between aquaculture and foreshore licences.

From the perspective of aquaculture producers, our central message today is straightforward: **legislative reform must deliver greater transparency for aquaculture businesses and must not simply replace one form of inefficient licensing process with another – we have reservations whether these proposed amendments go far enough to deliver the necessary efficient licensing process to realise the ambitions of sustainable development of the sector, set out in the National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture Development and the current Programme for Government.**

These legislative amendments are necessary to deal with the long-standing matter of licences operating under Section 19(A)4 but do not go far enough in dealing with the necessary reforms needed to deliver an efficient, transparent, sufficiently resourced aquaculture licensing system.

Licence Renewal and Business Continuity

The issue of licence renewal is particularly important. The accumulation of a backlog of aquaculture licence renewal determinations has a detrimental effect on the sustainable development of Irish Aquaculture – it appears that these proposed amendments will not immediately address the current backlog of in excess of 500 licence renewals awaiting determination.

The Bill proposes that renewal applications must be submitted at least 24 months before the expiry of an existing licence and extends the statutory period for determining applications from four months to 24 months. A new Section 10 (1a) will now require that the application to renew a licence is received and accepted by the Minister not less than 24 months before the existing licence expires.

We understand that complex applications, particularly those involving environmental assessments, require sufficient time for proper consideration.

Where a licence has been applied for and the Minister is unlikely to determine the application within the required period of time, the Minister may extend the licence for a temporary period specified in a written extension.

The Minister must be satisfied that the continued operation is unlikely to have the significant effect on or adversely affect the environment. However, it is not clear how or when the Minister would make such a determination. There is uncertainty around what environmental threshold must be met, and it also appears that there is no process or criteria specified.

Aquaculture producers need certainty to make decisions on investment, stock, employment and the future development of their businesses. However, we believe the Minister should ensure that necessary reforms of the licensing system are realised.

A producer who has submitted a valid and timely renewal application should not face having to cease operating because of delays in the State's licensing system that are outside their control.

The Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board

We also welcome proposals intended to improve the operation and capacity of the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board.

The Bill provides for increased flexibility in Board membership, broader expertise, a transparent appointment process, remote meetings and the use of divisions of the Board to support the speedier handling of appeals.

These changes are positive in principle. However, legislative changes alone will not resolve delays unless the Board is properly resourced.

For an aquaculture business, a delayed appeal can have serious consequences for investment, finance and the future viability of the business.

We would therefore urge the Minister to ensure that these reforms are matched by the resources, expertise and administrative capacity necessary to deliver a more efficient appeals system.

Environmental Protection and Regulatory Certainty

IFA Aquaculture fully recognises the importance of environmental protection. Our sector depends on clean, healthy and productive marine and coastal waters.

The Bill strengthens certain environmental provisions, including allowing for the revocation or amendment of licences where significant environmental effects are occurring or are likely to occur. It also updates environmental assessment terminology and references to EU legislation.

We support the need for the aquaculture sector to operate within a robust environmental framework.

However, a properly designed licensing system should protect the environment while also enabling sustainable food production and supporting viable coastal communities.

Our concern is that the legislation should provide clarity around the environmental assessments that will be applied, consistency in their application and a transparent basis for decision-making. Producers need to understand what is required of them and should not be left in prolonged uncertainty because of unclear processes or inconsistent interpretation.

Enforcement and Foreshore Licensing

The Bill also introduces significant new enforcement provisions. We accept the need for effective enforcement and for strong action against serious or persistent non-compliance.

However, these powers must be proportionate, fair and transparent. The objective should be to achieve compliance wherever possible, while retaining appropriate sanctions where they are necessary.

Finally, we welcome the Bill's action to address the relationship between aquaculture and foreshore licences, including provisions allowing for conditional grants and temporary extensions in certain circumstances.

An operator should not find themselves in a position where one necessary permission has been secured, but their business cannot operate because another related permission remains unresolved.

We would therefore encourage the Minister to ensure that the legislation delivers a genuinely coordinated and joined-up licensing process, with clear coordination between the relevant authorities and continuity of permissions where an operator has complied with the applicable requirements and delays are outside their control.

Further Amendments

We would also like to bring to the Committee's attention further amendments that should be considered for inclusion during the pre-legislative process of this draft Bill:

- Pre-planning Process – A pre-planning process should be introduced for new licence applications as recommended by the Aquaculture Licensing Review 2017 (8.2 (1) '*The establishment of a pre-*

application process to ensure that applications are complete and contain all of the material required to ensure an efficient processing of the application.'

- Remittal to DAFM – The draft Bill should provide for ALAB to remit DAFM determinations back to the Department in a similar process as other appeals bodies (e.g. Forestry Appeals board).

ALL recommendations of the Aquaculture Licencing Review 2017 should also be considered for inclusion, where appropriate, in order to maximise the opportunity for root and branch reform that the Review initially called for almost 10 years ago.

Consideration must also be given to recommendations for reform of the aquaculture licensing process outlined by the recently published Kieran Mulvey report.

Conclusion

Chairperson and Committee Members, IFA Aquaculture believes that this Bill is an important opportunity to address long-standing weaknesses and uncertainty in the aquaculture licensing system.

We welcome its overall intention to improve arrangements for licence renewal and determinations, strengthen the capacity of the appeals system, modernise enforcement and improve the interaction between aquaculture and foreshore licensing.

However, we have serious reservations whether these legislative measures will deliver the necessary reforms needed to deliver a licensing system that is **efficient, transparent, properly resourced and capable of providing regulatory certainty**.

Our key message is that aquaculture producers need confidence that their applications will be dealt with in a timely manner; that they will not be forced to cease operating because of administrative delays outside their control; that appeals will be dealt with efficiently; and that environmental and enforcement requirements will be clear, proportionate and consistently applied.

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

This Bill should not only be an opportunity simply to amend legislation, but to create a licensing system that gives responsible aquaculture businesses the certainty and confidence they need to invest, operate and develop for the future – This will also require the sufficient resources and political will to implement the necessary reforms needed in the aquaculture licensing system.

We welcome the Committee's engagement on this matter, we look forward to your questions and to working constructively on the further development of the Bill.

References:

Mulvey, 2026 – *Report to DAFM Minister of State Timmy Dooley Re: Current issues affecting the Irish Seafood/fishing sector & recommendations to address those issues.*

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

BIM, 2025 - *Business of Seafood 2024*

BIM, 2024 – *Annual Aquaculture Report 2024*

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

Independent Aquaculture Licensing Review Group, 2017 – *Review of the Aquaculture Licensing Process*

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).

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.

ENDS.