

Opposition mounts to super-sized fish farm in Galway Bay

THE Irish ballad *The West's Awake*, by Thomas Davis came to mind of late following the devastating news that Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) had lodged a proposal for a supersized salmon fish farm off Inis Oirr in Galway Bay.

Angling organisations, anglers, stakeholders, hoteliers, restaurateurs, islanders and west coast citizens are "up in arms" and rallying in large numbers in opposition to this outrageous proposal.

Take, for example, my report of Oct 29th in which I said the off-shore location for the proposed farm was a "step in the right direction". I was immediately contacted by an islander who, quite rightly, takes issue with this assumption.

Living on Inis Oirr, he said the location is just "one land mile" opposite the beach, "which is one of our greatest tourism assets". Any visible (or otherwise) pollution from the farm would have a devastating effect on the livelihood of many islanders.

He is also surprised that one of the biggest flaws in the Environment Impact Study (EIS) was overlooked, in which the proposed project is regarded as a "deep sea" initiative. "There is no area in Galway Bay that could, in maritime and fisherman's terms, be considered as deep sea," he said.

"This may seem a small issue but given the size and potential impact on the surrounding area, such details are of paramount importance. Neither I nor any self-respecting fisherman would consider the waters a mile off our shores as anything but shallow," he said.

In Galway anglers have united to fight the salmon farm proposed by BIM for Galway Bay. The proposed facility, reputed to be one of the largest open-pen salmon farms in the world containing 3.6 million salmon, has the potential to cause massive pollution to the bay, and to wipe out salmon and sea trout stocks in local rivers.

Galway Against Fish Farms (Gaff) condemned the way in which this project is being promoted by BIM. The State agency is trying to push through this application which could double the country's production of farmed salmon. This would then be franchised to a private operator and the profits diverted abroad, Gaff said.

The agency is playing the jobs card by claiming the project would create 500 jobs. Given the increasing automation in the fish farming industry, most observers believe the project will create only a fraction of this number, while destroying local salmon and sea trout fisheries that support many tourism-related jobs, Gaff said.

According to Gaff, the EIS assessment contains many claims not backed up by fact, as well as omissions, and is clearly an unsound document. Gaff calls on Minister Coveney to turn down the application when it comes before him following the public consultation process.

World champion salmon fly tyer Declan Tuffy from Galway, said BIM's plans to increase its salmon fish farming production by a staggering 100 per cent will be nothing short of an environmental disaster. "We have a duty as Irish citizens to protect our rare natural resource," he said.

"BIM gave us a 'golden egg story' of how salmon farms will provide hundreds of jobs to coastal communities. The impact of fish farms on local economies is far more damaging to communities, the environment and businesses dependant on angling tourism with job losses way out-stripping job creation," Tuffy said.

However, there is a glimmer of hope. In a survey carried out by Gardner Pinfold Consulting Inc. in conjunction with the Atlantic Salmon Federation, the case of wild salmon versus farmed salmon has finally been thrashed out. "The results are staggering," he said. The full report can be viewed at http://0304.nccdn.net/1_5/000/001/2c5/7cc/standingcommclosedcont.pdf

In the words of Orri Vigfusson from Iceland who has done more for salmon conservation than anyone else on this planet: "An Ireland, Norway, Scotland or Canada without wild Atlantic salmon in their famous rivers is a future too empty to contemplate. They would be rivers and countries that would have lost their souls."

Source Irish Times 10.12.12