

£17m loss threatens the salmon industry

SCOTLAND's lucrative salmon industry is facing a multi-million-pound threat from a parasitic disease outbreak, experts have warned. Worried fishermen said the spread of the disease in farms has seen hundreds of tons of fish being killed.

There are fears a recent outbreak of the parasite could have cost the industry as much as £17million. Some farms claim they are losing up to 20 per cent of stocks.

Yesterday, fishermen in the Western Isles said the disease is devastating stocks of farmed salmon. Warmer and saltier waters are being blamed for the recent outbreak, which occurs naturally and is difficult to control.

The parasite only appeared in Scotland last year, but has colonised farms from Shetland to Argyll.

Critics say the over-expansion of

By **Julie-Anne Barnes**

farms and the overcrowding of salmon has encouraged the disease to flourish.

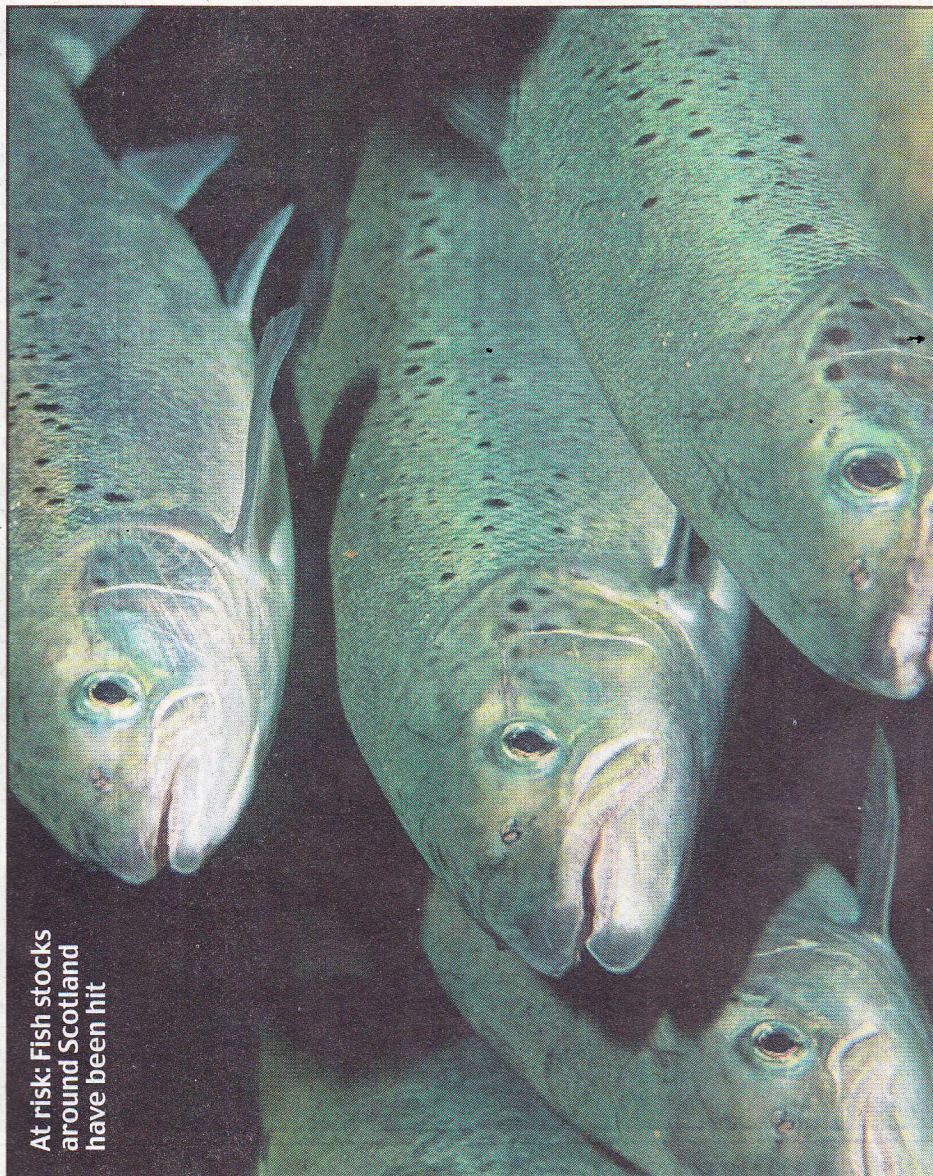
But the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation (SSPO) maintained that 'the treatment being used to kill the parasite is entirely safe for both fish and the marine environment'.

Exports of fresh Scottish salmon have leapt to record levels, according to the latest figures. Emerging and well-established markets helped boost exports by 22 per cent during 2011, rising to 95,638 tons.

Seven of the top ten markets have grown in volume and fresh Scottish salmon now reaches 64 countries worldwide. Exports of Scottish salmon have almost doubled in the past decade.

But the Scottish Salmon Company, an independent supplier, estimated it could lose 1,000 tons

At risk: Fish stocks around Scotland have been hit



of fish. If replicated across the industry it would mean a loss of nearly £17million at wholesale prices.

But the company, which produces 20,000 tons of salmon each year, insisted it would still be able to honour contracts and meet customer demand.

A spokesman for the Scottish Salmon Producer's Organisation moved to allay fears over the quality of the fish. He said: 'There will be no impact on texture, freshness and quality.'

The estimated multi-million-

pound bill is for dead salmon, lost production and the huge cost of expensive chemical treatment.

Amoebic Gill Disease (AGD) attacks the gills, causing swelling and mucus and suffocating the fish.

A spokesman for the Scottish Salmon Company said: 'We take the health and wellbeing of our fish very seriously and work rigorously to protect the natural environment and eco-systems in which we operate. We undertake daily health checks and where an incidence of AGD is discovered we act quickly,

in accordance with industry best practice guidelines, our own exacting veterinary procedures and Government regulation through our Marine Scotland licence.'

The SSPO says salmon farming is one of the biggest private employers in the Highlands and Islands.

The industry directly employs 2,124 people and thousands more in the salmon supply chain. It has put more than £1.4billion into the economy during the past four years with 500 new jobs created during the last three years.

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