

# Plans for ‘world’s biggest salmon farm’ did not progress beyond presentations

CRAIG TAYLOR

## OIC and SEPA under fire from campaigner over fish farm discussions

Documents outlining discussions on a massive “concept” salmon farm mooted for the Northern Isles hit the national headlines at the weekend.

If given the go ahead, the fish farm would be the largest of its kind in the world, it was claimed.

After details were released by anti-fish farm campaigner Don Staniford, *The Sunday Herald* reported that the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) had privately considered proposals for a 6,000-8,000 tonne salmon farm in the waters of the Northern Isles.

According to Mr Staniford, Orkney Islands Council was also involved in discussions about the potential development.

Mr Staniford, of the Global Alliance Against Industrial Aquaculture, released a series of emails and information gained through Freedom of

Information requests, giving details of discussions between sectors of the salmon farming industry and regulatory authorities.

He claimed that Marine Scotland and Scottish Seafarms are “pushing ahead” with plans to establish what would be the world’s largest salmon farm in Orkney, with Shetland also being considered as a site.

Releasing emails from the SEPA Kirkwall office, he stated: “SEPA’s (aquaculture specialist) Douglas Sinclair seems more than sceptical whether Scapa Flow is a suitable location, in view of huge historical problems with salmon farming pollution in the area (at much lower production levels).”

Mr Staniford told *The Orcadian*: “This crazy ‘experiment’ would be the world’s largest salmon farm and smash Scotland’s pollution limits for salmon farms.

“If SEPA sanctions such

stupidity in Orkney’s already overcrowded coastal waters, they would lose all credibility.

“Lest we forget that Norway — the world’s leading salmon farming nation — has strict biomass limits of less than 1,000 tonnes compared to 2,500 tonnes in Scotland.

“Allowing salmon farms to expand to 8,000 tonnes would signal that SEPA has abandoned any pretence to environmental protection.”

He added: “For OIC to seriously consider such a huge salmon farm shows their blatant disregard for Orkney’s precious wildlife and pristine environment.”

Asked for a response to the claims, an OIC statement said that “representatives from an aquaculture firm gave a presentation to officers of the council and SEPA regarding a demonstration site in November 2015.”

It added: “There has been no further correspondence from the firm regarding the concept, and no planning application lodged with the council.

“Council policy is that all aquaculture applications are considered on their merit, in consultation with a range of organisations including SEPA.”

Anne Anderson, SEPA’s head of regulatory services (North Region) added: “SEPA has been asked to take part in discussions around the possibility of establishing a large fish farm (described as an Innovation, Concept or Demonstration site) in Scottish coastal waters on a number of occasions in recent years.

“SEPA has a scientifically robust and well-tested method for assessing the capacity of the environment to cope with the polluting impacts of cage fish farms and, so far, our assessments of these proposals have not assured us that the environment, or the interests of neighbouring marine-based businesses, could be adequately protected.

“As long as the rearing of farmed fish in cages relies wholly on the marine environment’s capacity to break-down its wastes, the scale of sea farm units will always be limited by

this.

“SEPA has therefore been unable to approve such proposals to date.”

She added: “There has been some discussion about the development of truly innovative techniques to substantially reduce the environmental impact of cage fish farms.

“One example is new techniques that intercept the waste and allow it to be treated and possibly usefully recycled, which would help to reduce the impact on marine ecosystems.

“If a future proposal included such breakthrough techniques, SEPA would always be willing to assess it.”

Ms Anderson stressed that SEPA encourages innovation that can reduce environmental impact.

“However, we are clear that until, and unless, such larger cage fish farm proposals can demonstrate compliance with environmental standards, we will continue to reject them.”

Giving his reaction, Jim Gallagher, managing director of Scottish Sea Farms confirmed they had discussed a site location that could be used to demonstrate an “alternative approach” to fish farm operations.

“At the heart of the proposal,” he said, “was the willingness from the industry to invest in innovation, latest technology and infrastructure to allow aquaculture to be more competitive and improve sustainability, both environmentally and economically.”

He added that the “prize”

for Scotland was jobs, further investment with suppliers and the development of modelling to inform improved environmental performance and regulation.”

Meanwhile, Scott Landsburgh, chief executive of Scottish Salmon Producers’ Organisation said that any successful business had to innovate, discuss ideas with regulators and explore options.

“If broad-ranging discussions to look at new ideas and innovations are constantly viewed with suspicion, then it will be extremely difficult for Scottish salmon to develop any further, while our international competitors storm ahead and benefit from growing markets around the world.”