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RAT PACK

We've got giveaway tickets for a great new show

Objectors raise concerns about high levels of sea lice and use of chemicals

Fish farm plans are dubbed 'environmental vandalism'

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A CONTENTIOUS plan to enlarge an existing Wester Ross fish farm has caused outrage amongst passionate objectors who have branded the plan "environmental vandalism".

Those vehemently opposed to the proposed alterations at the farm on Loch Kanaird are concerned about the high levels of sea lice and the use of chemicals at the site and its impact on wild salmon and trout numbers in local rivers.

The proposal has even led some objectors to criticise the running of the current operation and to call for the Wester Ross Fisheries Ltd site at Ardmair north of Ullapool to be shutdown, rather than be extended.

Forty public comments have been lodged with the Highland Council's planning department and most — including an objection from the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fisheries Board — are strongly-worded pleas for the proposal to be rejected.

Wester Ross Fisheries Ltd is seeking permission to alter the existing site at its marine fish farm at Loch Kanaird to create a single

group of 46 square steel pens, and to allow for the installation of an automated feed barge.

The firm, which employs around 50 people, has farms in Loch Kanaird, Loch Broom and Little Loch Broom as well as a processing plant in Dingwall.

The salmon farm at Ardmair was established in 1977 and now the company wants to move away from a mixed pen type and focus on using steel pens, which it says requires less maintenance and enables staff to maintain high husbandry standards.

No one from the company was available for comment yesterday due to its attendance at the Highland Show.

A supporting statement lodged with the planning department says there will inevitably be some interactions between sea lice and wild and farmed salmonids and sea lice will be controlled by weekly monitoring and appropriate treatments.

"The change in pen group configuration and pen type will not require any innovative change in treatment techniques," it states.

"The change in pen group type and configuration will not increase risks to the effectiveness of our sea lice management."

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency and local community councils have not objected to the application.

However, the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fisheries Board claims it considers the proposed development will continue to cause an "adverse impact effect" on the Kanaird River and the wider area in general.

It says the application site appears to be one of the most problematic sea lice management sites in the west.

"It is clear that the wild fisheries within area 27 (known as the Two Brooms) are being affected by sea lice and that the WRF Ltd Kanaird site is potentially a significant source and magnification of sea lice which are being released into the receiving waters of Loch Kanaird," states the objection from chairman Bill Whyte.

The Association of Salmon Fishery Boards, the Salmon and Trout Association Scotland and the Rivers and Fisheries Trusts of Scotland — which says it is particularly concerned as to the performance of the site in respect of the control of sea lice numbers — have also voiced their opposition.

Some local estate owners are also against the plan saying that sea lice infested farming,

the use of chemicals and farmed salmon breeding with wild Atlantic salmon will further damage fishing on local rivers. Locals are also up in arms about it. Adrian Morgan, a Strathkanaird resident and fisherman, sailor and boatbuilder said he was appalled at the possibility of further pollution in Loch Kanaird.

One objector, Mark Hedgecoe, said the fish farm is already doing huge damage to migratory fish stocks in the area as a result of sea lice infestation. "Numbers of fish running the Kanaird and Ullapool rivers have been badly hit by this environmentally devastating menace. Moreover, the chemicals used to maintain fish farms are highly polluting," he said.

"Wester Ross Fisheries should be punished for their pollution by losing their licence to operate in Loch Kanaird — not rewarded by granting another site." Major R Stanners was of a similar mind, a migratory salmonid population," he said.

"Numbers of fish running the Kanaird and Ullapool rivers have been badly hit by this environmentally devastating menace."

Mark Hedgecoe

saying the applicant's below standard control over this operation had resulted in "hugely excessive" sea lice levels which are deadly to the young wild fish population.

Calling for the application to be rejected he said: "Further, I call into question whether the operation should be closed down and removed from the open sea on the basis of the known data."

Michael Timmis, who has been fishing for salmon and sea trout on the River Ullapool for the last 20 years, said that wild salmon numbers have suffered a dramatic decline and sea trout have all but disappeared from the river and the River Broom had also had similar catastrophic decline.

"Siting salmon cages in Loch Kanaird is an act of environmental vandalism. An alternative site should be found which is at least 25km away from the mouth of a river that has a migratory salmonid population," he said.