

A long awaited new facility for dealing with mortalities from the salmon farming industry has reached a milestone with an application to the regulator, SEPA, for permission to begin production.

The Whiteshore Cockles facility, at Bayhead in North Uist, is crucial to fish farming throughout the Western Isles and it is envisaged the new plant will provide 15 jobs – a major employment boost for the island. At the same time, there are plans for innovative ways to use the by-products for potential benefit to the crofting community

After eight years of designing and installing a groundbreaking and innovative drier system to process the salmon mortalities into recycled by-products, the company told the Gazette this week that installation of the equipment is almost complete.

There have been years of discussions and advice involving SEPA and various consultants. Now they have submitted a Part A PPC application to SEPA to authorise a permit which will allow production to begin. When the plant is fully operative it is envisaged that the 15 staff will cover a range of trades and skills while transportation of fish from throughout the Western Isles also supports three full-time drivers and two part-time.

Whiteshore Cockles Ltd is a family owned company based in Bayhead and has been involved in the disposal of fish farm waste for 18 years. Angus Macdonald, his wife Michelle and son Fraser all work in the business which also has a construction arm.

Angus is better known as probably the biggest crofter in the Western Isles with a herd of Highland cattle which grazes on Vallay island. That background gives him a particular motivation to find ways in which the new facility can benefit the crofting community.

European legislation restricted their original method of disposal and made the company look to a more environmentally friendly recycling system which will help to ensure the long-term viability of the islands' fish farm industry.

A multi-million pound investment has been involved and the plant will produce fish oil and meal from the salmon waste in an odour-controlled environment. A biomass burner has been installed which will utilise half the meal as a fuel to heat the drier system. Excess heat can also be used to run the grain dryer and provide a service to crofters.

The remaining oil and meal will be used to produce biofuel and as an addition to an Anaerobic Digester system. The company is also exploring the idea of using the meal as low-grade agricultural fertiliser which again could be offered locally a lower-cost alternative to crofters.

New staff have already been employed to maintain and service the machinery and once the permit is granted the company will advertise for further employees to work within the site.

The company have thanked the fish farms for their continued support and encouragement as well as Highlands and Islands Enterprise for their financial assistance and the Bayhead community for “their patience and understanding of the various issues that have arisen whilst the plans and installation of the new processing plant have been taken place during the transition period”.