Sir Tim Rice's son leads fight against upgrade plans. By **Mark Macaskill**

PLANS to upgrade a controversial fish farm in the Scottish Highlands have prompted a chorus of disapproval led by the family of Sir Tim Rice, the West End lyricist.

Wester Ross Fisheries (WRF), Scotland's oldest independent salmon farmer, wants to install almost 50 steel underwater cages at its Loch Kanaird site, close to the Rices' Dundonnell estate.

The move is opposed by, among others, members of the Vestey family, which owns the Inchnadamph estate in Sutherland, and Sir Roger Jones, a former BBC governor.

They argue the fish farm, sited close to several important salmon rivers, is polluting the water and killing marine life.

One of the most biting objections, however, has come from the pen of Donald Rice, son of the West End lyricist whose works include Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, Jesus Christ Superstar and Evita.

In a letter to Highland council, Rice claims juvenile salmon from nearby rivers have been found smothered in up to 500 lice. He warns that the infestations are among the worst recorded and has provided photographs of emaciated salmon with their fins eaten away.

Last week, WRF declined to respond to several approaches by The Sunday Times.

The company farms salmon at Loch Kanaird, mainly in wooden pens, but wants to replace these with larger steel cages.

The application includes spare cages that WRF says it will not use but which critics fear could be used in future to increase the tonnage of fish it farms at the site.

Since 2009, annual inspections of the site have highlighted levels of sea lice in excess of recommended thresholds. However, details of the duration and intensity of outbreaks are not in the public domain.

The Aquaculture & Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013 aims to ensure fish farm expansion does not damage the marine environment but Rice has accused Marine Scotland Science, a government agency, of "rubber-stamping" developments. Marine Scotland Science has told Highland council planners that "strategies for dealing with sea lice [used by WRF] are satisfactory as far as can reasonably be foreseen".

"We are past crisis point," said Rice.

"All the government agencies pass the buck and the law is not remotely stringent enough. Marine Scotland is rubber-stamping applications and failing wild salmonids on the west coast. Without farm-specific lice data, the aquaculture bill is completely worthless."

Hughie Campbell Adamson, chairman of the Salmon and Trout Association, said that evidence it had gathered from Marine Scotland Science under the Freedom of Information Act suggested that "the strategies used by Wester Ross Fisheries Limited over the last few years at Ardmair have not been satisfactory at all — far from it".

In a comment posted on Highland council's website, George Vestey said: "There is already far too much salmon farm activity in the northwest and it is clearly having a detrimental effect on migrating salmon and sea trout due to the increase in sea lice that salmon farms cause."

Rupert Longsdon, an Oxford-based member of the British team that made history in 2007 by reaching the centre of Antarctica without mechanical assistance (they used skis and kites), has also signalled his disapproval.

"We live for part of the year just outside Lochinver so this is obviously of local interest," he said. "However, I would object to this project anywhere in the British Isles as the evidence is overwhelmingly obvious against the detrimental effect this has."

A spokesman for the Scottish government said: "Aquaculture helps underpin sustainable economic growth, particularly in Scotland's rural and coastal communities.

"It has significant potential to contribute further by providing investment to create quality jobs and the Scottish government is committed to growing Scottish aquaculture.

"However, growth must be sustainable, and the industry must act as a good neighbour and operate to best practice."

THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT IS TURNING A BLIND EYE