

Damage fears over 'supersize' salmon farms

Julia Horton

Plans to "supersize" Scottish salmon farms and move them to "mythical" safety in deeper coastal waters will create sea lice factories, causing greater damage to the environment and wild fisheries, conservationists have warned.

The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (Sepa) is proposing lifting a ban restricting fish farms to 2,500 tons – about 500,000 "harvestable" salmon per farm – to make it more viable for the multimillion-pound aquaculture sector to expand into "exposed, more remote, deep-water locations with strong tides".

The environmental watchdog believes such sites are the most sustainable places for fish farms, because more powerful wind and tidal conditions will significantly disperse polluting waste and reduce disease levels, which would in turn lessen the need for toxic chemical treatments.

A Holyrood inquiry recently warned that Scottish government plans to double the lucrative business risked "irrecoverable" environmental damage. Lifting the ban could lead to the world's biggest fish farms being established here.

In evidence submitted to the inquiry, Sepa said allowing "large-scale farms" could attract the significant investment in infrastructure and innovation needed for firms to "relocate and consolidate" operations in less accessible places. Tidal conditions at preferred sites would make the impact of waste on the seabed "nor-

The watchdog wants to lift the restriction on the size of fish farms, to make it viable for the industry to move farms to more remote locations

mally much less severe than elsewhere".

Richard Luxmoore, senior conservation adviser at the National Trust for Scotland, said: "Even if they could find these mythical remote offshore locations that have these kinds of tides – and I don't think they exist – what you would have is basically a sea lice factory.

"It's more difficult to control disease when you've got a bigger farm. If they increase the volume of fish, they will increase the problem of releasing sea lice larvae. What they are proposing is going to be more detrimental to wild fish – especially wild salmon and sea trout – than the situation now."

Luxmoore said stronger currents could disperse waste but branded Sepa's thinking flawed, arguing that faeces would form "hot spots".

Don Staniford, of the anti-fish farm group Scottish Salmon Watch, said "supersizing" salmon would cause ecological ruin and could destroy the nation's "premium brand" image worldwide by creating "fast-food farmed salmon".

The Scottish Wildlife Trust has cautiously supported plans to move fish farms offshore, provided trials are done to prove it is better for the environment.

Several fish farms, including Marine Harvest, have told the Holyrood inquiry they are moving to more remote areas. The firm, from Norway, wants Scotland to allow farms up to 3,500 tons.

The Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation said lifting the weight restriction was welcome, but many successful farms would want to keep their existing locations.

Last year it was reported that plans for the world's biggest fish farm off Scotland were viewed by Sepa as unsustainable.

A Sepa spokesman said it was committed to protecting and enhancing Scotland's environment and would "shortly" announce "firm, evidence-based proposals" on more sustainable locations and better control of chemical treatments.

The Scottish government repeated its commitment to protecting the environment upon which the aquaculture sector and "many others" depended, and to balancing sustainable growth with economic, environmental and social responsibilities.

