Supplementary written evidence from the Scottish Salmon Producers’ Organisation

Having attended the recent hearings of the RACCE over the last couple of weeks, I felt this was an important time to write to you expressing my industry’s position with regard to the Aquaculture and Fisheries Bill and in particular the persistent issue of sea lice reporting.

Although from the outset, we had concerns regarding the Bill’s capacity to enable the industry to develop, we have recognised there are some pragmatic proposals which can be usefully implemented in the legislation. The subject of sea lice reporting seems to be dominant in both the written and oral evidence and I would like to clarify exactly what the industry is proposing to further develop its already established, publicly available reporting system. Industry, through SSPO, will launch an enhanced information system, reporting across approximately 30 areas from January 2013 which updates the existing reporting system which has been active for the past two years. This will enable those who desire more information to achieve a much greater understanding of this aspect of fish health management in local areas where salmon farms and wild salmon runs co-exist. Scottish Government officials have been advised of our proposal and are fully supportive of it. The question which has not been asked is “what do anglers propose to do with the information they seek on specific sea lice numbers”. To date, no-one has stated their reasons for requiring this. In truth, if the anglers’ demand for more information is borne from a genuine desire to have a complete informed picture of the total interaction between wild and farmed fish then the angling groups would offer reciprocal information on various aspects relating to wild fish exploitation. We, in the industry, are genuinely interested in establishing a comprehensive fisheries management area system. Our 30 carefully selected areas will bring a plethora of information on fish farms to the public domain, but we have yet to see any concrete proposals from the wild sector to populate and supplement this databank.

In my capacity as Chair of the Better Image and Improved Reputation sub-committee of the previous MGA, I noted that attitudinal research1 on Scotland’s aquaculture industry showed quite clearly that there is very little public interest in, or appetite for, information on this issue, unless it is pro-actively raised through negative campaigning against the industry. The industry is concerned that raw data on its own will be used by those with an agenda against the industry to mount negative campaigns which will result in exaggerated and unfounded press coverage and commercial impacts. The truth in this is that all sea lice information is available to Fish Health Inspectors at any time under existing legislation. Existing access to this information provides ample opportunity for FHI to assess whether or not our farm managers and their professionally qualified vets are taking the right approach to the management and control of sea lice. Unfortunately, the wild fish lobby, becoming privy to such information, will use it to seek to undermine the probity of the Fish Health Inspectorate and Marine Scotland by proclaiming reported farm number counts as damaging to their sector. Their track record on this to date confirms this and exposes their preferred solution to have fish farms removed from the shared water bodies of north west Scotland.

1 http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/marine/Fish-Shellfish/18364/marketing/CraggRossDawson
Indeed, salmon farmers and their vets have legal responsibilities to ensure high standards of welfare for fish in their care. A side benefit from this is that all necessary steps are taken to ensure not only high welfare standards, but also minimum impact on the local environment and therefore the wild fish in the vicinity of farms.

I ask you and your fellow Committee members to consider the above points.