

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

SALMON FARMING IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM KATRINE JOHNSON

I wish to submit a response to your current enquiry into salmon farming, in particular highlighting the positive impact it has created within our own communities in the North Isles of Shetland. My family have been fortunate to have been involved in salmon farming in our island since the mid 1980's and I have to say this industry has been the reason we have been able to enjoy our life in the home and island we love.

I was born in the 1960's and was brought up in the island of Unst at a time that the main source of income for many on the island was from the military presence based at RAF Saxavord. Along with support services to the military and some small local businesses and family crofting this was the mainstay of our island. In the 70's the oil boom years had arrived in Shetland. Unst was too far to benefit directly from the building of the Sullom Voe oil terminal but by the end of the 70's the Unst airport had been identified and extended to provide daily flights of personnel out to the oilrigs. In terms of employment, the future of our island and financial security available to residents these can probably be regarded as our golden years. The population of our island was probably at an all-time high in the region of 1200.

By 1979, after 2 years attending the High School in Lerwick, I, like so many others before me had left Unst and secured employment in Lerwick. This sadly was the way things were, many generations of young folk have had to leave the outer isles and seek employment further afield. I worked in Lerwick until 1988 when I returned to Unst marrying a local who was one of the first fish farmers in the island.

When I returned to Unst it was a vibrant place to live, with many prospects for people within the island, and a good future for people to stay here. Many of our peers had returned home and the island was a thriving community. The first of the major blows to Unst at this time occurred in 1996 when the oil industry pulled out from Unst airport with the loss of in excess of 20 local jobs at this time. This was followed in 2001 by an initial drawdown at RAF Saxavord with final closure of the base in 2007. The result of this was that the population hit a low in the region of 500 with many of the young folk and their families having to leave the island to gain employment. Since that time salmon farming has been the largest employer in the island with a long term future and I hope remains so.

The first year of salmon farming in Unst was in 1985, 2 cages in Uyeasound holding 7000 smolts. The enterprise was started by my husband and his uncle, along with his family to supplement their croft. This was followed in the next few years by more start up fish farms along with a couple of hatcheries. These fish farms all remained under private local ownership until 1995 when the first hatchery and sea sites were purchased by an outside company. In terms of securing the future of the industry in

the island this was a great success, providing capital and expertise to help develop the business. Since then we have seen this small croft subsidising scheme develop way beyond initial expectations. Today, all of the fish farm sites in the North Isles of Shetland are under the ownership of one family owned multi national company, still with family values at heart, much like our own in the islands. This has brought many benefits to the business, local communities and its residents.

The waters around our islands here in the north of Shetland are regarded as some of the finest in the world for the production of farmed salmon. The waters are clear and temperatures are steady throughout the year. Over recent years it can't be denied that there are more challenges than there was in the early days, but the industry is constantly moving forward, researching and developing.

Global demand is at an all-time high for the Superior product which is grown on our sites. Who could have imagined the worldwide appeal of this healthy, affordable food?

The onsite staff have many years experience in the industry and are trained to a very high standard in fish care and health, along with boat handling and daily site maintenance. Many have taken part in Modern Apprenticeship training provided by the local North Atlantic Fisheries College. The Company is also committed to encouraging children in the community to learn about the industry and consider as a future career.

The spin off support services to fish farming within Shetland and beyond is immeasurable. Wellboats, site service boats, ferries, local supply companies, local college, transport, both of the feed and final product, plus many more jobs creates a vast array of employment with a wide ranging skill set which is required to support the industry. It is no longer a case of chucking a few scoops of feed as it was back in the 1980's. Feeding is now strictly monitored and controlled remotely through wi-fi on many sites.

The Company is actively involved in and provides financial support to many community groups and projects within the islands. It is also extremely supportive to staff members in supporting community led projects.

Fish farming now employs over 100 people in the North Isles of Shetland thus providing money which is spent in the local community, in the shops, infrastructure and social facilities. In addition many people indirectly benefit from the industry be it through support services, transport, etc. The sector is well managed, and it is in no-ones interest to allow growth that would be detrimental to its aims, the environment it operates in and the communities and people it works alongside.

Throughout my lifetime I have had the ultimate pleasure of bringing my family up within a small supportive community surrounded by their extended family. They attended the local schools, had the freedom to play in this vast island playground

and have so many experiences that many children will never, ever have the chance of. I am now seeing the next generation entering fish farming in our community and hope to see them enjoy the same benefits as me and mine have done.

There is no doubt in my mind that without this industry none of us would be in these islands today, we suffered greatly from the loss of the major employers aforementioned and nearly 20 years later the island has never reached the same level of employment that was previously available. Fish farming was our saviour – long may it remain.

Katrine Johnson

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