

Dear Rural Affairs & Islands Committee,

I write to you in connection with your ongoing review of salmon farming in Scotland.

I wish to comment on two aspects. First is the management of fish welfare through the combined activity of the FHI, the APHA and the Local Authorities. The second is the suggestion that there should be a 'pause' in the consenting of new farms and expansion of existing farms.

1. Fish Welfare

Fish Welfare is, as you know, covered by the Animal and Plant Health and Welfare Act (Scotland) 2006.

This prevents 'unnecessary suffering', unless perhaps it is allowed by a suitably enacted Code of Good Practice (CoGP) of an established industry. The aquaculture CoGP appears not to be enacted and the Cabinet Secretary has undertaken to produce a statutory document which might improve the legality of the situation, but probably won't improve the life of the fish very much if at all.

Crucially, however, there is no indication whatever of a timetable for producing this important document.

Both the 2006 Act and the CoGP make mention of the Five Freedoms which are part of the essential requirement for ensuring animal welfare. There is ample evidence that one of these five, the provision of a suitable environment, is routinely disregarded. This is certainly so in cases where Lumpfish are used as cleanerfish in exposed sites.

In correspondence with APHA, the Veterinary Lead for Scotland has refused to explain, either in principle or with regard to a specific case, why no such case has been referred to the relevant Local Authority.

We know from recent press coverage in The Ferret, well supported by statistical evidence provided by the Scottish Government, that seven million cleanerfish have died on Scottish farms in recent years. I believe this number does not include those routinely slaughtered at the end of the cycle.

Poor welfare, illegal under the 2006 Act is happening almost continually in Scottish salmon farms. Yet there are almost no referrals for consideration of prosecutions and there is no change in behaviour.

As you know, fish welfare is the responsibility of APHA, but they rely on the FHI and the public to refer possible cases to them and on Local Authorities to consider any possible prosecutions. In theory, this structure could work, but in practice it does not do so at all. Fish welfare enjoys no significant protection from it.

All three organisations are in some way connected to government and therefore obliged to promote 'sustainable' aquaculture. Nobody even knows what this is. Nobody knows whether it is supposed to refer to aquaculture as we have it or

whether it refers to an ideal state to which we all aspire and towards which we are inexorably moving. Neither position is defensible.

FHI have no remit to take an active interest in welfare and no particular expertise or interest in it. Their staff seem to be very knowledgeable in identifying specific diseases, which they examine closely. They rarely report cases of poor welfare to APHA.

The public cannot observe poor welfare on farms, because they are out in the sea and the farmers are currently engaged in lawsuits which seek to make it illegal to approach farms. The exception to this is covert filming, which seems to reveal poor welfare surprisingly often. Of course, we cannot know how many pieces of covert filming uncover no problems at all.

When the public do raise a complaint, it must generally be done on the basis of reports to FHI on mortalities and FHI inspection reports, always at least a month out of date. By this time, there is often no poor welfare left to observe.

APHA's reaction in most cases seems to be to study the very same FHI reports and to contact the FHI for explanations. Occasionally, they will make an inspection. Sometimes the visits are described as 'remote'. It is unclear what this means. Perhaps the farms concerned are in a 'remote' location. Otherwise one imagines APHA vets looking at a video of a farm worker standing by a pen holding up a dead salmon or maybe sitting at a screen displaying a document.

Over the past three years, the number of complaints to APHA has trebled, doubled and trebled again. Over the same period, the percentage of complaints leading to a visit has fallen from 100% to 33%, then 10% and back to 23%. Of 57 complaints last year, only 13 led to a visit, of which 9 were 'remote'. (Figures from an FOI request by The Ferret.)

Only two cases have been referred to Local Authorities for possible prosecution in the past six years. In short, this labyrinthine system seems very well designed to fail. It protects salmon farmers, not fish.

2. A Moratorium or Pause in Consenting

On this subject, the Cabinet Secretary said to you: 'A moratorium would not be appropriate. It would not be a means to tackle the challenges that we face. We have outlined some of them. A lot of what we have said is about what we can do to try and mitigate some of the challenges. Much work and investment is already going into that. You could set a target or introduce a moratorium but that will not change the work that needs to happen or that is already under way.'

She seems not to see any benefit in pausing consents for new farms or expansions. Perhaps we should all try to see this from the point of view of the fish; sentient beings whose welfare is supposed to be protected. They might appreciate a pause.

Indeed, many pieces of work have been undertaken or promised. It must be assumed that these will lead to improvements, otherwise we would not be doing them. Some of them, proposed or already begun, are listed below.

National Marine Plan 2. Many years overdue, resulting from a 2021 Review, this document, expected in 2027, should say something useful about aquaculture. Many people and organisations are hoping that it will take a position on spatial planning. It is delayed partly because the most recent feedback was extensive, and not very favourable, about the work done so far. We must be optimistic that it might eventually be useful to aquaculture. The Cabinet Secretary herself promised all of this to you in her feedback last September. It would be sensible not to consent new farms until we know where they could best be placed.

The new SEPA Sealice Regulatory Framework. This has been completed by SEPA after several years of hard work, but its implementation is currently blocked by sector-wide industry appeals to the DPEA. It is uncertain how this will end as due process must be followed. It would seem to be obvious commonsense not to consent new farms until SEPA knows how it will be able to regulate them regarding this very contentious aspect of their work.

Scottish Animal Welfare Commission (SAWC) report on Cleanerfish. This was published in 2025, again after much delay. This recommended that a great deal of further research is needed, but that the use of cleanerfish should be phased out within the next ten years. This is because there is so much wrong with current practice. They recommended research into unexplained mortalities as well as explained ones. They recommended more research into several other areas, but there is no programme for carrying out any of this research. A pause in consenting now would avoid unnecessary suffering for all the potentially millions of cleanerfish who might be placed in any new farms. This would be a huge benefit to those fish.

The Cabinet Secretary, reporting to you in September 2025, referenced the research plans of Professor Mark Inall, Chief Scientific Advisor (Marine). They are extensive and cover health, welfare and mortality amongst other topics. A pause now would allow more fish to enjoy the benefits of some of this work. Surely it would be better to plan and execute some of this work before enlarging the existing problems.

There is work already underway to identify poorly performing existing farms, if any. When the methodology is agreed, perhaps this work will reveal patterns in the locations of farms which produce poor mortality results. If so, It would be good to know how to avoid replicating such errors.

There is much more besides the list cited above, which I do not mention for reasons of brevity. It would be of benefit to so many future fish, as yet unborn, both salmon and cleanerfish, who could be spared unnecessary suffering if this work were done before any more farms are permitted. They could also avoid some of the supposedly necessary suffering that the CoGP permits.

I ask you to try to set this against the harms that would be done by a pause, limited until certain work has been completed or specific targets on such metrics as mortality have been achieved. I imagine a modest number of employees who are employed entirely in developing proposals for new farms might find their jobs at risk, but it is for the farmers rather than for me to enumerate the drawbacks.

The idea of a pause in consenting recurs whenever salmon farming is evaluated. I hope you will give it serious consideration again now.

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