

## Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee

### Environmental impacts of salmon farming

#### Follow-up response from Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) to supplementary questions following ECCLR meeting of 6 February 2018 and corrections to previous evidence provided

#### Maerl Beds

##### *Committee questions:*

- *In evidence SEPA referred to 29 fish farms located close to maerl beds and then referenced 13 remaining maerl beds - can we have clarity - is it the case that of the original 29 maerl beds located close to fish farms only 13 remain or only 13 remain unaffected?*
- *Can SEPA confirm that 16 maerl beds in the vicinity of fish farms have now disappeared or been damaged? What is the process of stopping the activities? What action have SEPA and SNH taken in relation to the individual farms and compliance? Have licences been adjusted or revoked? How many other maerl beds or any other protected feature have been damaged?*

These questions follow on from statements made at the committee meeting on 6 February by our SEPA representative, Anne Anderson. We have since referred back to the Official Report and we would like to correct our response to the Convenor's question concerning maerl beds. At the meeting we said that there are 29 sites that are currently positioned in and around areas where maerl beds are present, and that maerl has not been recorded as present at 13 of the 29 facilities. This was incorrect and we apologise for this. Such conclusions cannot be drawn from the data we have.

In support of an application to authorise a fish farm, the Operator will typically submit a pre-development seabed survey to identify the habitats and species that are present both in close proximity to the development and at a suitable reference station remote from the development. SEPA will include this information in its risk assessment process during the determination of an application.

Once a fish farm is authorised, monitoring is required to be carried out by Operators in close proximity to the fish farm and at a reference station(s) and the results of this monitoring must be reported to SEPA for assessment. This monitoring will include benthic faunal assessment either by intrusive grab sampling, or where seabed sediment is not conducive to grab sampling, by other means such as visual survey. Where present this should identify maerl beds or fragments.

SEPA has not authorised any applications for fish farm developments likely to have significant adverse effects on marine protected areas, including areas designated for maerl or proposed to be so designated. We do not hold information with which to assess whether farms authorised in the past (i.e. pre-dating the establishment of protected areas for maerl) affected the quality or extent of any maerl beds present around these farms.

In our response of 16 February, we explained the process of stopping the activities and action by SEPA in relation to compliance. Regarding revoked or adjusted licences, SEPA has not had cause to reduce the permitted biomass at, or revoke the authorisation for, any fish farm for the purposes of ensuring the achievement of a protected area objective, including those for maerl.

SEPA has reduced the permitted biomass at a number of farms where there were unacceptable impacts on the health of the sea bed, but this action was not taken to address impacts on maerl per se.

### **Unannounced visits to fish farms**

We are taking the opportunity in this response to also make a correction to our written evidence of 16 February regarding the number and frequency of unannounced visits to fish farms. We previously stated the following numbers:

In 2015, 20% of 197 visits were unannounced  
In 2016, 35% of 168 visits were unannounced  
In 2017, 15% of 132 visits were unannounced.

The figures should be:

In 2015, 14% of 174 visits were unannounced  
In 2016, 13% of 152 visits were unannounced  
In 2017, 9% of 160 visits were unannounced.

Again, we apologise for the error in our earlier response.