



Pearse Doherty T.D.

Independent Review of Aquaculture Licensing
C/O Deirdre Morgan – Secretary to the Independent Review Group
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
National Seafood Centre
Clonakilty, Co. Cork



Tuesday 7th February 2017

A chairde,

We are writing to make a formal observation, pursuant to the terms of reference of the Independent Review Group, as part of the of Aquaculture licencing process and associated legal framework, and as directed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

We hereby enclose herein details of our submission with respect to same for your consideration.

Visual Impact:

The tranquillity, quietude and unspoilt attributes associated with many of the rural coastal settings to which a considerable number of applications for aquaculture relate, is a cause of concern for many communities.

In areas which have remained largely undeveloped, it's felt that the impact of large scale oyster farming can greatly impede on the unique rural landscape and unblemished topography of an area.

Oyster farming, as a commercial activity, is specially structured and orientated to take full advantage of the biology and life cycle of the target species. Depending on the methods of cultivation and techniques involved, harvesting of shellfish can cause considerable visual obstruction. The technique favoured by many applicants involve the use of 'Oyster Trestles' which, as physical steel structures of varying heights, are easily visible. Additionally, the installation of 'navigation poles' along the marine bed, which are designed to be much greater in height than trestles, may also be considered to be unsightly.

In such instance where the above cultivation methods have been prescribed, such sizeable frames and poles may be clearly visible in the littoral/inter-tidal zones concerned - particularly during periods of low tide.

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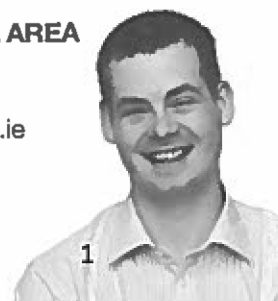
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It may therefore be argued that such activities and methods of cultivation are visually intrusive and can cause significant visual obstruction for both residents and visitors of the areas in which they are found.

Evidently, there is a responsibility on the licensing authorities to ensure that farms are not disproportionate in terms of their both size and scale compared to the proposed host site.

Collective Impact of Applications:

Further to the earlier argument of there being an onus on licensing authorities to ensure that aquaculture developments are proportional to the areas in which they are located, it is also crucial that, prior to a determination being made in respect of an application, that decision makers are cognisant of both existing aquaculture developments at the host site, and at neighbouring sites, as well of developments for which applications are presently being considered.

In other words, applications should not be viewed merely in isolation but rather, licensing authorities must take into consideration the collective impact which all existing and all potential developments have and are likely to have on the host site before a decision is made to grant or refuse an application. Failure to do so will result in aquaculture developments being disproportionate and not commensurable to the areas in which they are sited.

Method of Notice:

At present, existing regulations require applicants to publish, in a newspaper which is circulated in the vicinity of the location of the proposed aquaculture, a notice of application.

From the experience to date of many local communities in which aquaculture developments have occurred and in which licences have been sought, this statutorily mandated practice in relation to communicating the intention of the applicant is not sufficient as it does not allow for adequate formal notice to be given to the communities concerned in respect of proposed developments.

Accordingly, efforts to address and rectify this unsatisfactory method of communicating aquaculture licence applications should be further examined and scrutinised, with the view to radically improve, supplement and expand the existing statutory public notice requirements which applicants must give as part of the formal application process.

Environmental Impact:

Considering that the nature of the activities pertaining to aquaculture applications are primarily marine based, the negative influences often associated with aqua-farming on the marine environment must not be overlooked.

In areas for example which have been designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), it would be prudent and wise that licensing authorities require applicants wishing to carry out mari-culture activities to submit an Environmental Impact Statement as part of the application, pursuant to the Aquaculture (Licence Application) Regulations, 1998. Such a prerequisite is crucial to ensure that the an applicant can demonstrate that the application satisfies Natura requirements.

It is widely documented that oyster farming, if not properly regulated, can have a detrimental effect on the marine environment, while aquaculture in general may result in changes to the benthic macro-fauna. Aquaculture stock may pose a threat to wild populations through a reduction in gene pool strength caused when escaping farm stock mate with wild species, something which can result in the transmission of diseases to wild stocks. Furthermore, in areas where aquaculture activity is prolific, this is likely to result in environmental degradation and may lead to poor aquaculture growth rates. Therefore, in bays where aquaculture is abundant, the marine environment is likely to suffer from 'over stocking'.

Furthermore, the potential impact of intertidal oyster culture on water birds and the distribution of any birds which inhabit or depend on water bodies has become the subject of much study in recent years. Research carried out by the Marine Institute into the effects of oyster farming on marine and aquatic birds, has found that the assemblage variation and flocking behaviour of certain bird species is heavily affected by the presence of oyster trestles.

The study found that the species which tend to feed in large highly concentrated flocks, such as the Knot (*Calidris canutus*); Sanderling (*Calidris alba*); Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*); Blacktailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*); Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*) and the Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), all demonstrated a negative response to the structures. The presence of trestles in the samples taken from the studied ordination space, directly interfered with the flocking and territorial behaviour of the species, forcing individual birds to become dispersed across several lines of trestles.¹

It's notable that the species which displayed the strongest negative response to oyster trestles generally favour open mudflats/sandflats, such as those to be found at many foreshore locations. Consequently, mixed sediment and rocky shore sites are often cited as the preferred locations for littoral zone oyster culture as such sites can minimise the potential harmful impact of oyster culture on birds inhabiting the marine environment. In this context, it can reasonably be argued that the areas for which licences are being sought must be suitable for the installation of oyster trestles and harvesting equipment given the repercussions which such activities can have on avifauna.

¹ Gittings, T. & O'Donoghue, P.D. (2012). *The effects of intertidal oyster culture on the spatial distribution of waterbirds*. Report prepared for the Marine Institute. Atkins, Cork.

Consequently, and in order to avoid such scenarios as discussed above, it is therefore crucial that aquaculture activities are properly regulated and restricted to ensure that they are sustainable and commensurate to the area and local in which they occur.

Economic Impact:

Notwithstanding the potential knock-on effects which marine based activities may yield as discussed previously in this submission, another area to which consideration must be given is that of the impact which such developments may have on the local economy.

Much of our coastline is widely recognised for its breath taking natural beauty and is renowned for the unspoilt natural habitats contained therein. 'The Beautiful Scenery' was the main reason cited by tourists for choosing to holiday in the counties such as Donegal for example according to tourism studies. In one such study, 80% of respondents credited the 'Beautiful Scenery' as their primary reason for recommending the area. These figures therefore serve to highlight the significance of protecting and promoting local topographies in order to sustain and further develop the tourism sector here.²

Accordingly, it is important to note that poor and imprudent planning and aquaculture management can impact negatively on lucrative recreational activities and amenities such as fishing, water sports and ecotourism to name a few. This is particularly worrying when one considers the importance of the hospitality and tourism sector to coastal regions, particularly those which host a number of recreational water based leisure activities such as boating, canoeing, equestrian beach trekking, kayaking, sailing and swimming, etc., in areas where favourable marine environments facilitate their use for any great number of leisure purposes.

As a result, such marine locations can act as a major lure and pull factor for visitors when coming to the region, and any development which could potentially restrict or limits their usage for water based leisure activities should be vehemently opposed. Incidentally, the size and scale of projects, as well as 'Access' Zones, must not render the host strand unsuitable for recreational, sporting and or leisure pursuits.

It may reasonably be argued therefore that aquaculture activities must only be permitted in situations whereby a locality's ability to sustain existing tourism trade would not be irrevocably damaged as a result of same.

² Fáilte Ireland, (2013) *Holidaymarker Study 2013 – Donegal/Sligo*

In conclusion, our observations regarding the review of the Aquaculture licencing process and associated legal framework are set out and outlined herein for the due consideration of the Independent Review Group concerned.

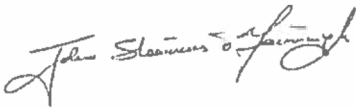
Signed:



Deputy Pearse Doherty



Cllr Marie-Therese Gallagher



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