



Dear Rural Affairs Committee,

I'm writing to raise a number of issues prior to the upcoming meeting scheduled for the 25th of February to continue the review of industrial salmon farming in Scotland.

I work as a ghillie and fishing guide on the River Spey in Morayshire. I have fished regularly on the Rivers Dee, Spey and Tay as a visitor to Scotland when living in the south of England.

Over the past 15 years I have seen first hand the decline in wild salmon numbers. While there are a number of contributing factors, the evidence that the expansion of open cage industrial salmon farming in the Orkney and Shetland Isles has been devastating for wild salmon populations in the East Coast rivers is overwhelming.

Rivers on the West Coast saw a similar decline in the nineties and early 2000's when the industry expanded in the Hebrides.

Numerous scientific studies have indicated that open cage salmon farming harms wild fish populations.

I'm sure members of this committee are aware of this evidence, but I would like to bring to your attention some important developments that have occurred since your last discussion.

Happily, the first of these developments is a positive one for wild salmon. Real world evidence now exists that removing open cage salmon farms from wild fish migration routes can lead to the swift recovery of wild populations.

In 2021 around the Discovery Islands off the coast of British Columbia, 47 salmon farms were shut down.

In 2025 the runs of wild coho salmon back to the Fraser and other rivers in the area were the best since before industrial scale farming began in the area in the mid 1990's.

The impact that open cage farming has on wild salmon is now in plain sight. Remove the farms and the fish will return. We don't need more industry led studies or test cases. We need similar action here in Scotland!

The other developments I'd like to draw attention to are unfortunately not so positive.

While all rivers are special to those who live near and work on them, my local river, the Spey, holds a unique place in the salmon fishing heritage of Scotland.

Sadly, chances of catching a Spey salmon are lower than ever. The 2025 return was one of the lowest since records began.

The river is recognised as the home and birthplace of a particular style of fly fishing that is practised all over the world, from the UK to Scandinavia, to Japan, to the West Coast of the USA and Canada.

Spey Casting has become an art form in itself, with regular festivals and competitions held in all of these places..

For the anglers who come from far and wide to cast a line on the river here, their trip is a pilgrimage to where it all began in the late 1800's when Alexander Grant first developed this style of casting on the banks of the Spey.

It is an iconic sporting venue for those who love fly fishing, comparable to The Old Course at St Andrews for a golfer, Lords cricket ground or the Centre Court at Wimbledon for a tennis enthusiast.

It is a 'must visit' for anyone who loves the sport and for anyone who appreciates its history, traditions and cultural heritage in Scotland.

Open cage salmon farming in the Northern Isles is a direct threat to this heritage as sea lice from these farms kill the young salmon smolts as they begin their migration through the Moray Firth.

The anglers who come to fish on the river bring thousands of pounds of income to the local economy. Not only to the fishing beats themselves, but to hotels, pubs, restaurants, distilleries, petrol stations, and other small and medium sized businesses.

As fish numbers dwindle, visiting anglers are coming less frequently, staying for less time and spending less money.

The decline in fish numbers isn't just a problem for the tourist industry.

Salmon fishing is sometimes portrayed as an expensive and elitist pastime. However, the River Spey supports at least seven local Angling Associations, where the people who live and work in the valley can buy a season ticket on excellent stretches of the river for a few hundred pounds. Day tickets are available on these beats for as little as £30.

The benefits for both physical and mental wellbeing of spending time outside in nature are well documented. The community aspect of these local groups is also important. As the numbers of wild salmon continue to decline, these associations are struggling to maintain their memberships. Opportunities to enjoy recreational time by the river with like-minded friends and family inevitably decline as well.

Industrial fish farming in Scotland is dominated by four foreign-owned multinational companies. Yes, they employ just over a thousand people to the Highlands and Islands, but at a cost to jobs in other sectors. Recreational angling is the obvious one, but artisanal inshore commercial fisheries are also affected by pollution from salmon farms.

The industry is becoming more automated, so job numbers are falling while production and pollution increases.

Tourists visiting the West Coast and the Hebrides expect to see unspoilt lochs and coastlines, rather than salmon cages and plastic waste littering the shoreline.

The profits made by these companies disappear offshore. All the pollution and waste from millions of caged salmon stays untreated in Scotland's coastal waters.

The vast majority of the salmon grown in Scotland is exported, mainly by air freight. The carbon footprint of this method of transport is never included in the claims of sustainability made by the industry.

The question is, how long are the government and regulators going to allow this industry to pollute our environment, to provide cheap fish to the Chinese, US and European markets? If the companies were held to the same pollution and animal welfare standards as other farming sectors, their business model would become unviable overnight.

We need action now. A moratorium on fish farm expansion and strict enforcement of the sea lice regulations recommended by SEPA in its recent review of the industry should be the first and minimum steps.

In the medium to long term, the industry must be moved into closed containment or onshore, to ensure separation between wild and farmed fish, and to allow the effluent currently being pumped into coastal waters to be properly treated.

The technology to allow this transition is developing rapidly. Companies like First Water in Iceland, and Salmon Evolution in Norway are already selling land based salmon into UK and overseas markets as the regulators in those countries impose stricter controls than here.

The industry knows this change is inevitable. The only barrier is cost. It seems that the strategy for the companies operating in Scotland is to

make as much money as possible in the short term before they are forced to change, regardless of the long term damage to the environment. The 210 objections to the recent SEPA proposals to control sea lice are an example of this delaying tactic.

The communities who live by these rivers and coastlines have a rich cultural heritage closely entwined with salmon and salmon fishing.

This heritage has been hijacked by industrial aquaculture to sell a wholly inferior product, and in so doing are threatening the heritage they claim to value.

I would ask the committee to please recommend these measures to ensure the long term prosperity of the Spey valley and other river valleys in Scotland.

Time is running out for wild salmon in Scotland. The jobs and livelihoods of around 45 ghillies on the river Spey are directly under threat. A traditional pastime enjoyed by local anglers for hundreds of years is dying out.

The image of Scotland as a place with a healthy environment and abundant nature is threatened by an industry that does not seem to care about anything other than short term profit.

Please take action now to press the Government to enforce the existing regulations and then to bring open cage salmon farming in Scotland to an end as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Sam Jarman