

Submission to Legislative Council inquiry on fin-fish farming

By (Dr) Sharon Moore

I have a number of concerns about the Tasmanian fish-farming industry, and am very pleased to see the Legislative Council inquiring into the industry.

Transparency, monitoring, regulation

Having a separate planning system for one industry has never inspired confidence in the transparency and fairness of its regulation. This lack of confidence has only been exacerbated by the government's plans to expand the industry, without regard to independent scientific input, including the most basic of requirements – baseline environmental data – or community concerns, and the lack of independent scientific and community input into planning and industry oversight.

The lack of publicly available environmental monitoring data only adds to the perception that the industry is secretive and that it has special treatment from government and regulators. The industry uses a public asset – our waterways and coastal areas – to make profit; the public should therefore have access to complete, independent and understandable data and reports on the environmental impacts of the industry. This is definitely not the case now, and never has been.

Environmental impacts

Overloading marine and estuarine environments with nutrient from fish-farm waste has long been known to have adverse impacts, yet without baseline data on what the seabed was like before fish farms were introduced, and without independent scientific monitoring made publicly available (ie neither has happened), it is impossible for laypeople to make definitive statements about what the impacts are. It's probably impossible now even for experts, given that there were no baseline studies done initially. Anecdotally, areas beneath fish pens are biological deserts, except perhaps for algae that thrives in waters overloaded with nutrients. Marine creatures that live in these areas are smothered or have to move away.

Nutrient levels in the fish-farmed marine and estuarine waters are clearly higher than before they began. A study in which I participated in the mid-1990s found that the amount of nutrient loaded into the Huon estuary from fish farms was equivalent to the sewerage from 40,000 houses. It is impossible that that much additional nitrogen and phosphorous would not be having an adverse impact. If raw sewage from that many houses was being pumped into the Huon there would be outcry and new systems installed. Yet the fish-farming companies suffer no greater consequences than a fine that they can easily absorb.

Marine debris such as ropes and buoys are often found along the shores of the Huon and Channel, including where I live, at Deep Bay. These are just the bits that we find – who knows what's floating around out there, contributing to pollution of the oceans by microplastics as they break down, entangling and killing birds, fish and marine mammals, and potentially (and in reality) causing serious injury to people and vessels. The industry claims that they regularly clean up their debris – well, they shouldn't be allowing it to float off in the first place. If the government was serious about its supposed 'zero tolerance' approach to marine debris, we would be seeing the industry being penalised with substantial and meaningful fines.

Algae and slime foul rocky foreshores, algae smothers seagrasses and weed; in most summers in recent years as the water warms up mats of grey-green algae/slime float on the water. I have observed these effects in Deep Bay, and longer-term residents tell me that before the fish farms

came, the foreshores were pristine. They were also able to go fishing, which now is an almost futile endeavour. No doubt the companies will argue that these are anecdotal observations only, with no proof. It is beyond the capacity of individual residents and small community groups to undertake the scientific monitoring and studies required to scientifically link the fish farms with increased algae and slime. And we shouldn't have to. The fact is, the government has not been doing its job; it should have ensured that initial baseline studies were carried out before fish farming commenced, that independent scientists carried out regular monitoring, submitting results and reports to a truly independent authority. None of this has happened.

Impacts on residents

As a resident of the lower Huon/Channel area, I have been kept awake for hours at night and woken in the very early hours by the noise from the Huon Aquaculture well-boats. I am quite a distance away from the route taken by the boats and know of people who live much closer to the route; their lives would be a misery. I have not complained as I know it would be futile and do not suffer as much as others. The adverse health impacts of exposure to noise and light pollution are well documented. With both Huon Aquaculture and Tassal about to introduce much larger vessels, I know the problem will only get much worse.

I find it astonishing that in a supposedly civilized society an industry can simply be allowed to cause these kinds of impacts on people. I have heard of the enormous amount of stress, with ensuing health problems, suffered by people who have tried to enter the labyrinthine bureaucracy involved in trying to deal with noise and light problems from fish-farming operations. It seems that there is nothing but buck-passing and mis- or inadequate information. It seems that no one authority takes responsibility for these impacts.

Conclusion

The way forward for management of the fish-farming industry in Tasmania must include:

- A truly independent authority to require and oversee monitoring, carry out planning and regulation, and to make available to the public comprehensive, easy-to-understand information on monitoring results, assessments, regulation and complaints procedures. It must include independent scientists as well as community representatives;
- A moratorium on new leases and new pen placements until an independent scientific analysis of environmental impacts of existing leases is carried out and baseline studies in proposed new lease areas;
- An independent study of the sustainability and economic potential of moving all fish-farm operations onto land.

Yours sincerely

Sharon Moore

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