Salmon Watch Ireland – Conservation Newsletter

Policy & Protection Update 2026

Given the severe and continuing decline in Atlantic salmon populations, it is essential that exploitation is curtailed to the greatest extent possible in order to maximise the number of fish reaching the spawning grounds. From a biological perspective, maintaining high spawning escapement is not optional but fundamental to stock recovery: sufficient numbers of adult salmon are required to fully seed available habitat, maintain genetic diversity, and ensure resilient populations capable of withstanding ongoing pressures such as climate change, poor marine survival and degraded freshwater conditions. Every salmon allowed to spawn contributes directly to the future viability of the species. We therefore ask all stakeholders to support the measures announced by Inland Fisheries Ireland, while recognising that exploitation controls alone are not sufficient. A proactive, coordinated response is required both nationally and internationally to tackle the many cumulative pressures affecting salmon throughout their life cycle. We acknowledge and thank all those who support these necessary actions, understanding that collective effort and restraint today are essential to ensure enough spawners remain to keep Atlantic salmon populations intact for the future.

This year's scientific advice is issued at a notably more precautionary level, reflecting the severe and ongoing decline in salmon stocks nationally. The measures recommended are necessary to protect remaining spawning potential and to prevent further deterioration below already critical thresholds.

While future advice may allow for a less cautious approach, this will depend entirely on measurable improvements in stock status and consistent recovery above minimum conservation limits. Achieving this outcome will require full cooperation from all stakeholders—managers, anglers, communities, and all sectors influencing freshwater and marine environments—working collectively to safeguard the long-term viability of our salmon populations.

Introduction

Salmon Watch Ireland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Draft 2026 Wild Salmon and Sea Trout Tagging Scheme Regulations. The new proposals are grounded in science, precautionary in approach, and urgently needed to address the continuing decline of Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon.

The Department's 2026 Information Note details the now well-documented pressures facing salmon: falling marine survival, climate change, declining water quality, habitat loss, disease impacts, salmon farming pressures, and a range of cumulative exploitation factors. In this context, the regulatory framework must prioritise spawning escapement and protect every fish capable of contributing to future generations.

Supporting the 2026 Tagging Scheme Regulations

Stronger Scientific Thresholds

Salmon Watch Ireland supports the more conservative assessment thresholds recommended by the Technical Expert Group on Salmon (TEGOS), including:

- **85% probability of achieving the Conservation Limit (CL) for rivers exceeding 100% CL.**
- **75% probability of achieving CL for rivers below 100% CL.**

These updated thresholds reflect the seriousness of the stock crisis and the need to protect as many returning adults as possible.

Ireland's salmon harvest has dropped from 36,500 in 2010 to just 11,500 in 2024, highlighting the scale of decline and the necessity for decisive conservation measures.

The proposed 2026 river designations, including expanded catch-and-release requirements, full closures, and highly limited harvest opportunities, align fully with the scientific evidence.

Protecting 2SW and MSW Salmon

We strongly support the proposal to restrict harvest to 1 June – 31 August.
This measure provides essential protection to early-running multi-sea-winter fish—our most valuable spawners, carrying significantly more eggs and contributing disproportionately to population resilience.

Additional Recommendations for Strengthening Conservation

1. Maximum Size Limit: 65 cm

Salmon Watch Ireland recommends adopting a 65 cm maximum size for any salmon retained during the harvest period.
This would:

- **Protect large multi-sea-winter salmon**
- **Align Ireland with international best practice**
- **Support rebuilding efforts for the most depleted life-history component of the stock**

2. One-Fish Daily Bag Limit

Within the proposed seasonal limit of three salmon per angler, we recommend a one-fish-per-day limit.
This would:

- **Spread harvest more evenly across the season**
- **Reduce intense pressure on peak-return days**
- **Improve spawning escapement outcomes without reducing the total seasonal allowance**

Commercial Fishery Considerations

Given the very limited commercial fishery proposed for 2026, additional safeguards are advised:

- **A maximum of four fishing days per week**
- **Immediate tagging of all salmon and sea trout >40 cm at point of capture**
- **No movement of fish without an attached tag**

- Enhanced oversight and monitoring to ensure full compliance

These measures will help ensure consistency, transparency, and protection of vulnerable returning stocks.

Enhancing Angling Practices

Salmon Watch Ireland recommends a standardised specification for approved catch-and-release equipment, supported by an educational outreach campaign. Clear guidelines on handling, landing nets, barbless hooks, and release methods will improve post-release survival and ensure consistency across fisheries.

State-Owned Moy Fisheries

Given the limited quota available, we propose that key State-owned Moy fisheries—such as the Ridge Pool—operate on a catch-and-release basis, allowing the limited harvest quota to be allocated to other designated Moy fisheries in a more sustainable manner.

Urgent Protection for the Liffey, Boyne, and Slaney

Salmon Watch Ireland's recent Policy Statement highlights the acute decline across all Irish rivers, but particularly in major eastern catchments such as the Liffey, Boyne, and Slaney (closed in spring 2026).

These large, complex systems require:

- Substantial increases in protection resources

- More enforcement staff and frequent patrols
- Priority remedial works, including fish passage improvements, barrier removal, and nursery habitat restoration
- Increased penalties and stronger deterrents against illegal exploitation
- Targeted predation management where science indicates significant impact

Local communities should play a formal role in protection, through stewardship programmes, volunteer river-watch initiatives, and local partnerships.

Digital Surveillance

We strongly support the deployment of:

- Remote cameras
- Drones
- Thermal imaging
- Live-feed monitoring technologies

These tools will enable more consistent oversight of rivers closed to salmon fishing.

Water Quality Action

Recovery is impossible without clean water.
We urge enhanced coordination between:

- Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI)
- Uisce Éireann
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- County Councils

Priority actions include intensified farm inspections, improved wastewater oversight, and rapid-response systems for pollution incidents.

Seal Predation in Freshwater: A Growing Concern

Salmon Watch Ireland has received increasing reports of seals entering freshwater systems and preying on vulnerable salmonids—sometimes becoming resident in holding pools or locations below obstacles where fish are concentrated.

To address this emerging issue, we have requested clarification on:

Monitoring & Reporting

- **What systems exist to detect and document seal activity in freshwater?**
- **Can a formalised reporting structure be established?**

Impact Assessment

- **What thresholds determine when predation becomes a conservation concern?**

Management Options

We ask the NPWS to clarify whether relocating seals from freshwater to coastal zones is legally and practically feasible where necessary.

Inter-Agency Coordination

We recommend a defined response framework between IFI and NPWS to ensure timely, science-based decisions.

Decision-Making Authority

Salmon Watch Ireland strongly supports IFI and NPWS acting as primary decision-makers for any required seal management interventions, including removal where justified.

Conclusion

Salmon Watch Ireland fully supports the Draft 2026 Tagging Scheme Regulations as a necessary response to the sustained collapse of Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon.

We respectfully urge the Department to additionally adopt:

- **A 65 cm maximum size limit**
- **A one-fish daily bag limit during the June–August harvest**
- **Enhanced commercial oversight**
- **Standardised catch-and-release equipment requirements**
- **Expanded protection measures in major eastern catchments**

These steps would significantly strengthen conservation outcomes and increase the likelihood of stock recovery.

We welcome continued collaboration with the Department, IFI, NPWS, and all stakeholders in restoring this iconic species.

An All-Island Decline

The decline encompasses countries widely in the Northeast Atlantic. We have included three reports noting an all island decline in Ireland which is similar to the majority of countries in the Northeast Atlantic.

The Status of Irish Salmon Stocks in 2025 with Catch Advice for 2026, prepared by the Technical Expert Group on Salmon (TEGOS), provides a comprehensive scientific assessment of Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon stocks and forms the basis for fisheries management advice for 2026

The overall conclusion is clear: Irish salmon stocks remain in a depleted and vulnerable condition, and a strongly precautionary management approach is required.

Ireland has 144 salmon-designated rivers. Of these, only 28% are assessed as exceeding their Conservation Limits (CLs) at the standard 75% probability level. Conservation Limits represent the minimum spawning stock required to maintain healthy, self-sustaining salmon populations. Even among rivers that currently exceed CLs, the margin of surplus is often small and highly sensitive to risk assumptions. When more precautionary probabilities are applied (80–99% chance of meeting CL), the number of rivers eligible for harvest declines sharply, demonstrating that any apparent surplus is fragile.

Long-term trends show a persistent national decline in salmon abundance. Fish counter data from 2002–2025 indicate a peak in returns around 2007, followed by a sustained downward trend. Returns in 2023 were the lowest on record, with 2025 ranking as the third lowest. Both one-sea-winter (grilse) and multi-sea-winter (spring salmon) stocks are declining, with spring salmon particularly depleted. National and international assessments by ICES confirm that Irish salmon have failed to exceed national conservation limits for decades, and forecasts suggest that stocks are unlikely to recover above these limits before at least 2028.

The report identifies poor marine survival as the primary driver of decline, with survival rates falling from approximately 15–20% historically to around or below 5% in recent years. This decline is strongly linked to climate-driven changes in the North Atlantic, including ocean warming, altered food webs, and changing predator

dynamics. However, the report also stresses that freshwater pressures remain critical and within national control, including declining water quality, habitat degradation, barriers to migration, altered river flows, aquaculture impacts, and climate-related droughts and floods.

For fisheries management, the advice is unequivocal. Harvest fisheries should only occur on rivers with a clearly identified surplus above CL, and catches must not exceed that surplus. Rivers below CL should be limited to catch-and-release angling only or closed entirely where stocks are severely depleted or data are insufficient. Mixed-stock fisheries are identified as posing particular risks, as they can disproportionately impact weaker stocks even when stronger rivers appear to be meeting conservation limits.

In conclusion, the report provides a robust scientific justification for continued and enhanced precautionary management in 2026. Expectations of increased catches are unrealistic under current conditions. Recovery of wild Atlantic salmon in Ireland will depend on sustained conservation measures, improved freshwater habitat and water quality, effective enforcement, and collective action to address cumulative pressures across the salmon's life cycle.

The fish counter data available for 2025 certainly reflect the continued downward trend being the third lowest count on record. The map below also indicates a relatively strong east coast recruitment deficiency which may have similarities to Northern Ireland.

Please find the link to all reports here:

Full Reports Here

TEGOS Report Juvenile Densities 2025

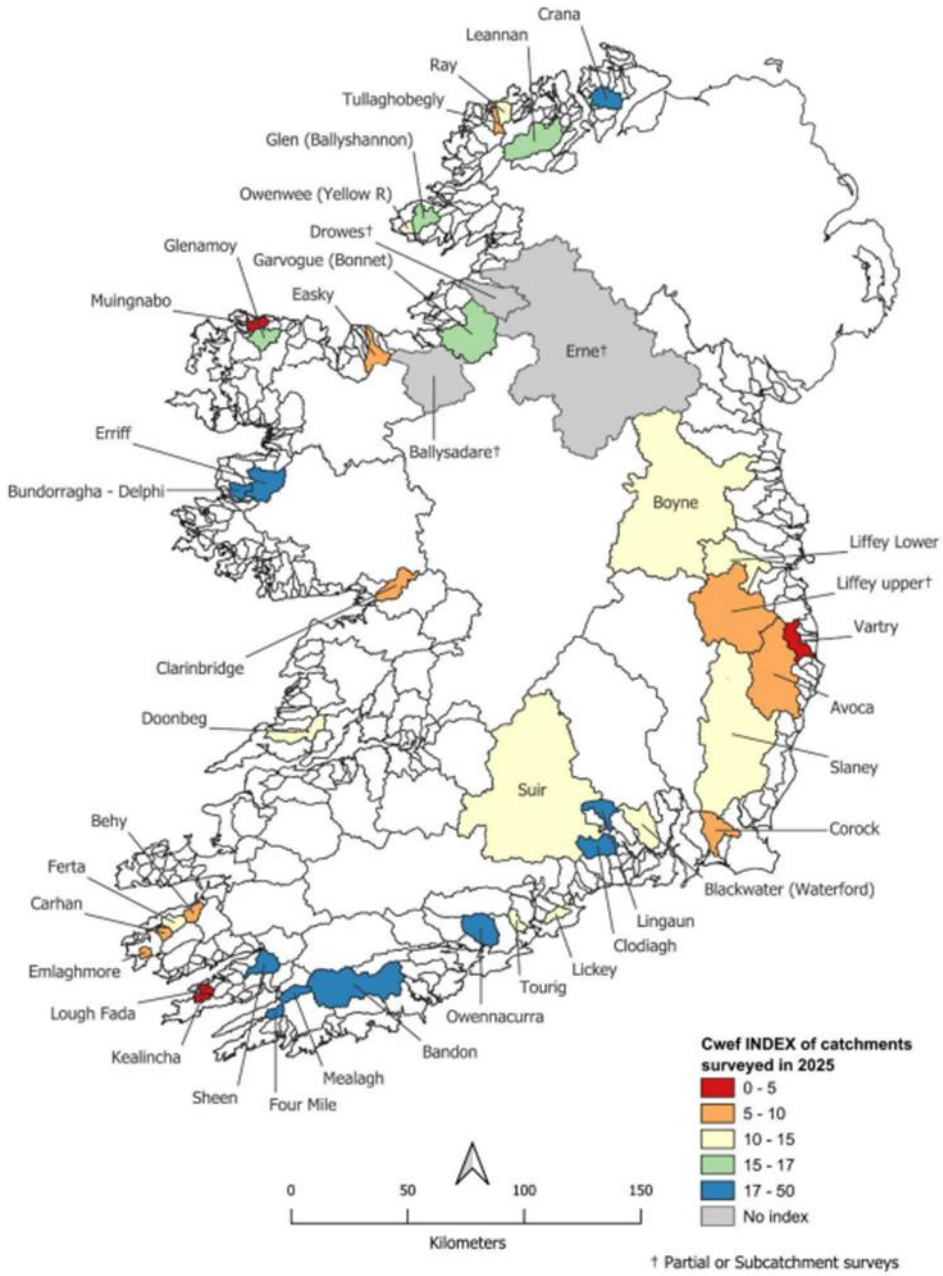


Figure 12 Mean salmon fry index values for catchments surveyed in 2025.

TEGOS Report – Fish Counter Data.

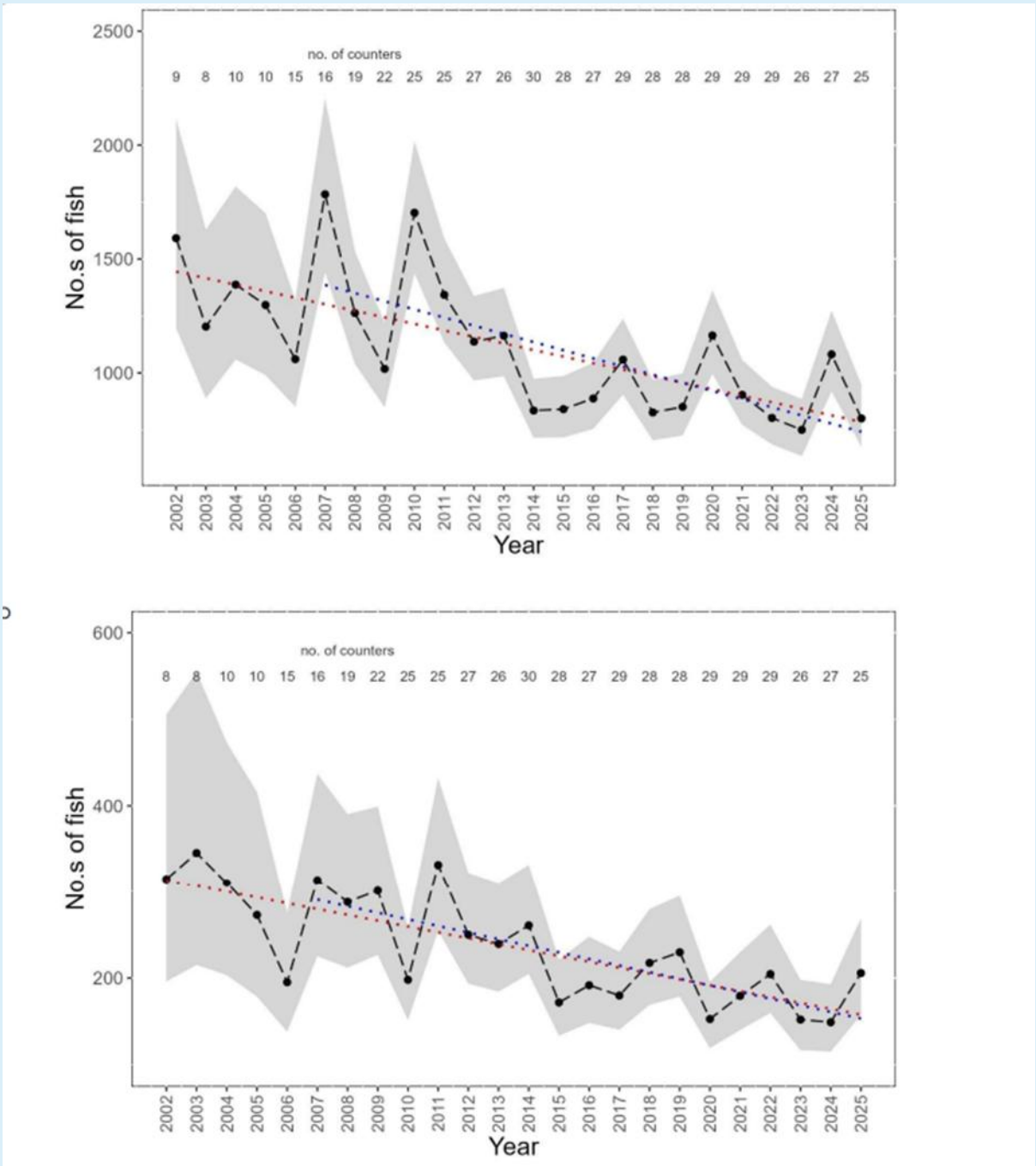
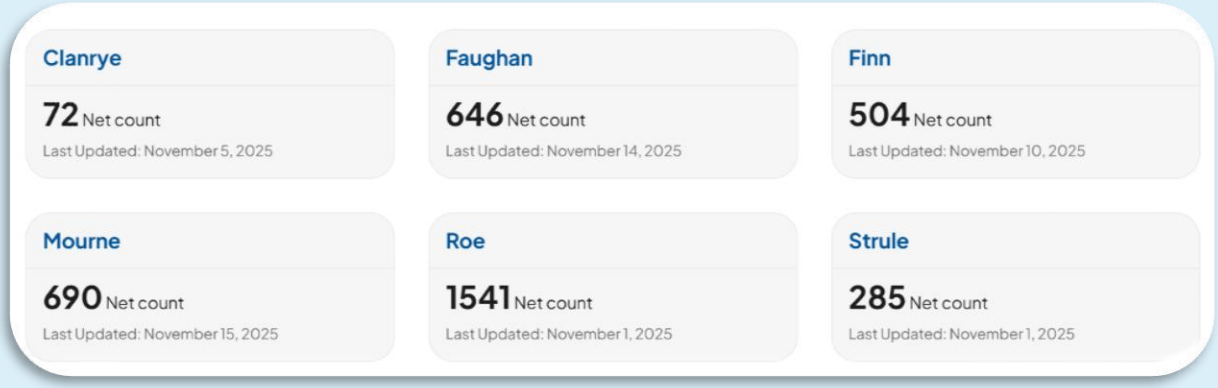


Figure 7 Marginal GLM LS-mean standardised number of (a) 1SW grilse and (b) MSW counted through counters operated between 2002 and 2025 (± 95% confidence intervals – grey band). The linear trend over the full time period (red dashed line), and between 2007 and the present (blue dashed line) are also indicated.

Loughs Agency Fish Counter Data – 2025 up to Mid-November



To put some context on these figures the following management targets are set down for a number of the rivers:

River	Net Upstream Requirement	Misc.
Clanrye	N/A	Partial Count
Faughan	800	Partial Count
Finn	5410	Full
Mourne	8000	Partial Count
Roe	1833	Full
Strule	N/A	Partial Count

It is very important to read the report to get a sense of how the decline is certainly to our mind accelerating.

Full Data – Available at Fish Counter Programmes, Loughs Agency - Counter Data

Northern Ireland – Salmon Stock Assessment 2025 - Standing Scientific Committee - Advice on DAERA Area Salmon Stocks

River	Managem. Target (M ova)	Assessment Data		Attainment Managem. Objective	Status	Tags
		Adult	Juvenile			
L. Bann	23.86	Counter	Electrofishing	*MSF*	C&R	-
Main	7.48	Tracking	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
Blackwater	2.47	Tracking	Electrofishing	Yes	*C&R*[2]	0
Sixmile	2.0	Tracking	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
Ballinderry	1.96	Tracking	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
Moyola	2.92	Tracking	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
U. Bann	4.74	Tracking	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
Clady	1.43	Counter	Electrofishing	Yes	*HS*	158
Agivey	2.49	Rod catch	Electrofishing	Yes	*HS*	227
Bush	2.66	Trap	Electrofishing	No	C&R	0
Ballycastle	1.51	Rod catch	Electrofishing	No	C&R	0
Glendun	0.48	Counter	Electrofishing	No	C&R	0
Glenarm	0.44	Rod catch	Electrofishing	No	*C&R*	0
Shimna	0.30	Counter	Electrofishing	No	C&R	0
Melvin	IFI[3]	Rod catch	Electrofishing	Yes	*HS*	108
Erne	IFI[2]	Counter	Electrofishing	No	C&R	0

The counter data included in the report is very interesting. Fish counter data show considerable year-to-year variability in adult salmon returns, with some rivers recording strong runs in 2024. However, these increases are not consistent across rivers nor sustained through time. Several east coast counters (notably Shimna and Glendun) continue to record low absolute numbers and fail to reach conservation or management targets in most years, while others show brief peaks followed by sharp declines. Importantly, counter data alone increasingly reflect the return of a small number of stronger cohorts rather than a broad rebuilding of stocks.

When interpreted alongside juvenile survey results, the counters indicate that recent adult improvements are unlikely to persist, as weak or absent recruitment in recent years will translate into reduced returns in the near future. This reinforces the conclusion that east coast salmon populations remain fragile despite occasional short-term improvements in counter counts

Full Report Here: AGRI-FOOD & BIOSCIENCES INSTITUTE

SALMON WATCH IRELAND

Dedicated to the restoration of salmon abundance in Ireland"

SAVING THE IRISH SALMON