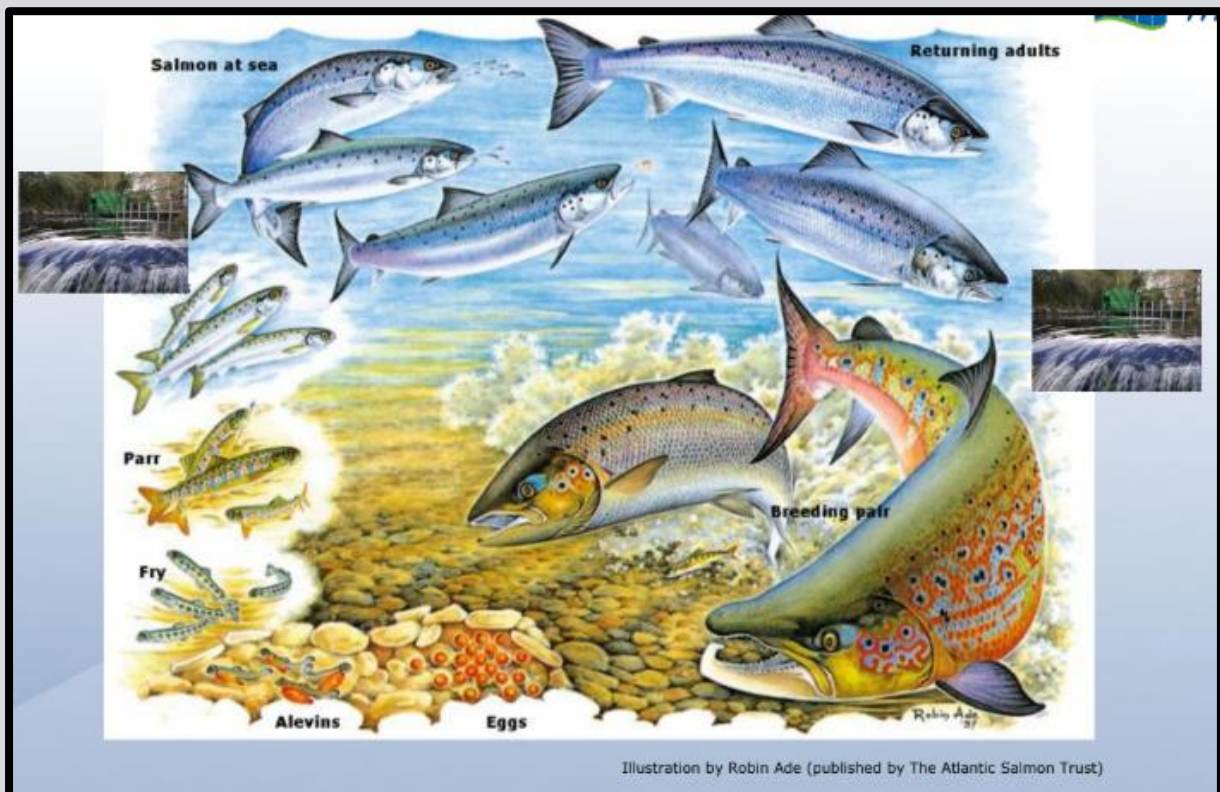


Salmon Watch Ireland

Newsletter Number 37 – 28 April 2026

Atlantic Salmon at a Tipping Point

Reflections on the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment, and Energy – April 2026



A Crisis That Cannot Be Ignored

Across all submissions to the Committee, one fact stands out with striking clarity: Atlantic salmon are in crisis.

Scientific evidence presented shows a long-term collapse in returning salmon—from well over one million annually in the 1970s to well below 200,000 today, with some estimates lower still.

This is not a marginal decline. It is systemic, sustained, and worsening. Salmon are now classified as being in poor conservation status nationally and are listed as Near Threatened internationally.

Yet, despite the consistency and weight of this evidence, elements of the Committee's questioning appeared not to fully grasp the scale or urgency of the crisis. That disconnect is concerning. Policy responses can only be as strong as the understanding that underpins them.

The Reality: Most Stocks Are Failing

The independent scientific advice is unequivocal. Of Ireland's 144 salmon stocks:

- Only 28% exceed conservation limits
- A majority are either restricted or closed entirely to fishing

In simple terms, most rivers do not have enough salmon to sustain exploitation.

This leads to an unavoidable conclusion:

Where there is no surplus, there must be no harvest.

Moreover, current conditions justify a precautionary shift whereby moderate surpluses are retained within the system to support stock rebuilding, rather than being allocated to exploitation.



On Commercial Exploitation: A Closed Chapter

Where there is no surplus, there must be no harvest.

And in the face of sustained decline and uncertainty, even moderate surpluses should be protected, not exploited, to rebuild resilience in depleted stocks.

Against this backdrop, the continuation of commercial fisheries on stocks such as the Laune, Maine and Caragh—where catches may reach upwards of 2,000 fish in a single season—cannot be justified. These fisheries are operating while overall runs are in decline, and their impact must be considered in that wider biological context.

A similar situation on the River Lee should not be permitted to develop or continue. Allowing commercial harvest in any system where stocks are under sustained pressure risks undermining national conservation efforts and sends a contradictory policy signal at a critical moment for the species.

At the same time, recreational fishers must also be mindful of the current reality and play their full part in conservation. This means recognising that even limited retention can add pressure to vulnerable stocks and adopting a voluntary approach whereby only a small fraction of the legally permitted catch is retained, with catch-and-release becoming the norm in a system under stress.

Conservation responsibility does not rest with one sector alone. It requires a shared commitment to ensuring that the protection of salmon takes precedence over short-term interests.



Regulatory Signals Moving in the Wrong Direction

Concerns were also raised about recent changes to tagging regulations.

Revisions to these measures have:

- Enabled increased harvest levels

- Expanded the geographic footprint of exploitation

Even if incremental, such changes send the wrong signal at a time when every available measure should be directed toward recovery.

In a context where stocks are collapsing, loosening controls—however modest—risks accelerating decline rather than stabilising it.

Multiple Pressures, One Outcome

There is broad agreement on the drivers of decline:

- Climate-driven changes in marine survival
- Habitat degradation and water quality issues
- Barriers to migration
- Aquaculture impacts
- Predation and ecosystem imbalance
- Ongoing exploitation

No single factor explains the crisis—but together, they create a cumulative pressure that salmon populations are no longer able to withstand.

What Must Happen Now

If there is a single unifying principle emerging from the evidence, it is this:

We must maximise the number of healthy wild salmon reaching the sea—and returning to spawn.

That requires:

- Strict adherence to scientific advice
- A precautionary approach to all forms of exploitation
- Stronger habitat protection and restoration
- Improved monitoring and data systems
- Coordinated national and international action

A Moment of Decision

Atlantic salmon are more than a species under pressure—they are a measure of the health of Ireland's environment.

The evidence presented to the Committee leaves little room for ambiguity. The trajectory is downward, and time is limited.

The real question is not whether we can afford to act, but whether we can afford not to.

We have submitted a number of supporting materials for consideration, including our opening statement, a graph illustrating the collapse of sea trout stocks in the Burishoole system, and our full policy document. The opening statements from all contributors to the Committee are also available to view. In addition, we have provided link to the full Committee session recording. A transcript of proceedings is not yet available but will be shared once published.

[Joint Oireactas Opening Statements and Submitted Documents Salmon Watch Ireland](#)

[Video Salmon Conservation - Joint Oireachtas Committee](#)



“Despite gaps in the data, there is an undeniable trend of continued decline in Atlantic salmon stocks. Now is the time to act—decisively and without delay—to halt and reverse it.”