Salmon Watch Ireland - Newsletter No. 41 – 26June 2026

Oireachtas Hears Evidence on Salmon Farming and Wild Atlantic Salmon

During two recent meetings of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, members heard contrasting views on the relationship between salmon farming and Ireland's declining wild Atlantic salmonid populations. While representatives of the salmon farming industry defended current practices, environmental organisations argued that the evidence now points to an unavoidable conclusion: open-net pen salmon farming is incompatible with the long-term recovery of wild salmon and sea trout.

The Debate Has Changed

For many years, discussions centred on whether sea lice levels on salmon farms complied with regulatory trigger limits. However, the hearings demonstrated that the debate has evolved.

The key question is no longer whether sea lice are monitored—it is whether the existing regulatory system can demonstrate that wild salmon and sea trout are adequately protected.

Representatives from SWAN and Salmon Watch Ireland argued that compliance with regulatory trigger levels is not the same as demonstrating ecological protection. The critical measure should be the survival of wild fish rather than the number of lice counted on farmed fish during inspections.

Is the Monitoring System Scientifically Robust?

Ireland's salmon farms are inspected regularly for sea lice, with the Marine Institute explaining that approximately fourteen inspections are carried out annually at each active site.

However, questions were raised regarding whether the current monitoring programme is capable of detecting the true scale of the problem.

Salmon Watch Ireland highlighted that only a small sample of fish is examined from farms containing hundreds of thousands of salmon. More fundamentally, it was argued that no one has established what the natural background level of sea lice should be in bays without salmon farming. Without this baseline, it is difficult to determine whether existing trigger levels genuinely protect wild fish.

Wild Fish Survival Must Be the Measure

Evidence presented to the Committee emphasised that telemetry studies and long-term scientific research should be the primary indicators of success or failure.

Salmon Watch Ireland referred to the latest long-term Irish research indicating that rivers adjacent to salmon farms experience, on average, approximately **19% fewer adult salmon returning** than comparable rivers. Members also heard that these impacts may be substantially greater in some years and locations.

The collapse of sea trout populations in areas such as Clew Bay and elsewhere in the presence of salmon farming was highlighted as a practical example of what can occur where intensive salmon farming and wild salmonids occupy the same marine environment.

Legal Questions Remain

The hearings also explored whether existing sea lice regulations satisfy Ireland's obligations under European environmental law.

Evidence presented by An Taisce noted that Inland Fisheries Ireland has itself questioned whether current trigger levels are sufficient to prevent mortality in wild salmon. It was argued that, under the Habitats Directive, competent authorities must be satisfied beyond reasonable scientific doubt that protected species will not be adversely affected before licences can be granted or renewed.

If there remains uncertainty over whether existing sea lice thresholds adequately protect wild fish, this raises important legal as well as scientific questions.

Industry Response

Representatives of IFA Aquaculture strongly defended Ireland's salmon farming sector.

They argued that Ireland operates one of the most intensively monitored salmon farming industries in Europe and stated that Irish farms consistently record among the lowest reported sea lice levels internationally. They also emphasised that Irish salmon farming operates under strict organic standards, lower stocking densities and comprehensive environmental monitoring.

The industry maintained that coastal waters surrounding salmon farms generally remain classified as having good or high ecological status under the Water Framework Directive.

A Different Question

Importantly, the two sides were often answering different questions.

The industry focused on whether farms comply with existing regulations and whether reported sea lice numbers are low.

Environmental organisations focused on whether those regulations have been shown to protect wild salmon populations.

These are not identical questions.

A farm may comply with current regulatory limits, yet those limits themselves may still be insufficient if they do not prevent impacts on wild fish.

Looking to the Future

Salmon Watch Ireland reiterated its long-standing position that the future of salmon production lies in separating farmed fish from the marine environment.

Recirculating aquaculture systems and other land-based technologies were identified as offering the opportunity to produce salmon while eliminating interactions with wild salmon and sea trout, preventing escapes, containing waste and virtually removing the risk of sea lice transmission.

As climate change brings warmer seas, harmful algal blooms, lower oxygen levels and increasing disease pressures, it was argued that the transition away from open-net production will become increasingly necessary for both environmental protection and fish welfare.

The Challenge Ahead

The Joint Committee hearings demonstrated that Ireland is entering a new phase in the debate over salmon farming.

The discussion is no longer centred simply on counting sea lice.

Instead, policymakers are increasingly asking a more fundamental question:

Can open-net salmon farming continue if it cannot be demonstrated that wild Atlantic salmon and sea trout are fully protected?

That question now lies at the heart of both the scientific and legal debate and is likely to shape the future direction of aquaculture policy in Ireland.

Salmon Watch Ireland will continue to advocate for policies that restore wild Atlantic salmon populations while supporting sustainable aquaculture systems that do not compromise Ireland's internationally important wild salmon rivers.

Link to JOC hearings Here:

https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/34/fisheries-and-maritime-affairs/

National Protocol for Coordinating the Response to Significant Fish Mortality Events in Freshwater

One of the most significant developments in freshwater fisheries management this year has been the publication of the **National Protocol for Coordinating the Response to Significant Fish Mortality Events in Freshwater**. Developed by Inland Fisheries Ireland in collaboration with the EPA, Marine Institute, National Parks and Wildlife Service and other statutory agencies, the protocol is a direct response to the lessons learned from the devastating 2025 Munster Blackwater fish kill. It establishes, for the first time, a nationally coordinated framework for investigating major fish mortality events, placing Inland Fisheries Ireland in the lead role and requiring rapid inter-agency action, coordinated sampling, transparent reporting and a precautionary approach from the outset. The protocol represents an important step towards ensuring that future fish kill investigations are faster, more scientifically robust and better coordinated, improving the likelihood of identifying causes, securing evidence where enforcement action is warranted, and protecting Ireland's freshwater ecosystems.

Full Protocol Here

Norwegian Scientific Advisory Committee: Wild Salmon Remain in Crisis

The Norwegian Scientific Advisory Committee for Atlantic Salmon has published its **2026 Status Report**, concluding that wild salmon populations remain at historically low levels despite a modest improvement from the record-low returns recorded in 2024. An estimated **456,000 wild salmon** returned to Norwegian rivers in 2025, including fish caught in fisheries, making it one of the **six poorest years since records began in the early 1980s**.

The report concludes that the continued decline is driven by a combination of **reduced marine survival and human-induced pressures**. It identifies **salmon farming and climate change as the two greatest human-caused threats** to wild Atlantic salmon. In particular, the Committee states that **sea lice from salmon farms remain the single greatest human-induced threat**, while escaped farmed salmon and infections associated with aquaculture continue to impact wild populations.

The report also concludes that there has been **no improvement in any of the major human-induced threats** affecting wild salmon since last year's assessment. Climate change is increasingly affecting salmon throughout their life cycle, with higher river temperatures, drought, altered flood patterns and changing winter conditions placing additional pressure on already vulnerable populations.

Although more salmon populations achieved their spawning targets in 2025, the Committee attributes this largely to **stricter fishing regulations, extremely low harvest rates and record levels of catch-and-release**, rather than any significant

recovery in salmon abundance. In fact, the 2025 salmon harvest was the **second lowest recorded since monitoring began in 1980**, and the proportion of salmon released by anglers was the highest ever documented.

The greatest declines continue to occur in **Western and Central Norway**, where the Scientific Advisory Committee concludes that **the impacts of salmon aquaculture have contributed significantly to the deterioration of wild salmon populations**. The iconic **Tana River** also remains classified as **severely threatened**, with salmon returns still well below conservation targets despite almost complete cessation of fishing.

The report sends a clear message: while fisheries management has reduced exploitation of wild salmon, recovery will depend on addressing the human-induced pressures that can still be managed. The Committee emphasises that reducing the impacts of salmon farming, alongside responding to climate change, is essential if Norway's wild Atlantic salmon populations are to recover.

Protecting Wild Salmon Through Policy and Planning

Over the past month, Salmon Watch Ireland has continued to advocate strongly for the protection and recovery of wild Atlantic salmon through detailed policy submissions. We recently submitted comprehensive observations on two proposed salmon farm developments, highlighting concerns relating to sea lice, disease transmission, escaped farmed salmon, cumulative impacts, water quality, Natura 2000 obligations and compliance with the Water Framework Directive. We also made a detailed submission on Ireland's Draft National Restoration Plan, calling for ambitious measures to restore salmon rivers and freshwater habitats. Our recommendations included the transition to land-based salmon production, stronger protection of riparian habitats, catchment-wide nutrient reduction measures, restoration of river connectivity, and targeted actions to improve water quality and biodiversity. Through these submissions, Salmon Watch Ireland continues to ensure that the best available science and the interests of wild salmon are represented in national policy and decision-making.

You can view these submissions at the following link – Salmon Watch Ireland Submissions

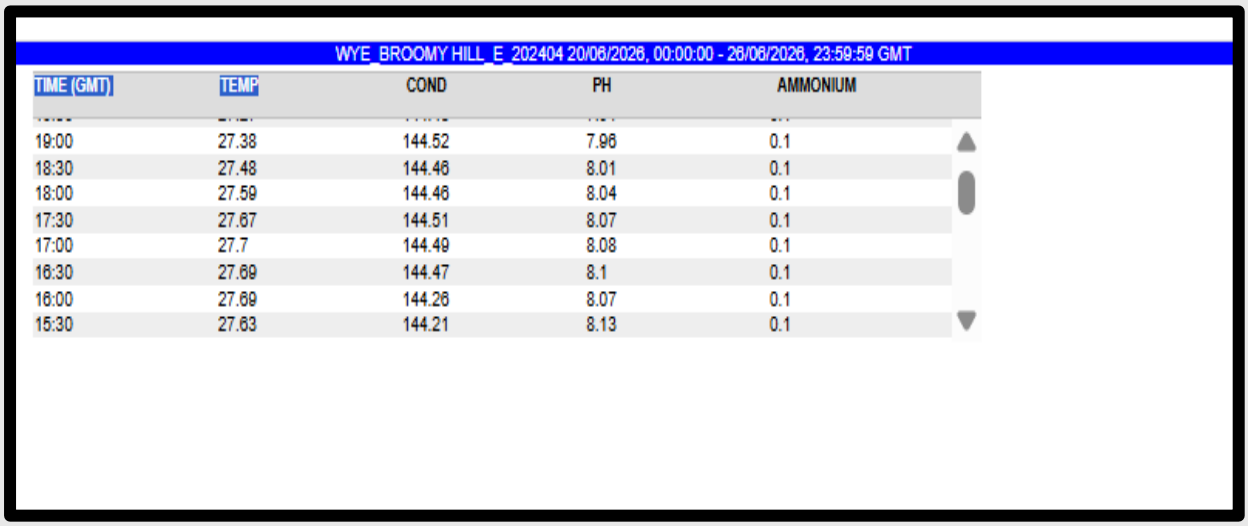
Think Before You Catch a Salmon

Salmon Watch Ireland fully supports the implementation of warm-water angling protocols designed to reduce additional stress on wild salmon during periods of elevated river temperatures. While much attention focuses on returning adult salmon, it

is equally important to recognise that prolonged periods of warm water also place significant stress on juvenile salmon and trout. Higher temperatures reduce dissolved oxygen levels, increase metabolic demands, limit suitable habitat and can make young fish more susceptible to disease and predation. These impacts can reduce survival long before fish ever reach the sea. For adult salmon and sea trout, warm water can delay migration, increase exhaustion and reduce the likelihood of successful spawning, populations continue to decline, every juvenile that survives and every adult that reaches the spawning grounds is increasingly valuable. We encourage all anglers to act responsibly, respect temperature guidance, and carefully consider whether fishing is appropriate during periods of high-water temperature. **Think before you catch a salmon—your decision today can help secure the future of Atlantic salmon and other native salmonids.**

What to expect if climate continues to warm – A complete and accelerated extinction vortex.

The River Wye Catchment Wales and Southwestern England – Are our Southeastern and Spate Rivers Reaching these Thermal Limits. Yes, certainly in spate rivers and some larger rivers – The only solution is to try and climate proof rivers but if recent weather remains long term – we certainly will see a dramatic decline in survival of both adults and juveniles.



WYE_BROOMY HILL_E_202404 20/06/2026, 00:00:00 - 26/06/2026, 23:59:59 GMT

TIME (GMT)	TEMP	COND	PH	AMMONIUM
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18:30	27.48	144.46	8.01	0.1
18:00	27.59	144.46	8.04	0.1
17:30	27.67	144.51	8.07	0.1
17:00	27.7	144.49	8.08	0.1
16:30	27.69	144.47	8.1	0.1
16:00	27.69	144.26	8.07	0.1
15:30	27.63	144.21	8.13	0.1