

Salmon farming in Scotland

Letter from Salmon Scotland

3 February 2025

Dear Finlay,

Re: Farm-raised salmon survival – 2024 figures – research and investment supporting sector improvements

During the recent Rural Affairs and Islands Committee update to the 2018 inquiry into salmon farming, there was considerable focus on survival rates in farm-raised Scottish salmon. Like other livestock sectors, salmon farmers strive to reduce mortalities and to keep them as low as possible. We have been open and transparent about specific challenges we faced in recent years, such as a spike in water temperature and the subsequent increase in harmful plankton and jellyfish. We also explained during our committee evidence session and through the publication of our Fish Health Plan, how our sector has overcome previous challenges through research and investment and continues to do so.

I can now update you that our hard work has paid off and the survival of salmon on Scotland's marine farms has improved significantly. **In 2024, survival across all marine farms was 82.3%** (mortality = 17.7%). This represents an improvement of 10 percentage points compared to 2023 (when survival was 72.3%).

This improvement is testament to the hard work of Scotland's 2,500 salmon farmers, who work tirelessly in some of Scotland's most isolated, coastal and island communities, as well as the 10,000 people supporting our farmers through the supply chain. It has also been possible due to significant investment by salmon farming businesses, with nearly £1 billion invested in fish health and welfare since 2018.

The Committee was made aware of ongoing improvements in fish survival prior to concluding its work. It is unfortunate that these facts were not reflected in the final report and its recommendations. Given these updated figures the RAIC report published last month is already out of date.

While the Committee's decision to focus considerable attention on survival is not unexpected, the overall approach taken, and the lack of balance in how survival was considered, was extremely disappointing. Comparisons were, and are, regularly made with other livestock sectors, without acknowledging the clear biological differences between fish and land animals ¹ - differences that mean direct comparisons are in no way appropriate.

¹ Salmon produce many thousands of eggs which are fertilised outside the fish's body, and which hatch as poorly developed fry. This strategy is based on fish having an expected high level of mortality, but it ensures a small number survive to become adults and reproduce. Land animals, like sheep and cattle, produce just one or two offspring a year. Their young are fully developed and expected to have a high natural survival.

We would also note that we are the only UK animal production sector to publish detailed survival statistics. It is therefore difficult to understand how meaningful comparisons can be made to other sectors when such data is not available.

You will also be aware that the UK is currently experiencing an increase in cases of avian flu, and as a result millions of farmed chickens and turkeys have been culled. Furthermore, farmers and national authorities remain on high alert due to a significant outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in Germany. These situations, rightly, trigger widespread calls for governmental support and funding.

No such calls can be heard from politicians or parliamentary committees when salmon farmers experience challenges to the health of their stocks. Far from receiving calls for government and regulatory support, our sector endures continual criticism and a ratcheting of regulatory controls. All farmers, whether on land or at sea, work to produce nutritious, healthy and sustainable food for consumers. From time to time, we all experience challenges that are beyond our control. Elected representatives need to recognise all modes of food production, in a fair and balanced manner.

We will consider the RAIC reports recommendations and write to your committee in due course. However, we note that as with the 2018 parliamentary RECC inquiry, rather than providing a focused suite of proactive recommendations that will help streamline regulatory oversight to support our sustainable development into the future, RAIC has produced an extensive set of recommendations, many of which will add further regulatory complexity and burden on salmon farmers. Such an approach will hinder one of Scotland and the UK's leading food production sectors.

Yours sincerely

Tavish Scott

CEO Salmon Scotland