

Press Release

Deformities, parasite infestations and high death rates: the murky depths of the Scottish salmon industry exposed in new undercover investigation

The biggest ever exposé into the Scottish salmon industry reveals suffering on an industry-wide and endemic scale, breaches in animal welfare legislation and shocking mortality rates. The undercover investigation and accompanying report titled '*Underwater Cages, Parasites & Dead Fish: Why a Moratorium on Scottish Salmon Farming Expansion is Imperative*', released today by a global network of NGOs in 30 countries and led by farmed animal welfare charity Compassion in World Farming, uncovers the grim reality for many fish raised in sea cages producing world-famous Scottish salmon.

Scotland is the third largest producer of farmed Atlantic salmon worldwide (approximately 38 million fish produced in 2019), with exports to over 50 countries, and the Scottish government supports plans for massive industry expansion by 2030. Over 96% of Scottish salmon production is handled by five companies: Cooke Aquaculture, Grieg Seafood, Mowi, Scottish Sea Farms and The Scottish Salmon Company. Compassion investigated 22 farms in total, both using drone technology and, at 6 farms, underwater divers, between September and November 2020. On several of these farms, investigators found severe sea lice infestations and high levels of mortalities.

Investigators also found fish crammed in barren underwater cages, where these natural migrators have nothing to do but swim aimlessly in cramped conditions for up to 2 years. These animals suffer to such an extent that as many as a quarter will die before they even make it to slaughter.

“Salmon are silently suffering, out of sight, in cruel underwater factory farms across Scotland. Even the experienced investigators were shocked at what they found,” said Sophie Peutrill, Compassion in World Farming’s Global Campaign Manager for fish welfare. *“The footage reveals salmon with deformities and disease, missing eyes and large chunks of flesh and skin being eaten away by sea lice. This is completely unacceptable.*

“Salmon are sentient beings - they should not be subjected to such awful misery. There is an industry-wide failure to protect these animals, and this must change. We need an immediate halt on the continued expansion of Scottish salmon farming”.

Sea lice are parasites that feed on skin, blood and mucus of fish. Their numbers have grown with the expansion of the salmon industry, which is yet to implement an effective, welfare positive and environmentally friendly treatment or prevention method. Methods the industry has developed in an attempt to rid the fish of sea lice – including chemical baths, thermolicer and hydrolicer treatments – are cruel and ineffective. Many fish die as a result.

Not only is salmon farming bad for animal welfare, but it is also damaging the environment. Organic and chemical waste from Scottish salmon farms is changing the chemistry of sediments and killing marine life on the seabed. Waste from farms can lead to poor water quality and harmful algal blooms. Medicines and chemicals, such as antibiotics and insecticides, are also released into the environment, and many of the latter are known to be toxic to fish and other marine organisms, as well as birds and mammals. In addition, farming carnivorous fish, such as salmon, is responsible for much of the industrial fishing of our decimated oceans. Millions of tonnes of wild-caught fish are reduced to fishmeal and fish oil in order to feed fish in intensive farms.

“Given the numerous welfare and environmental issues within the Scottish salmon industry, plans to expand are completely irresponsible”, said Dr Krzysztof Wojtas, Head of Fish Policy at Compassion in World Farming.

“We are calling on the Scottish Government for a moratorium on the expansion of the Scottish Salmon industry. Confining carnivorous species in underwater cages and depleting our oceans of wild fish in order to feed them, is pure madness. Ultimately, we directly challenge whether farming essentially wild, migratory fish, such as salmon, has any place in a sustainable food system.”

The Scottish salmon farming industry is rife with fish welfare issues and serious environmental problems. At current production levels sea lice infestation and disease are out of control, causing fish suffering on an alarming scale and threatening wild fish populations. Compassion has launched an open letter to the Scottish government, urgently calling for a moratorium on the expansion of the industry, with a view to phasing out intensive salmon farming.

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For more information, please email media.team@ciwf.org or call 01483 521 615

Investigation footage and images can be found [here](#).

Note to editors:

- The investigation was carried out across 22 farms with footage gathered on several of these farms in Scotland between September and November 2020.
- Upon reviewing the footage, the investigators found that a considerable proportion of the fish appeared to be in an extremely poor state at a Scottish Sea Farms farm. Significant welfare problems were seen throughout the pen: lice damage, seaweed growing in open wounds, gill damage, fin damage, white heads, abrasions and lesions and damage to mouths. Some fish were missing eyes and had large chunks of flesh missing. Compassion promptly reported these findings to the Animal and Plant Health Agency, believing these findings are in violation of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006.

Other findings included:

- At two Mowi Scotland farms, lethargic salmon were filmed working hard to breath in dirty water. Salmon with deformity of the spine, and many with lesions and lice. Cleaner fish were found with lice and seaweed growing out of open wounds, plus dead fish were left floating in the cages.
- At a farm of The Scottish Salmon Company: a hydrolicer boat was filmed in action, conducting lice checks on treated salmon before throwing them back into the water. Also, fish found that were substantially damaged, with fin damage and white heads on fish. Water in and around the cage was brown and murky.
- At the Scottish Sea Farms farm: our investigator also found cleaner fish problems included lice, seaweed growing from wounds and fungal damage. Boats were filmed removing large quantities of dead fish from cages.
- At a Grieg Seafood farm: major welfare problems included damage caused by lice eating away at the salmon skin and bodies, fin and gill damage, seaweed growing in fish wounds, abrasions and lesions, plus infection and damage to mouths. Investigators also filmed footage of hydrogen peroxide being used on the fish, suggesting a sea lice problem, and bins filled with dead fish.
- At a Cooke Aquaculture farm: large numbers of fish and overcrowding were filmed with dead salmon floating in the pens, and cleaner fish in use.
- Our investigators also found dumpsters filled with dead fish exposed to wildlife, possibly posing a biosecurity risk.

The accompanying report reviews the major welfare and environmental concerns created by Scottish salmon farms today. Compassion in World Farming is calling for a moratorium on the growth of the Scottish salmon farming industry, with a view to phasing out intensive salmon farming.

- Salmon on Scottish fish farms should be protected under the following legislation:
 - Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006
 - The Welfare of Animals (Transport) (Scotland) Regulations 2006
 - Aquatic Animal Health (Scotland) Regulations 2009

- Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Act 2013
- The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 places a duty of care on those responsible for any vertebrate to promote their welfare and prevent suffering. That means looking after their physical and mental wellbeing and providing them with a suitable environment that encourages natural behaviour, supplying an appropriate diet and protecting them from pain, injury, and disease.
- Scottish salmon farming breaches animal welfare legislation in the following ways:
 - Causes stress and increases exposure to disease and parasites.
 - Puts salmon at risk of physical injury from handling, contact with equipment, aggression, and predation.
 - Prevents natural behaviours such as undertaking long-distance migrations.
 - Forces them to live in environments with poor water quality and reduced oxygen levels.
 - Inflicts salmon with treatments such as thermolicers and hydrolicers that intentionally expose them to temperatures known to cause them pain and stress, and processes known to cause physical injury and death.
- Compassion in World Farming was founded in 1967 by a British dairy farmer who became horrified at the development of intensive factory farming. Today Compassion is the leading farm animal welfare organisation dedicated to ending factory farming and achieving humane and sustainable food. With headquarters in the UK, we have offices across Europe, in the US, China and South Africa.