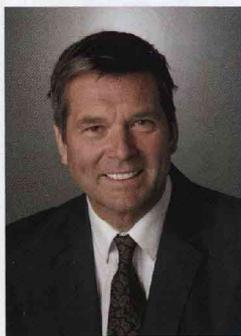


Decision-makers must 'step forward' and deliver Ireland's aquaculture potential



Jan Feenstra,
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When booking flights and hotels for the annual Seafood Expo Global in Brussels in April, I asked myself what news would we have for our customers this year?

This is an enormous annual event at which the entire seafood world comes together to meet customers, colleagues and competitors, and to keep up with international developments. It is a proud week for all Irish

producers to showcase wonderful fresh and healthy Irish seafood products.

But regrettably, news from Ireland was yet again the same: no news on licensing. This is not the news that our customers want to hear.

SKewed STATISTICS

Over the past ten years we have been unable to match growth with that of our customers. Export statistics suggest that Ireland's seafood business is growing, but this is not true. It simply reflects the fact that prices continue to rise and volumes remain the same. The fact is we cannot look for new business and can only satisfy our existing customers?

When your company is not able to grow in an emerging international business sector then you are facing trouble ahead. Our business will survive but it is not generating what it could or should.

We have a bustling processing plant in Co Donegal that employs 120 people but reaches capacity only two to three days a week and has shut down completely for a couple of months in each of the past three years.

Our other plants in Killybegs and West Cork operate

even fewer days. This is an underperformance, and thinking about it for any length of time brings out strong emotions; it is a sad situation and one that goes well beyond business considerations.

JOB SECURITY

At Marine Harvest we care passionately about this situation because we want to secure five-day-a-week jobs for all 250 employees and security for our 600 suppliers. And there is a lot at stake for the local community: local shops, schools that need to hold on to their teachers, and indeed local post offices – all are affected.

It is the latter that strikes a familiar chord, the tale of struggle for rural survival, emphasised by newly-elected Independent TDs but which is seldom a political priority. Perhaps with a Dáil dominated less by traditional party politics, we may hear new perspectives. The prospect of a minister for rural development is certainly intriguing as historically there has been little passion or responsibility to create employment in our coastal fringes.

This is not just about 'Dublin versus the West': here in County Donegal, young people are

migrating into the Letterkenny-Derry corridor, leaving the remote coastal areas to fewer and increasingly lonely and ageing folk. Many factors are driving this decline: for example, students don't come home at the weekend because there is no broadband. We have broadband at our processing plant near Fanad Head only because we put it there ourselves!

The best and only way to keep rural life vibrant is by ensuring real and sustainable local development.

Aquaculture is an indigenous industry with huge potential. This should not come as a surprise to those that have played their part in previous governments. My office is full of reports dating back to when I first put on my oilskins 35 years ago.

Most memorable is an address by Professor David E Bell of the Harvard Business School in which he refers to the 2010 Bord Bia document *Pathways to Growth*. This is an excellent piece of work, feeding into the *AgriVision 2020 strategy*.

One of the first quotes in his address is: 'Aquaculture is a no brainer for Ireland.'

It really begs the question whether anybody will ever implement the recommendations

of these numerous and costly consultant reports. Even well-intentioned Ministers have tried and failed, demonstrating that fundamental changes are needed in the decision-making process itself.

While we draw some encouragement from the commitment in *FoodWise 2025* to review the licensing system in an attempt to resolve the backlog, we continue to face a serious challenge with the protracted delays that effectively provide opportunities for rival producer countries.

The Scottish salmon farming sector contributed €1bn to the Scottish exchequer in 2013. A licence there takes roughly 22 months to process compared to approximately six years here.

So it's off we go again to *Seafood Expo Global*. Nobody will erode our belief and enthusiasm for what we do. Our employees are great people, dedicated to working and living in these remote locations.

Ireland has ideal conditions and an excellent reputation for producing high quality seafood, and it is long overdue for us to capitalise on it.

Maybe when we return to Ireland there will be a dedicated minister for rural development, ready to push for real change?