



Australian Senate

Bob Brown

Leader of the Australian Greens

media release

19 December 2011

Science should precede fish farm expansion in Macquarie Harbour

The proposed expansion of fish farms in Macquarie Harbour should not be considered until comprehensive scientific studies are undertaken into the harbour's plants, animals and water flows, Australian Greens Leader Bob Brown said today.

"I have put in a short submission to the public review of the proposed development where I detail my concerns about the lack of baseline scientific data, impacts on native fauna and flora, noise and waste impacts and use of antibiotics," Senator Brown said.

"We need a more balanced approach to the regulation of fish farms in Tasmania as the current system is weighted in the operator's favour. The farms are operating in public waterways and their environmental and social impacts need appropriate consideration and action," Senator Brown said.

Senator Brown's submission is attached.

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15 December 2011

Comments on the Draft Amendment to the Macquarie Harbour Marine Farming Development Plan

The proposal to expand the existing fish farm area in Macquarie Harbour raises questions which I don't think have been adequately answered in the public information.

Baseline data needed

Like many marine and terrestrial environments, we have a limited knowledge of Macquarie Harbour. When we don't know what we could be damaging, the use of the precautionary principle is prudent. This expansion proposal raises the same concerns for me that the Soldier's Point proposal did last year.

Without adequate baseline scientific studies the damage to the environment cannot be properly measured. A given for any of these proposals should be that the companies involved fund an independent, comprehensive analysis of the species present, their preferred habitat, the hydrodynamics of the harbour and features under or near the proposed pens.

Native fauna and flora

This lack of data is particularly concerning considering the presence of the threatened Maugean Skate (*Zearaja maugeana*) and the potential for increased nutrient load and greater seal presence to impact on other vulnerable native species, as well as the danger of escapee Atlantic salmon and their impact on native species. In the past nine years close to 14 million smolt (young salmon) and 144,000 large fish have escaped from the pens. The environmental impact statements from the companies detail the potential disease and predation for native species but admit that despite their best efforts escapes are part of the fish farming process. They also acknowledge that more research needs to be conducted into the impacts of escapees on native fauna. And yet despite this lack of knowledge of the effects of escapees, the companies are applying to increase the extent and number of farmed fish in the harbour.

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It is well known that seals are attracted to the fish pens. An unnatural number of seals for the area may not only impact on other native species but on the activities of recreational fishers and boat users. Any management plan needs to put the onus on the farm managers to use infrastructure and practices that won't attract seals. Placing the temptation of pens full of writhing fish in front of seals in their natural habitat and then killing them for responding is unacceptable, especially considering there is a colony of Australian fur seals nearby. The environmental impact statement is silent on whether the companies would consider shooting seals, other than to say they have the option to do so.

We need to ensure we have a full understanding of the marine vegetation in Macquarie Harbour, what particular species depend on and why and how increased nutrient loads and reduced dissolved oxygen may impact on these, especially under and near the proposed pen sites and areas affected by water flows that carry nutrients away from the pens.

Visual, noise and waste impacts

The companies' submission clearly outlines an increase in noise and lighting associated with the expansion. Lights will run all night for four months of the year, generators run 24 hours a day and there will be significant boat activity to and from shore and from pontoons in the harbour.

The people of Strahan and its surrounds who work in the successful tourism sector should be properly consulted about how increased industrial activity will impact on their accommodation and tourism businesses. Part of the charm of Strahan is as a gateway to wilderness experiences, industrialising the harbour has the potential to diminish this experience.

Increased pen area and lighting will also impact on the ability of recreational and professional harbour users to freely move about the public waterway. The proposed expanded pen area is right in the middle of the harbour and extends for some 15km, which may detract from the experience of kayaking or boating in a wilderness area for some people. For people camping along the shores of the Harbour in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area or Southwest Conservation Area, noise and lighting will obviously diminish their experience and be out of keeping with wilderness.

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Native animals may also be disturbed by increased noise, activity and light and it's not clear whether the companies will be monitoring the impact of this.

Rubbish from fish farms is a considerable concern, anecdotal evidence points to this being a problem in the D'Entrecasteaux Channel and Huon estuary. This sort of pollution of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area and Southwest Conservation Area is unacceptable. There would need to be strict controls and monitoring to ensure the companies were responsive to this or were responsible for the cost of cleaning it up quickly.

Antibiotics

The companies claim that antibiotic use is low and they can't predict volumes that may be used in the future, so we still don't know the quantities of antibiotics that would typically be used at the site when it is expanded. Environmental persistence of antibiotics and built-up resistance in species is a serious risk and the government needs a whole-of-environment approach to any activities that increase this risk. If this expansion is permitted the government must make it mandatory for the companies to report the volume and frequency of antibiotic use.

Part of the proposal gives the secretary of the department the power to alter the number of fish permitted to be stocked in the pens. As overcrowding of pens has the potential to lead to disease and escapes this decision should be part of a management plan overseen by the marine planning panel which gives any variation the appropriate public scrutiny. The Greens opposed the recent Labor and Liberal vote to allow the minister to override the decision of the independent panel.

This expansion should not be considered until appropriate baseline data is produced. If it does go ahead, monitoring requirements should be mandatory and publicly released so the increased concentration of chemicals and nutrients entering the water and their effects on aquatic flora and fauna are openly known.

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