CFP: WHICH FUTURE FOR AQUACULTURE?

Conference organised by the European Commission and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment & Water Management of Austria

Sala Schloss Mondsee, Schlosshof 8, Mondsee, Salzburg

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Aquaculture is the fastest-growing animal food producing sector in the world and currently accounts for nearly half of the world's food fish consumption. Global production of fish from aquaculture has increased by almost 7% per year in the last decade, yet Europe has fallen behind the rest of the world, only experiencing a 0.5% increase in the same period. Furthermore, EU freshwater production has decreased during this period, down -1% per year, offset by increased production levels in the Mediterranean.

Despite several efforts to address this huge setback, none of the EU's initiatives have been able to avert the stagnation that has beset the sector. Indeed, a number of challenges identified ten years ago are still very much with us today, most notably the huge burden of red tape that holds back our primary producers.

European aquaculture can be divided into two distinct groups: Western Europe which concentrates mainly on high-value species such as salmon and rainbow trout, frequently for export, and Central and Eastern Europe, where the main concentration is on lower-value species such as carp, mostly for local consumption.

Norway, France, the UK, Italy, Greece and Spain account for around 80% of all aquaculture production across 34 European countries. But output has been falling recently in Spain and Italy and there are potentially dire consequences for the fish farming sector in Greece due to the Eurozone crisis.

Meanwhile production in Norway has burgeoned with a massive 65% increase over the past decade alone, although even this pales next to the almost 200% increase in production in Turkey over the same period. Nevertheless the EU is producing farmed fish valued at over €3.3 billion annually, so this is a hugely important sector providing tens of thousands of well paid jobs, often in peripheral or remote areas of the Community.

EU aquaculture comprises three main activities: sea fish farming, marine shellfish farming and freshwater fish farming. The most important systems are intensive cages for salmon, trout, seabass and seabream, intensive or semi-intensive ponds for trout and carp, and the intensive suspended culture of mussels.

Some of the key problems affecting European aquaculture relate to the production side: increasing constraints from environmental concerns and from competition for space and aquatic resources. But there are also concerns affecting the marketing side. Aquaculture suffers enormously from inadequate marketing methods and from the negative public image of intensive farming conveyed by consumer and animal welfare associations. Of most dramatic importance in recent times has been the exposure of the EU sector to global competition as trade liberalisation grows.

Globally, the Asia–Pacific region continues to dominate the aquaculture sector, accounting for almost 90% of worldwide production. China alone contributes around two thirds of this total. Peru continues to play a key role in the supply of fishmeal and fish oil, while the salmon sector in Chile, after a severe setback from disease and natural disasters, is once again burgeoning and causing prices for EU farmed salmon to nosedive.

Indeed, with stagnating aquaculture production, the European market is increasingly dependent upon imports. In 2008, for example, some 1.65 million tonnes of farmed seafood products

were imported into Europe. Almost half of this was salmon, although imports of pangasius and tilapia from Southeast Asia have demonstrated remarkable growth in recent years. Last year we imported around 200,000 tonnes of frozen pangasius fillets from Vietnam alone.

Exports from the EU in 2008 totaled only 100,000 tonnes and reflected mainly high-value processed products. So there is a growing balance of trade deficit in aquaculture products.

Nevertheless, the great diversity of climatic, environmental, social and even cultural conditions in different parts of Europe, ranging from the colder Baltic to the warm Mediterranean Sea, has given rise to a rich European aquaculture industry that encompasses a wide range of different species and systems, each with their own unique features. The EU has great potential and it is a potential that we must exploit.

We are the leaders in technology and research, we have a strong and highly trained entrepreneurial base, our climate is appropriate for many species, and we have set rigorous quality standards. But these high standards inevitably mean higher costs, and make it more difficult for our fish farmers to compete in markets both at home and abroad.

Europe used to lead the world in the production of farmed fish but in recent years we've taken our eye off the ball. We have allowed our non-EU competitors to assume dominance in the sector and we have seen our indigenous industry haemorrhage jobs to countries outside the EU. We import almost 60% of our seafood needs when we are perfectly capable of producing this food ourselves.

Of course the industry does recognise the fact that sound European regulation provides protection to the consumer in terms of the quality and safety of fish and shellfish products and that consumer confidence is a vitally important issue. But the industry favours regulation, not strangulation!

If EU aquaculture grew by 4% annually, as foreseen in the Commission's strategy for aquaculture in 2002, we would be producing nearly 1.5 million tonnes of fish by 2030. But to do this we need fish farms, fish farmers and a wide range of support services.

I have been banging on for ten years about the need for the Commission to pay more attention to the development of EU fish farming, while at the same time cutting regulation for the sector and at long last we have a Commissioner who has listened to and responded to our calls. Commissioner Damanaki is determined to cut red tape and to fund significant development in research and innovation in the sector under the EMFF.

So if we grasp this opportunity, we can look forward to a bright future for the EU aquaculture sector and this must include freshwater fish farming. Freshwater production in Central and Eastern European countries was 300,000 tonnes last year, which is about half of the total freshwater aquaculture production in Europe. Trout production remains the most important fish species activity and is present almost everywhere in the EU.

According to the FAO, both intensive and pond-based semi-intensive aquaculture production systems could generally contribute to the better use of natural resources, thus becoming more environmentally friendly and more socially acceptable. With this in mind, it is highly plausible that one of the key elements of the future competitiveness and success of European aquaculture may be the promotion and implementation of the ecosystem approach to aquaculture.

Freshwater is a finite and vulnerable resource in Europe and there is fierce competition for its use. The freshwater ecosystems of the European zone – rivers, lakes, reservoirs and groundwater alike – have suffered from an intensive multipurpose level of exploitation, habitat degradation and increasing pollution.

Furthermore, increasing competition for space is a major challenge for the continued development of freshwater fish farming. Extensive aquaculture in inland ponds and wetlands, or in coastal lagoons, also faces increased competition from other economic developments such as urbanisation, agriculture, industry and tourism.

The FAO states that despite conflicting interactions between aquaculture and the environment, various examples clearly demonstrate that aquaculture and environmental services can be compatible. Fish farmers in inland areas and shellfish farmers in coastal areas could act as "gardeners" of waters and, in addition to providing environmentally friendly food production they could also provide services for wildlife. Examples of multifunctional fish farms already exist where aquaculture producers do diversify and expand their activities to include ecotourism, recreation, including services for anglers and a combination of organic farming, wetland management and stewardship.

Finally, let me address the question of the level playing field? We often hear people involved in aquaculture calling for a level playing field when it comes to the way we treat imports into the EU in comparison to the way we treat our own indigenous producers. As the rapporteur on the report on the Common Organisation of the Market in fisheries and aquaculture products, I have prioritised the inclusion of a voluntary EU eco-label that can certify environmentally friendly and sustainable aquaculture practices.

I have suggested that the European Commission could sub-contract the evaluation process for the awarding of this eco-label to the ASC on a self-financing basis. Even companies outside the EU who wish to export their fisheries products to Europe could apply for this eco-label and they would have to meet exactly the same standards as anyone within the EU. Thus the level-playing

field would be achieved and European consumers would instantly recognise the EU eco-label as a guarantor of a sustainable and environmentally friendly producer.

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