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## Fish farm company aims for 'zero seal deaths' after reported fall in shootings

A major salmon farming company has claimed that its new pen netting system has helped reduce the number seal shootings at its fish farms on the West Coast, prompting calls for similar measures to be rolled out nationwide.

However, the head of conservation at the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) has warned that more investment and 'radical change' is needed to reduce the 'unacceptable impact' of salmon farming on the environment.

Scottish Sea Farms, which has sites in Lochaber, Argyll and Mull, reported a significant reduction in 'last resort' seal shootings this year so far, which it claims is down to a recent £5.7million investment in rigid pen netting systems.

Since February this year, the salmon grower saw two seal deaths across its 43-strong estate of marine farms, five fewer than in the same period last year, and seven fewer compared with 2016.

Shooting a seal is the last resort option taken by farmers to protect salmon stocks and is carried out under licence when seals persist beyond all other preventative measures.





Scottish Sea Farms invested millions into its new Seal Pro netting. NO F31 SSF netting

‘We won’t be happy until we achieve zero seal deaths,’ said Scottish Sea Farms’ managing director Jim Gallagher, ‘however, our multi-million pound investment to roll out protective Seal Pro netting across as many of our farms as possible, as quickly as possible, is another example of our commitment to farm as responsibly and as sustainably as we can.’

Sarah Robinson, director of conservation at SWT, said the organisation is supportive of the use of anti-predator netting at fish farm sites and would like to see this used as standard.

‘We welcome the investment made to reduce seal deaths, although to fully understand the impact that this has on a national scale would require further study,’ she said. ‘With Scotland’s salmon aquaculture industry currently having an unacceptable impact on the marine environment, we look forward to further investment that can support the radical change required to make Scotland’s salmon farms environmentally sustainable.’

According to the Scottish Government, there has been an 80 per cent decline in the number of seals shot at fish farms since 2011, which it attributes to advancement in non-lethal preventative measures.

‘Seal predation at fish farms is a complex issue,’ a spokesperson for the Scottish Government said in welcoming Scottish Sea Farm’s investment. ‘We continue to work closely with industry, academic institutes and other countries to investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of non-lethal options to tackle it, while reducing instances of seal fatalities.’

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) also welcomed the investments into improved netting and hopes that the initiative will be ‘rapidly adopted’ across the Scottish salmon farming industry.

‘Investing in new netting systems will not only reduce seal deaths, but may also reduce the need to deploy acoustic deterrent devices, which can cause disturbance to cetaceans,’ added Cathy Tilbrook, SNH’s head of sustainable coasts and seas.

