

# Briefing note on water purification tech highlights potential danger to marine life from pesticides

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A civil servant admitted farmed salmon, Scotland's No 1 food export, could pose an "unacceptable" threat to the environment, according to newly released documents that reveal ministers are keen to test a technology to protect marine life from pesticides used by the industry.

A briefing note was drawn up by advisers to Fergus Ewing, the rural economy minister, before a meeting with executives behind a pioneering water purification system.

The note stated that the purpose of the meeting, which took place at the Scottish parliament in September, was "to discuss the potential trial of the technology in Scotland" amid concern over vast amounts of chemicals used to control fish lice. It admitted that the £620m salmon farming industry, which employs 12,000 people, could have "unacceptable impacts" on the environment "if not correctly regulated".

The document – released by the Scottish government after a freedom of information request from Don Staniford, a vocal critic of salmon farming – reflects concerns raised by a Scottish parliament inquiry last year that expanding the salmon farming industry without effective regulation could harm coastal ecosystems.

Since March 2018, however, planning permissions for additional salmon farm production of 76,000 tons have either been granted or are in the pipeline.

"This begs the question, why have ministers failed so conspicuously to

tighten environmental regulations while permitting the industry to continue to expand exponentially?" said Andrew Graham-Stewart, director of Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland. "This is not responsible government."

Medications are used to protect farmed fish from disease and infestations, such as sea lice.

There are limits on how much can be used, but concerns remain that large amounts of pesticides, as well as faeces and food waste coming from thousands of salmon in giant nets, are wreaking havoc in some of Scotland's lochs and coastal waters.

Internal emails show that in 2018, Scottish government officials described CleanTreat, which removes medicines from treatment water before returning the "cleaned" water to the sea, as a "game-changer". The industry's umbrella body, the Scottish Salmon Producers' Association, has been lobbying ministers to allow the technology, which has been tested successfully in Norway, to be tested in Scottish waters.

The documents suggest that executives at CleanTreat have been coached by civil servants in recent months to ensure their proposal for trials in Scotland wins approval from bodies such as Marine Scotland and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

A Scottish government spokeswoman said: "This is a potentially ground-breaking treatment which has been developed in Scotland and which should be trialled in Scotland with relevant and appropriate safeguards and monitoring in place."