

# Scientist hits out at RSPCA for backing salmon farms

Mark Macaskill

A scientist who claims farmed salmon in Scotland endure "heavy-duty suffering" has questioned one of Britain's largest animal charities for its support of the £2bn industry.

Dr Lynne Sneddon, director of bioveterinary science at Liverpool University, said evidence that intensive farming can harm fish raised questions for Scottish aquaculture.

She described the suffering as unacceptable and challenged the RSPCA for endorsing 150 farms as ethical food producers amid research that suggests a popular lice treatment can cause pain.

Sneddon spoke out after examining a dossier of photographs, including some released by the Scottish government, of farmed fish covered in lesions, ulcers and open wounds.

"These fish are obviously damaged, so they will be in pain. If you walked past a field and saw a sheep or a cow with a massive patch of skin missing, there would be a public uproar. But because salmon are farmed under the water, all of this is hidden," said Sneddon.

"I think really that these fish should not be allowed to live in this kind of state... and I would say this is totally unacceptable."

Edie Bowles, a solicitor with Surrey law firm Advocates for Animals, said the dossier, compiled by Don Staniford, a critic of salmon farming, indicated "systemic and obvious" pain and suffering that could justify legal action against the Scottish government for

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Marine Harvest's salmon farm off the Isle of Muck. The industry is worth £2bn a year to Scotland



Sneddon: fish are suffering

breaches of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. "It appears that there is a strong legal case to answer," she said.

Sneddon, who studied at Glasgow University and the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh, said the skin of fish is covered in nociceptive nerves that detect potentially painful

stimuli. It suggests that being infested with sea lice, or being pumped through a Thermolicer – a machine widely used by Scottish fish farmers that heats water to kill the parasites – is likely to inflict pain.

In December, a study published in *Veterinary and Animal Science* monitored the response of fish to temperatures of 28C and above, and observed "instant behavioural responses indicative of nociception or pain".

In 2018, Kristin Ottesen of Norwegian firm BaVet linked head injuries in fish with being exposed to heated water for 30 seconds.

Sneddon said the empirical evidence strongly suggested that thermolicers "should not be used".

The RSPCA said its

food-assurance scheme existed "only to bring about welfare improvements for farm animals" and confirmed that all certified salmon farms had been assessed in the past 12 months.

On the issue of heat treatments to kill lice, a spokeswoman said: "It's not an easy issue to address, but in the absence currently of a concrete solution to eradicate lice, RSPCA Assured salmon farms can use mechanical lice-removal methods as long as the process is carried out responsibly and the welfare of the fish is a priority at all times."

In 2018, Holyrood's environment committee warned of gaps in knowledge, data, monitoring and research in the salmon farming industry.

Hamish Macdonell of the

Scottish Salmon Producers' Organisation said farmers have an "outstanding record on fish health and welfare". Lice levels hit a five-year low in 2018, he said, stressing that the use of Thermolicers is done under "strict health and veterinary supervision".

Staniford, director of Scottish Salmon Watch, plans to instruct Advocates for Animals to sue ministers if he can raise money through a crowdfunding appeal.

A Scottish government spokeswoman said its responsibility to protect the marine environment, including the health and welfare of farmed fish, was taken "extremely seriously" and that research is planned to "bridge the remaining knowledge gaps on the health and welfare effects of the Thermolicer".