



Net losses

DURING a late summer storm, North Carradale fish farm, near Arran (pictured), came loose from its moorings, causing tears in four of the ten fish pens. A spokesman for the owner, Norwegian fish giant Mowi, told the *Eye* staff and contractors had quickly secured the pens back in place but “48,834 salmon had unfortunately escaped”. Some 30,000 more fish died when the pens were damaged.

The event was chastening. Only two months earlier Mowi had told the local *Campbeltown Courier* that it had “upgraded its cages [with] robust anchoring to make the pens more stable and better suited to withstand the most extreme weather.” But the recent damage isn’t the first time the Carradale site has seen large numbers of fish escape. Under Mowi’s previous name, Marine Harvest, North Carradale reported the escape of 16,000 fish through a hole in a net in 2015. Dr Craig MacIntyre, then manager of the Argyll Fisheries Trust, said at the time: “This single escape has probably doubled the number of salmon in the Firth of Clyde. It is potentially massively serious for wild stocks.”

After the latest great escape, Dr Alan Wells, chief executive of Fisheries Management Scotland, reiterated the potential threat to wild salmon: “In Norway, interbreeding between wild and escaped farmed fish is considered the greatest threat to wild Atlantic salmon and it is important that all avenues are explored to mitigate impacts on wild salmon arising from this event.”

Meanwhile locals tell the *Eye* they have seen seals and dolphins feasting on the farmed salmon, but were less enchanted by the sight of dead fish washing up on Arran and Kintyre beaches. The charity Salmon and Trout Conservation noted in a recent blog: “Within days large numbers of flabby farmed salmon were showing up in west Scotland rivers... These fish dominated rod catches, an indication that they will likely greatly outnumber wild fish on the spawning redds.” The charity also pointed out that it is not currently illegal to have mass escapes from fish farms in Scotland. (In Chile, Mowi was recently fined \$6.7m following a major fish escape in 2018.)

The Scottish government acknowledges that farm escapees may bring disease to wild fish or interbreed with them, interfering with their genetic make-up. But it is very protective of an industry which earns hundreds of millions for the Scottish economy. As rural economy secretary Fergus Ewing says in a new report: “Not least given the significant impact the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit is having, the Scottish government will continue its efforts to support the sector and its supply chain in Scotland.”

Mowi’s spokesman told the *Eye* research on the impact of escapes is under way: “Mowi and Fisheries Management Scotland have now initiated a comprehensive, multi-year study that will first look to track the fate of these escaped salmon and confirm the background genetic profile of local wild salmon. In year two, the study will assess whether or not any genetic variance may have occurred.” And what if genetic variance has occurred? As Salmon and Trout Conservation’s spokesman puts it: “The genie is well and truly out of the bottle.”