

**Appropriate Assessment Screening Conclusion Statement by the Licensing Authority  
for aquaculture activities in Loughros Beg Bay within the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/  
Loughros Beg Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (Site Code:0190), including  
consideration of the West Donegal Coast Special Protection Area (SPA) (Site Code:04150)  
(Natura 2000 sites)**

This Conclusion Statement outlines how it is proposed to license and manage aquaculture activities in the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/ Loughros Beg Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (Site Code:0190) in compliance with the EU Habitats Directive. The West Donegal Coast Special Protection Area (SPA) (Site Code:04150) is directly adjacent to the proposed aquaculture in Loughros Beg Bay and was considered in accordance with the EU Birds Directive due to the potential overlap between bird species and aquaculture areas in the bay.

Aquaculture in Loughros Beg Bay will, if approved, be licensed in accordance, inter alia, with the standard terms and conditions as set out in the aquaculture licence templates. These are available for inspection on the Department's website at:

<http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/seafood/aquacultureforeshoremanagement/aquaculturelicensing/aquacultureandforeshorelicencetemplates/> The licences will also incorporate specific conditions so as to accommodate Natura 2000 requirements, as appropriate, in accordance with the principles set out in this document.

An Appropriate Assessment is required under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive where a project or plan may give rise to significant effects upon Natura 2000 site(s). A first stage Screening for Appropriate Assessment purposes determines whether a plan or project, either alone or in combination with other plans and projects, is likely to have a significant impact on Natura 2000 site(s) in the context of their Conservation Objectives and, specifically, on the habitats and species for which they are designated.

A Screening Report for the Appropriate Assessment of aquaculture in Loughros Beg Bay has been carried out by the Marine Institute on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. This Report considered the likelihood of significant impacts from aquaculture activities on the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC, the West Donegal Coast SPA, four other proximate SAC sites and six further SPA sites.

The information upon which the Screening Report is based is the definitive list of existing licences and applications for aquaculture available at the time of assessment. This information was provided by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

**Description of the Aquaculture Projects**

The projects cover the renewal of existing aquaculture activity and the licensing of new aquaculture sites within Loughros Beg Bay. Both the existing and proposed aquaculture activities involve suspended oyster cultivation using bags and trestles in the intertidal zone. There are currently two licensed sites and five new, applied for sites in the bay for the cultivation of Pacific oysters. Triploid oysters are grown in the bay, the oyster seed being sourced from a hatchery in France. An Oyster Fishery Order (OFO) is also located within Loughros Beg Bay. However, there is no profile of activity for the OFO area and local communications have indicated that the Order area has not been used for more than 20 years. On this basis, there are no likely in-combination effects with the OFO to consider.

## **Potential Impacts on Natura 2000 sites with respect to Qualifying Interests and Conservation Objectives**

### **Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC**

Loughros Beg Bay is situated on the southwest coast of Co. Donegal and is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) under the Habitats Directive.

### **Qualifying Interests of the SAC**

The SAC is designated for a number of habitats and species as listed in Annex I and Annex II of the Habitats Directive. These are set out below:

- 1014 - Narrow-mouthed Whorl Snail (*Vertigo angustior*)
- 1230 - Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts
- 1355 - Otter (*Lutra lutra*)
- 1364 - Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)
- 2110 - Embryonic shifting dunes
- 2120 - Shifting dunes along the shoreline with white dunes
- 2140 - Decalcified fixed dunes with *Empetrum nigrum*
- 2150 - Atlantic decalcified fixed dunes (*Calluno-Ulicetea*)
- 4060 - Alpine and Boreal heaths
- 7130 - Blanket bogs (if active bog).

### **Conservation Objectives for the SAC**

The Conservation Objectives for the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC (Site Code: 0190) were identified by NPWS (2015) and relate primarily to the requirement to maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of habitat distribution, structure and function. For designated species, the objective is to maintain various attributes of the populations including population size, habitats quality and the distribution of the species in the bay.

### **West Donegal Coast SPA**

The West Donegal Coast SPA (Site Code: 04150) is directly adjacent to Loughros Beg Bay.

### **Special Conservation Interests for the SPA**

This SPA is designated for the following bird species:

- Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)
- Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
- Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)
- Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*)
- Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
- Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

- Razorbill (*Alca torda*)
- Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*).

### **Conservation Objectives for the SPA**

The Conservation Objectives for the SPA were identified by NPWS (2016) and relate primarily to maintaining or restoring the favourable conservation condition of the bird species listed as Special Conservation Interests for this SPA.

### **Screening of other proximate Natura sites**

There are four other SAC sites and six further SPA sites proximate to the existing and proposed aquaculture activities, as follows:

- Lough Nillan Bog (Carrickatlieve) SAC
- Rathlin O'Birne Island SAC
- Slieve League SAC
- West Of Ardara/Maas Road SAC
- Sheskinmore Lough SPA
- Lough Nillan Bog SPA
- Inishduff SPA
- Inishkeel SPA
- Rathlin O'Birne Island SPA
- Roaninish SPA.

These proximate Natura sites were screened out from further consideration on the basis of distance from the aquaculture sites in Loughros Beg Bay and due to no obvious interactions between aquaculture activities and the conservation features of the sites.

### **Screening for Appropriate Assessment of Aquaculture**

The function of the first stage Screening Report is to determine if the existing and proposed aquaculture activities are consistent with the Conservation Objectives for the Natura sites and to ascertain if the projects are likely to have significant effects on these Natura 2000 sites, thereby requiring a second stage Appropriate Assessment.

### **Findings of the Screening for Appropriate Assessment**

The Screening Report finds that the aquaculture activities, at the current and proposed or likely future scale and frequency of activity are consistent with the Conservation Objectives outlined above.

## **Aquaculture and Habitats:**

Reduction of habitat area: The Screening Report concluded that there is no reduction in habitat area arising from aquaculture production activities, within any of the Natura 2000 sites considered.

## **Aquaculture and Species:**

Otter (*Lutra lutra*): The likely interaction between the existing and proposed aquaculture activities and the Annex II Species Otter were assessed. The objectives for this species in the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC focus upon maintaining the good conservation status of the population. Shellfish culture operations are likely to be carried out in daylight hours and the interaction with the Otter is likely to be minimal given that Otter foraging is primarily crepuscular. The Screening Report found that proposed and existing shellfish culture activities are likely to be non-disturbing to the Otter.

Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*): An assessment of the effects of aquaculture production on the Grey Seal was also examined. The objectives for the Grey Seal relate primarily to the requirement to maintain various attributes of the populations including population size and the distribution of the species. Given the distance of 3.5km from the proposed aquaculture operations to the nearest identified locations for the Grey Seal and the shallow and sheltered nature of the aquaculture locations it is unlikely that the Grey Seal will access the sites during operational times. Therefore, the existing and proposed levels of shellfish culture within Loughros Beg Bay are considered non-disturbing to the Grey Seal.

Whorl Snail (*Vertigo angustior*): The Screening Report concluded that there is no spatial overlap or obvious interactions with the narrow-mouthed Whorl Snail which features within the Slieve Tooley/Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC.

## **Aquaculture and Bird Species:**

The aquaculture activity in Loughros Beg Bay is directly adjacent to the West Donegal Coast SPA which is designated for 8 types of bird species as outlined above. The Screening Report found that there is no spatial overlap between the bird species and aquaculture activities (including the access routes). The foraging range of the species is extensive and while some may utilise the aquaculture areas for feeding (which are proximate to a small portion of the SPA) it is unlikely the activities or structures used will impact on the Conservation Objectives and targets. For the most part the bird species will range beyond the scope or influence of the shellfish culture operations. Therefore, shellfish culture and associated activities do not pose a significant risk to the conservation features found in the West Donegal Coast SPA. The Screening Report concludes that the aquaculture activity therein is considered non-disturbing and no further analysis is necessary.

## **Introduction of non-native species**

Oyster culture may present a risk in terms of the introduction of non-native species such as the Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*). However, the risk of recruitment of *C. gigas* is considered low given the very large intertidal extent in the bay resulting in short residence times and also due to triploid (non-reproducing) oysters being used.

## **Summary of Management Actions that are being implemented for aquaculture activities in Loughros Beg Bay**

The following measures are being taken in relation to licensing aquaculture in the Slieve Tooley /Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC:

- *Licence conditions requiring strict adherence to the identified access routes over intertidal habitat in order to minimise habitat disturbance;*
- *Licence conditions requiring that triploid oysters be used at all sites and that the measures set out in the draft Marine Aquaculture Code of Practice prepared by Invasive Species Ireland are adhered to;*
- *The use of updated and enhanced Aquaculture and Foreshore Licences containing terms and conditions which reflect the environmental protection required under EU and National law.*

## **Conclusion**

The Licensing Authority is satisfied that, given the conclusions of the Appropriate Assessment Screening process, and subject to other licensing considerations, a decision can be taken in favour of licensing existing and proposed aquaculture operations in the Slieve Tooley /Tormore Island/Loughros Beg Bay SAC.

A full Appropriate Assessment was not deemed necessary as the proposed licensing of shellfish culture in Loughros Beg Bay is not likely to have any significant effects on the qualifying interests of the SAC, the West Donegal Coast SPA or other proximate Natura 2000 sites as there is no direct impact (spatial overlap) or likely interactions with the conservation features of these sites.