

Draft Appropriate Assessment Screening Conclusion Statement by the Licensing Authority for aquaculture activities in the West Connacht Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (Natura 2000 Site code: 002998)

- 1.1** This draft Conclusion Statement outlines how it is proposed to licence and manage aquaculture activities in the West Connacht Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC) (Natura 2000 Site code: 002998) in compliance with the EU Habitats Directive.
- 1.2** Aquaculture in this Natura site will, if approved, be licensed in accordance with the standard licence terms and conditions as set out in the aquaculture licence templatesⁱ. The licences will also incorporate specific conditions to accommodate Natura requirements, as appropriate.
- 1.3** A Screening Report for the Appropriate Assessment of aquaculture in the West Connacht SAC has been carried out by the Marine Institute on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marineⁱⁱ. This Report considered the likelihood of significant impacts from aquaculture activities on the SAC, and the other proximate SAC and Special Protection Area (SPA) sites.
- 1.4** The information upon which the Screening Report for the Appropriate Assessment of aquaculture 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.
- 1.5** The aim of the report was to determine whether or not aquaculture activities at the existing and proposed sites within the West Connacht SAC are consistent with the Conservation Objectives set for the Qualifying Interests of the SAC or if such activities will lead to deterioration in the attributes of the Qualifying Interests for which the site is designated over time due to the scale, frequency and intensity of the activities.
- 1.6** The report specifically considered if the suspended aquaculture operations (mussel or macro-algal culture) are likely to significantly impact on the conservation features of the West Connacht Coast SAC and adjacent Natura 2000 sites.

2. West Connacht Coast Special Area of Conservation

- 2.1** The West Connacht Coast SAC consists of two large bodies of marine waters off the coasts of Mayo and Galway. The site is a Special Area of Conservation selected for the Annex II species, the Bottle-nosed Dolphin (Tursiops truncatus) [Natura 2000 Code: 1349].

3. Description of the Aquaculture Activities

3.1 There are five existing licensed sites and one new application within the West Connacht Coast SAC:

T10/058A – finfish – licensed;

T09/143A – finfish - licensed;

T09/132A – finfish - licensed;

T09/434A – longline seaweed- licensed, renewal application;

T09/492A – longline mussels - licensed;

T09/524A – longline mussels - application

3.2 There were three aquaculture licences for suspended aquaculture operations to be assessed within the report, comprising of two applications and one existing licence. One application is for renewal of licence at site T09/434A for macro-algal culture and one is an application for a new licence for the culture of mussels at site T09/524A. These applications are considered cumulatively with the existing licensed site for the culture of mussels T09/492A.

3.3 The overall footprint of specified suspended aquaculture operations is small (i.e., approx. 30ha) and represents a very small proportion of the Dolphin habitat in the SAC (i.e., 0.05%)

3.4 In addition, the locations of the structures are relatively close to the shorelines, and as such they do not present a barrier to movement of this species. Furthermore and based upon scientific studies, the structures are such that echolocating species, such as dolphin, can easily avoid the structures/sites (Watson-Capps and Mann, 2005ⁱⁱⁱ; Heinrich, 2006^{iv}; Ribeiro et al., 2007^v) and therefore, avoid any risk of entanglement.

3.5 It is also noted that there are no energy sources (e.g., light, noise etc.) likely to result from activities at the sites that pose a risk to dolphin.

4. Appropriate Assessment Screening of the SAC

4.1 A screening assessment is an initial evaluation of the possible impacts that such aquaculture activities may have on the qualifying interests.

4.2 The Annex II Qualifying Interest species for which the SAC is designated Annex II Species - Marine Mammals, Tursiops truncatus (Bottlenose Dolphin).

4.3 Within this large SAC (circa 65,000ha), it is estimated, on the basis of surveys conducted during the summers of 2013 and 2014, that there are between 140-296 dolphins resident in the SAC.

5. Screening of Adjacent Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) for *ex-situ* Effects

5.1 A total of 12 SACs are located within 15km of the proposed aquaculture sites at West Connacht Coast SAC. The sites are:

- Aughrusbeg Machair and Lake SAC
- Barnahallia Lough SAC
- Omey Island Machair SAC
- Inishbofin and Inishshark SAC
- Kingstown Bay SAC
- Tully Mountain SAC
- Rusheenduff Lough SAC
- Tully Lough SAC
- Slyne Head Peninsula SAC
- The Twelve Bens/Garraun Complex SAC
- Connemara Bog Complex SAC
- Slyne Head Islands SAC

5.2 The characteristic features of the above SAC sites were identified and a screening was carried out on the likely interaction of the Conservation features with specified aquaculture activities within West Connacht Coast SAC.

6 Screening of Adjacent Special Protection Areas (SPA) for *ex-situ* Effects

6.1 A total of 5 SPAs are located within 15km of the proposed aquaculture sites at West Connacht Coast SAC. The sites are:

1. Inishbofin, Omey Island and Turbot Island SPA
2. High Island, Inishshark and Davillaun SPA
3. Cruagh Island SPA
4. Illaunnanoon SPA
5. Connemara Bog Complex SPA

The characteristic Species of Conservation Interests (SCIs) of the above SPA sites were identified and a preliminary screening was carried out on the likely interaction with aquaculture activities within the West Connacht Coast SAC.

7 Findings and Recommendations of the Article 6 (3) Appropriate Assessment of Aquaculture

7.1 The screening assessment investigates the potential for suspended aquaculture activities to have significant effects on the conservation

interests of the West Connacht Coast SAC and adjacent Natura sites within the Natura 2000 network.

7.2 The screening assessment has determined, in light of best available scientific data, that there is no potential for significant effects of proposed or existing suspended aquaculture activities (i.e., mussel and macro-algal culture) on the following Qualifying Interests of Site 002998:

- Tursiops truncatus (Common Bottlenose Dolphin) [1349]

7.3 The likelihood of significant ex-situ effects on Qualifying Interests of adjacent SAC and SPA sites have also been excluded (screened out).

8 Summary of Management Actions that are being implemented for aquaculture activities in Cleggan Bay

The following measures are being taken in relation to licensing suspended aquaculture operations in Cleggan Bay:

- To manage the risk of introduction of alien species to the Qualifying Interest habitats and associated constituent community types, all stock movement in the bay should strictly adhere to relevant legislation and follow best practice guidelines.
- The source of seed and any changes to the source of seed are to be approved by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in advance.
- A licence condition requiring all movement of stock in and out of the West Connacht SAC should adhere to relevant fish health legislation and follow best practice guidelines (e.g. <http://invasivespeciesireland.com/cops/aquaculture/>) will apply to mitigate the risk of introduction of alien species into the SAC as a result of aquaculture activities.
- All aquaculture licences are subject to standard licence conditions, which cover, amongst other things, any further actions that might be required in the event of deterioration of conservation status of species/habitats at site level that is directly attributable to aquaculture operations.

9 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 suspended aquaculture operations in the West Connacht SAC.

A full Appropriate Assessment was not deemed necessary as the proposed licensing of suspended aquaculture operations in the West Connacht SAC is not likely to have any significant effects on the qualifying interests of the SAC, or other proximate Natura 2000 sites as there is no direct impact (spatial overlap) or likely interactions with the conservation features of these sites.

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ⁱ Aquaculture Licence Templates <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fcd20-aquaculture-foreshore-management/>

ⁱⁱ Screening Report for West Connacht Coast SAC <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fcd20-aquaculture-foreshore-management/#appropriate-assessments-carried-out>

ⁱⁱⁱ Watson-Capps JJ, Mann J (2005) The effects of aquaculture on bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops* sp.) ranging in Shark Bay, Western Australia. *Biological Conservation* 124: 519–526.

^{iv} Heinrich, S. (2006) Ecology of Chilean dolphins and Peale's dolphins at Isla Chiloe, southern Chile (PhD dissertation). University of St Andrews, 239 p.

^v Ribeiro S, Viddi FA, Cordeiro JL, Freitas TRO (2007) Fine-scale habitat selection of Chilean dolphins (*Cephalorhynchus eutropia*): interactions with aquaculture activities in southern Chiloe Island, Chile. *Journal of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom* 87: 119–128.