Protecting Ireland's Wild Atlantic Salmon: A Call for Immediate Action

Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon, one of our most iconic and culturally significant species, is in crisis. Once abundant in our rivers and coastal waters, salmon stocks have declined sharply in recent decades. Climate change, habitat degradation, predation pressures, mixed-stock exploitation, and aquaculture impacts have combined to place unprecedented strain on already weakened river systems. Urgent and decisive action is now required if we are to prevent irreversible loss.

One of the most pressing issues is the continued operation of the commercial salmon netting sector. While historically important to certain coastal and rural communities, commercial netting now poses an unacceptable risk to vulnerable salmon stocks. Coastal and estuary nets intercept mixed stocks, including fish from rivers that are failing to meet conservation limits. Current management measures, though well intentioned, are no longer sufficient to rebuild salmon numbers to sustainable levels.

We therefore call on the immediately establish a State-run buy-out scheme for the commercial salmon netting sector, coupled with the announcement of a clear and permanent closure date. Such a move would provide regulatory certainty, deliver ecological protection, and ensure fair and transparent compensation for affected licence holders. Importantly, it would also align Ireland with its national biodiversity goals and international conservation commitments.

Economic evidence consistently shows that a single rod-caught wild salmon delivers far greater long-term value to local economies than commercially netted salmon. Angling tourism supports rural employment through accommodation, guiding, tackle shops, and hospitality. Transitioning away from commercial netting is not a loss, but an investment in sustainable, community-based economic activity that depends on healthy rivers and abundant fish.

From our analysis of figures spanning 2016 to 2024, we are advocating for a total ban on commercial netting, as deferring the season start date would have little to no meaningful conservation benefit for multi-sea-winter salmon. The data clearly shows a sharp and

consistent decline in salmon harvested for the month of May. In 2016, a total of 6,917 salmon were harvested, with 1,162 taken in May (16.8%). In 2019, 5,723 salmon were harvested in total, with 369 harvested in May (6.4%). By 2024, the total catch had fallen further to 4,365, with just 184 harvested in May (4.2%). These figures demonstrate that simply deferring the start of the netting season would not improve conservation outcomes. The continued overall decline in total catches highlights the urgent need for a full and permanent ban on commercial netting to properly protect multi-sea-winter salmon and support stock recovery.

Salmon Harvested in May (Nationally): 2016, 2019, and 2024

Year	Total Salmon Harvested	Harvested in May	Percentage Harvested in May
2016	6,917	1,162	16.8%
2019	5,723	369	6.4%
2024	4,365	184	4.2%

Specific examples of salmon harvested in the month of May

2016	May	Total Allowable Catch	%
River Lee	205	1145	17.9%
Castlemaine	197	753	26.2%

2024	May	Total Allowable Catch	%
River Lee	1	656	0.15%
Castlemaine	11	583	1.9%

Beyond netting, the impact of salmon aquaculture must also be acknowledged. Escaped farmed salmon regularly interbreed with wild fish, causing genetic dilution and reducing the natural fitness that wild salmon need to survive changing environmental conditions. Open-net fish farms act as breeding grounds for sea lice, which spread to wild juvenile salmon during their outward migration to sea, often with fatal consequences. In addition, pollution from excess feed, waste, and chemical treatments degrades surrounding waters, contributing to

algal blooms and oxygen depletion. Habitat destruction and altered currents further reduce the availability of clean, safe environments for wild salmon to thrive.

Targeted protection is especially critical during the peak migration period for returning salmon, which now occurs primarily from the last week of June through July and into the first week of August. This six-week window has become increasingly compressed due to climate variability, lower water levels, and habitat degradation, making salmon more vulnerable than ever. Enhanced enforcement, increased river and coastal patrols, improved monitoring, and stronger coordination between inland and marine authorities during this period would offer the greatest chance of stabilising and rebuilding stocks.

Another essential conservation measure is the mandatory release of all salmon over 75 centimetres (approximately 10 pounds) throughout the angling season. These large, multi-sea-winter fish are the most valuable spawners in the population. They lay more eggs, produce stronger offspring, and are declining faster than any other salmon group. Protecting them is critical to recovery.

Ireland has acted decisively before. In 2009, Inland Fisheries Ireland introduced a ban on the fishing, possession, and sale of eels in response to catastrophic population declines. Today, Atlantic salmon face a strikingly similar threat. Without bold, precautionary action now, salmon could follow the same path toward collapse.

By implementing a commercial netting buy-out, strengthening protections during peak migration, addressing aquaculture impacts, and prioritising the conservation of large spawning fish, Ireland can safeguard wild Atlantic salmon for future generations. This is not just an environmental responsibility, but a cultural and economic one. The time to act is now.

Title: Submission in Support of Protecting Ireland's Wild Atlantic Salmon

To: Department of Climate, Energy and Environment

From.....

Address...

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Introduction

We are writing to express our strong support for enhanced conservation measures to protect Ireland's wild Atlantic salmon, which are in serious decline due to climate change, habitat loss, mixed-stock exploitation, and aquaculture impacts.

Commercial/Private Salmon Netting

We support the immediate introduction of a State-run buy-out scheme for the commercial and private salmon netting sector, along with the announcement of a clear and permanent closure date. Coastal and estuary netting places unsustainable pressure on vulnerable mixed salmon stocks and undermines recovery efforts.

Economic and Community Benefits

Evidence shows that rod-caught salmon provide significantly greater long-term economic value to local communities than commercially netted fish, particularly through angling tourism and associated rural employment.

Peak Migration Protection

We urge increased enforcement, monitoring, and habitat protection during the key migration period from late June through July and early August, when returning salmon are most vulnerable.

Protection of Large Salmon

We support a rule requiring the release of all salmon over 65 cm (approximately 9 lbs), as these fish are the most important spawners and essential to rebuilding stocks.

Angling Regulations

We support of the original draft salmon regulations (published November 2025) proposing a three-tag limit per angler where a scientifically verified surplus harvest exists. We also support angling 'Catch and Release only' from Sept 1st to the end of the season. We believe this represents a balanced and precautionary approach, allowing limited sustainable angling while prioritising conservation and stock recovery.

On one of our local rivers, the **River Roughty**, the current system represents a clear moral and ecological injustice. A single draft net operator is allowed to harvest **59% of the total allowable catch**, while over 100 recreational anglers are collectively restricted to just **41%**. This imbalance not only puts excessive pressure on vulnerable salmon stocks but also denies local communities the cultural and economic benefits of sustainable angling. Allowing one

This imbalance not only puts excessive pressure on vulnerable salmon stocks but also denies local communities the cultural and economic benefits of sustainable angling. Allowing one operator to take majority of the total allowable catch,. while so many others are severely limited, is fundamentally unfair and highlights the urgent need for a total ban on commercial netting to protect wild salmon and ensure equitable access for all of those who appreciate this valuable resource.

Signature: .....

Contact information: (Email)

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