

# Meeting Report - Cage Finfish Farming in the Firth of Thames Thames, 5 September 2010

A report for the Hokianga Accord, option4, NZ Sport Fishing and other non-commercial interests  
By Trish Rea  
7 September 2010

## Attendees

Hosts: Catherine Delahunty (Green Party, List MP), Bill Brownell (Marine Farming Action Committee).

Attendees: 28 people.

Duration: 1.75 hours.

## Background

A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) was formed in August 2009 to provide the government with recommendations to streamline the aquaculture application and management processes, to improve economic returns. In November the Ministry of Fisheries (MFish) released the TAG report and requested submissions by 16 December. A reform Bill was likely in early 2010. As of 5 September 2010 no Bill has been released.

option4 and the Hokianga Accord jointly responded to the TAG report and recommendations in December 2009<sup>1</sup>. Major concerns related to the authorisation and environmental impacts of cage finfish farming, the privatisation of the coastline, ensuring development is limited to agreed Aquaculture Management Areas (AMAs), and the need for meaningful consultation with non-commercial interests.

Aquaculture development in the Firth of Thames is a sensitive community issue. On 5 September 2010 the Green Party hosted two meetings, one in Coromandel and the other in Thames. Robust discussions occurred at both venues.

## Meeting discussion

A majority of attendees at the Thames meeting were non-commercial environmental and fishing interests. Several aquaculture farmers were present and at least two commercial flatfish fishermen. Kier Volking [Ngati Wai], a member of the Advisory Group, was also present.

Finfish farming can be sustainable in New Zealand, but not in the Firth of Thames due to its ecological importance in sustaining the Hauraki Gulf's marine life and local communities.

A primary issue is the 'race for space', the competition to have control/rights over coastline areas, often to the exclusion of others. Visual pollution is a major issue.

## TAG input

Keir explained that while he did not agree with all of TAG's recommendations he believes there is a need to improve aquaculture processes, that the Resource Management Act can be used to set sustainability limits and that New Zealand needs "*a solution to feed the hungry world*".

## Existing environment

Bill Brownell presented an environmental perspective of using marine space for aquaculture. This was based on 12 year's of studying the Firth's ecology and resources prior to producing the *Muddy Feet* report in 2004. The Firth is a unique ecosystem with very high productivity.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries\\_Mgmt/aquaculture\\_reforms.htm](http://www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries_Mgmt/aquaculture_reforms.htm)

Current returns from farming mussels are poor and reasons for these low returns need to be examined before cage finfish farming is approved. There is potentially more profit from finfish farming, but those have to be weighed against the risks of increased pollution and impacts on wildstocks of any escapes.

Sustainable development of aquaculture was a priority because many communities around the Firth were dependent on existing recreational and small-time commercial fishermen.

### **Fish feed**

Clive Monds explained demand for fishmeal and oil was increasing worldwide as finfish farming was viewed as a source of untapped wealth. This was inflating fishfeed prices because fish and fish waste supplies are declining. Already there are concerns that Antarctic krill are being targeted for their oil and Omega 3 properties because of this insatiable demand.

If finfish farming is established in New Zealand local baitfish will be targeted first, this could have serious impacts on the marine foodchain, kahawai and kingfish populations.

A specific agency needs to be responsible for certifying the supply of fishfeed from sustainable sources. Currently no government department is accountable. Short-cuts were inevitable as fishfeed prices rise. Melamine or urea-based synthetic binders have been used in fishfeed<sup>2</sup>. In 2008 a scandal developed when Taiwanese fishfeed was found to contain melamine.

Clive highlighted the collaborative effort being made by the Hokianga Accord<sup>3</sup>, the mid north iwi fisheries forum, environmental and non-commercial fishing interest groups to respond to a raft of issues. As an example he presented the More Fish in the Water Strategy II<sup>4</sup>. Maintaining communication between the groups is helping to keep everyone updated on initiatives such as the proposed aquaculture changes.

### **Industry perspective**

Several aquaculture farmers were present. They confirmed any new development will be limited to approved areas. Finfish farming employed more people than mussel operations and generated greater income. Any mixed farming applications, for finfish and shellfish, will need to go through the Resource Management Act process, which usually takes two to three years.

Some Marlborough Sounds salmon farmers use videos to monitor waste accumulation under fish cages. Feed levels were adjusted to reduce unnecessary wastage. The industry was confident of managing finfish farming sustainably. It was in their interests to do so because of the time and investment involved, around \$4M installation cost per farm.

An existing mussel farmer cautioned against widespread development in the Firth. He advised that current productivity was low when compared to two years ago. He has had to reduce mussel numbers because growth rates are slowing down.

Commercial flatfish fishermen are concerned about the potential to introduce diseases via contaminated fishfeed. Increased pollution of the local environment was concerning and would add to the chemicals being washed into the Firth from local waterways.

### **Non-commercial concerns**

The Firth of Thames was a known marine nursery area for many species. The environmental risks associated with cage farming were too high. Dangers included chemical pollutants, foreign organisms from inferior fishfeed and loss of natural productivity.

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<sup>2</sup> Alternative binders are being developed.

<sup>3</sup> [www.HokiangaAccord.co.nz](http://www.HokiangaAccord.co.nz)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries\\_Mgmt/documents/More\\_fish\\_in\\_the\\_water\\_2.pdf](http://www.option4.co.nz/Fisheries_Mgmt/documents/More_fish_in_the_water_2.pdf)

Any 'fast-tracking' of finfish farm applications will be strongly opposed.

It was not New Zealand's responsibility to 'feed the world', irrespective of increasing population and affluence in some countries.

It had been confirmed through the Kahawai Legal Challenge<sup>5</sup> judicial process that the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000 was a significant piece of legislation. There were ongoing obligations on governing bodies to maintain the life-sustaining properties of the Gulf, to enhance the well-being of people and the environment.

The potential to earn export dollars needs to be compared to the high social, cultural and environmental costs associated with increasing aquaculture development.

It was unrealistic to suggest the aquaculture industry could monitor itself, the contamination from farming, or the impacts on surrounding areas. A pre-requisite for marine farm applicants ought to be the ability to prove the environmental integrity of their proposed operation.

Currently, anchovies and pilchards are lightly fished. Fishing effort is likely to skyrocket if finfish farming is approved. Until the quota management system is capable of constraining commercial catch to sustainable levels no targeting of baitfish ought to be allowed.

## **Conclusion**

Both Bill Brownell and Clive Monds encouraged people to discuss the aquaculture issue with others and provide their feedback. It was important to ensure finfish farming was sustainable, but the Firth of Thames was not the place for mixed aquaculture.

Meeting closed at 1750 hours.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.option4.co.nz/kahawai/kahawai.htm>