**Tasmania gets it right and the feds get it wrong with fish-farming inquiries**

In the last weeks before the Tasmanian Parliament broke up for two months, there was an opportunity to adopt the recommendations from the Fin Fish Inquiry led by the Legislative Council, instead of its chilling anti-protest laws.

The Fin Fish Inquiry confirmed that fin fish farms as they currently operate in lutruwita/Tasmania are not sustainable. Mass fish deaths, environmental dead zones and jellyfish blooms were among the many concerns expressed by scientists and the public before the Inquiry.

The Legislative Council recommended a revised Sustainable Industry Growth Plan for the salmon industry as part of a marine plan for Tasmania, to be designed through a marine spatial planning process. Until this recommendation was adopted, the Legislative Council recommended that the industry should not expand, and inshore fin fish farming sites should be reduced.

Furthermore, the Legislative Council recommended that environmental licence conditions for all existing and new fin fish farms should be reviewed and include defined limits of total biomass, dissolved nitrogen and other key nutrients., an independent review of the impacts of fin fish operations on inland waterways should be conducted, State-wide Water Quality Objectives developed, and an independent review of the fees, levies and penalties for the industry should be conducted.

The Report serves as a model for the Tasmanian and federal governments. It starkly contrasts with the report from the House of Representative’s National Aquaculture Inquiry released earlier this year.

We, the Tasmanian Independent Science Council, made a detailed submissions to the national Inquiry. Thirty percent of all submissions, and 47% of Tasmanian submissions focused on environmental issues, the rest being from government, industry and organisations receiving government funding for work in aquacultural research. The national process did not involve an interim draft report for public comment, nor much opportunity for the environmentally-focused submitters to speak to the committee.

The final report strongly downplayed scientific concerns about the sustainability and environmental effects of aquaculture in favour of serving the short-term economic interests of the industry, an outcome largely supported by submissions from agencies of governments. Only one recommendation from environment groups was adopted. Nevertheless, we commend recommendations on biosecurity, participation by First Nations, origin of food labelling, standardised fish naming and training.

The final report skims over numerous calls for caution on the environmental risks of open-cage culture of finfish in coastal waters in submissions from environmental representatives. Those who express concerns for coastal environments and ecosystems are caricatured in the report as purveyors of ‘misinformation and negative perceptions’. The report exhorts the government to provide the means to counter negative opinions of coastal aquaculture as if they have no basis. This exhortation is one of many recommendations that seek to transfer taxpayer funds to private aquacultural interests, or which seek to reduce regulatory activity to save money for the private sector.

Like all sectors of the economy, as has recently been reinforced by a Federal decision on a Tasmanian mining operation, aquaculture should conform to the principles of ecologically sustainable development. Coastal aquaculture operates within the commons of our coastal waters. The precautionary principle is not a synonym for the ‘adaptive management’ favoured by aquaculture industry and government regulators. The final report either pays lip service to ESD principles and then proceeds to undermine them or ignores them totally. Marine spatial planning as presented in the report is sector specific. Planning for a sector is not actually marine spatial planning which, by definition, includes all sectors and values, including natural systems.

The impression gained from the section on ‘Responding to negative perceptions’ (pp. 40–42) that all science underpins, aligns with, and justifies current practices and aspirations of industry in open sea-cage aquaculture is a misrepresentation of the weight of scientific opinion (see TISC web page). There are real and substantial environmental costs that are likely to be incurred if the recommendations of the national report are followed. In contrast, the Legislative Council Fin Fish Inquiry Final Report should serve as an example to state and federal governments on how to make our marine environment sustainable. We strongly recommend its implementation to both governments.