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Frances Bender Talking Point: Macquarie Harbour

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I HAVE been speaking to many people over the past few weeks — friends, customers, staff, politicians (and aspiring politicians), as well as strangers that stop me in the supermarket, in the street and whenever I am out in public.

People are concerned and confused about what they are hearing and what is happening in Macquarie Harbour.

I thought that I would have a go at writing down what Huon Aquaculture's concerns are and why we have taken the unusual step of legally challenging the way decisions are being made about our industry and my company and try to put them in plain English rather than legal speak and double talk.

For reasons too long and complicated for this article let us just agree that too many fish have been allowed to be grown in Macquarie Harbour.

The West Coast harbour is a good place to grow fish, but not too many.

Salmon and trout have been grown there successfully for decades without concern.

We in the industry were allowed to put more and more fish in from 2012 and we pushed the environment too hard and now Mother Nature has caught up with us.

The harbour is like a big bath tub and all three companies are in there together and the water does not get changed much so once we are in the poo, we are all in it together.

Since 2014, we have been privately expressing our serious concerns to the regulator and our Ministers, in written submissions and face-to-face presentations, that Macquarie Harbour was being put under too much pressure.

Our website has all of these documents available to be read.

Unfortunately, our advocacy for a more conservative, transparent and fair approach has not resulted in any change to the decisions or how they are being undertaken by the regulators or the actions of other farmers.



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While we accept that taking legal action is a radical decision, we had exhausted all other avenues and felt it was the only way to resolve an issue that has the potential to seriously damage the environment, our industry reputation as well as the valuable brand of Tasmania for the long term.

In effect, Huon Aquaculture has had the risk profiles of the Government and our competitors imposed on us, increasing the potential for serious negative environmental, commercial and reputational damage and it is out of our control.

It scares me.

If I cannot understand how this has been allowed to happen, how can you?

Clever scientists have sampled, tested, investigated and written and published papers and they discovered that what we have been fearing would happen is really happening and that indeed, tragically, our predictions had come true.

While all this is happening in Macquarie Harbour, lots of people are telling lots of confusing stories about who is right and who is wrong.

Who is the regulator? Which government is in charge? What law does this come under? Are these “alternative facts”? This is just a commercial spat, right? The regulator is independent, the government has a big stick and will fine us, etc, etc.

At the end of the day, the science cannot really attribute whose fault it is.

Is it the fish breathing, the nature of the harbour, the wild rivers running in or the sea pushing over the opening at the heads of the West Coast waterway?

So whose fault is it?

Well the truth is we will never know all of that completely and quite frankly the Maugean skate, the sediment fauna and the fish in our pens do not actually care.

They cannot read the scientific or legal papers.

They just know they cannot breathe, feel crook and are struggling while we pass the buck, blame each other and hide the truth.

Published on the Environment Protection Authority website are what each farmer can farm in Macquarie Harbour right at this minute.



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These are the facts:

HUON — 13 tonnes per hectare over 230ha = 2990 tonnes.

PETUNA — 13 t/ha over 416ha = 5408 tonnes.

TASSAL — 13 t/ha over 280ha (including lease 266 although it can't be farmed) = 3640 tonnes.

Tassal are also now allowed to grow an extra 15 t/ha after the EPA director approved a “waste capture trial” (so that's 13 +15 = 28 t/ha).

This means they have been given an increased biomass allocation for a still to be designed, trialled, installed and proven waste capture system.

I am not aware of anything like that which is currently or has been successfully used commercially anywhere else in the world.

And because Tassal now cannot use its lease 266 it means that its fish will be stocked at about 50 t/ha on their other two leases.

So Huon and Petuna are at 13 t/ha and Tassal at 50 t/ha.

To put that in context, right now, there are more fish in the harbour compared to the same time last year when the leases collapsed and died, not less like you would expect.

And, sadly for the skate, the sediment fauna and the fish the oxygen levels are lower now than at the same time last year before we saw dead leases.

So to sum it up — it is a recipe for disaster.

There is a very simple, safe way to sort this, to lessen the risk to jobs, the environment and our industry reputation and it is available right now.

On the shelf so to speak.

Huon and Petuna committed to harvest early and take big fish out sooner to ensure that we safely stayed under the EPA cap of 13 t/ha.

It is just business as usual. It may not be as profitable, but in the circumstances we know it is safe for the environment, our fish, our corporate reputations and the jobs of our employees.



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It gives our leases a chance to work with Mother Nature and restore themselves.

Huon made the decision to harvest early for the long term, for real sustainable farming and real jobs for that region.

We invite Tassal to do the same.

In closing, I hope sense will prevail and the Tasmanian Government will act like leaders before the environment is trashed along with the reputation of my wonderful world-class industry and all that work within it.

Frances Bender is executive director of Huon Aquaculture. A company founder, she has 30 years' experience farming fish. She was nominated in the Pride of Australia Medal environment category in 2014, was voted Tasmanian Rural Woman of the Year in 2001, and was awarded the Centenary Medal for service to agribusiness and community in 2001.

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