What is happening with salmon mortalities and Piscirickettsia salmonis in our waterways?

NOFF
NEIGHBOURS OF FISH FARMING

Read on for the facts and what you can do to support the campaign for clean waterways in Tasmania.

Earlier this year (2025) millions of farmed salmon died of a disease ***Salmonid Rickettsial Septicaemia*** **(SRS)** in Tasmania's South Eastern Region. SRS is caused by the bacterium *P.salmonis.* The bacterium is now listed as endemic in our waterways, and fish are susceptible to disease when environmental conditions place the fish under stress. Summer months when temperatures reach up to and above 21 degrees in Tasmania's inshore waterways are the most high risk period for the farmed salmon to develop the disease. The bacterium exists in wild fish populations but *the level of disease* is not known. The disease is prevalent in other regions globally, with one of the most effective mitigation strategies being to lower stocking densities in the salmon pens.

What about a vaccine?

At least 34 vaccines for the disease have been registered in Chile. Currently there are around 17 vaccines registered there. None of them are very effective. Vaccines are typically given to very young fish, well before they go to sea pens. A briefing to the newly elected cross bench revealed that the vaccine is only effective for around 12 months. After this the fish become vulnerable to developing SRS. Farmed Salmon are in the marine environment (open net pen feedlots) for periods well over 12 months, meaning that the industry is at risk of high levels of disease and mortality with each batch cycle.

What about antibiotics?

In February, summer 2025 Huon Aquaculture reported the commencement of its use of oxytetracycline (OTC) - An antibiotic listed as important for human health by the WHO. The lack of OTC efficacy in the last outbreak may have been due to slow commencement of dosing.
SRS causes the fish to lose appetite so if dosing in feed is commenced too late, they may not ingest enough antibiotic for it to be effective. As a result many fish were lost. The Industry admitted to selling diseased fish for human consumption, and over a tonne of antibiotic was released into the waterway, with residues detected in wild fish many kms from the treated salmon farms.

The industry is now seeking a fast tracked approval for florfenicol (FFC) - a different antibiotic with unknown environmental impacts. Approval has been granted at state level (Chief Veterinary Officer/CVO) and is now awaiting approval at a federal level Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicine Authority (APVMA).
Florfenicol has a short withholding period - treated fish can be slaughtered for market just 10 days after their last dose, but it has a low water solubility which means the drug can exist suspended in the water for 60 days or more. The impacts on the environment are not currently known.

The APVMA will only grant an *emergency permit* if there is a real emergency.
The ABC reported that conversations about florfenicol have been had between industry and govt since February.

Florfenicol *has* been granted a permit in the past. It is not new. We are concerned by the "emergency permit" application to the APVMA that has been announced in August 2025 ahead of the coming summer.
FFC is rapidly metabolised in salmon to florfenicol amine. Florfenicol amine is not currently tested for or regulated, FFC amine is also produced in sediments and released into waterways through fish faeces and urine. The ecological impact of FFC amine has not been extensively studied, and is not regulated. We are calling for this to be changed.

Industry has known about the rising danger of Rickettsia bacteria and associated disease mortalities since 2013, when the action plan for SRS was released. Communities argue that industry should be applying for a **full registration** for use of FFC, **NOT an emergency permit**, with that length of time tp prepare.

Why a full registration rather than an emergency permit? A full registration carries increased regulation, and we argue that in line with best practice, it ***SHOULD*** require baseline studies of flora, fauna, and ecological markers related to anti microbial resistance and microbiome diversity in the ecosystem ***BEFORE*** the drug is introduced. Without the studies, it will be difficult to assess the true impacts that the drug is having on our valued marine ecosystems. An emergency permit should only be allowed in a true emergency, for a short period of drug administration. We argue that now that the Bacterium *P.salmonis* is endemic in the waterways which are continuing to warm, year by year, it is likely that this drug will have ongoing and increasing use, and therefore should be fully registered and regulated as such.

In Chile, the use of antibiotics to treat Salmonid Rikketsia Septicaemia is on the rise, with antibiotic use going up by nearly 10% in the last 12 months. In 2024, 336.26 tonnes of antibiotic were used on farmed salmon in Chile, and 96.98% of that was florfenicol.

According to European regulators, FFC is expected to be harmful to the aquatic environment and ***must only be used if other less environmentally harmful treatment options are not available.***

What about antimicrobial resistance?
Antimicrobial resistance is a growing threat to human health and agricultural use of antimicrobials (antibiotics) contributes to the risk.
In 2020 the Australian government released a document One Health Master Action Plan for Australia's ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE STRATEGY 2020 & BEYOND
There are stated strategies for mitigating the risk of antimicrobial resistance, but we should question whether these are being carried out in Tasmania with oversight

of the federal and state regulators. This includes a recommendation to “Develop accountable and transparent sector-specific action plans with stakeholders, including monitoring and evaluation frameworks.”

This is why we are calling for a full baseline study to be a mandatory requirement of a full registration permit before the antibiotic is introduced to our public waterways. We call for the rejection of an emergency permit and subsequent lower standard of monitoring.

We call for a change to the animal husbandry used by industry leading into summer, to reduce the chance of another deadly disease event, we call for lower stocking densities across all biosecurity regions, especially the Huon River estuary and D’entrecasteaux Channel.

What can you do?

You can write letters outlining your concerns regarding the emergency permit of FFC to the following:

EPA: enquiries@epa.tas.gov.au

Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO): kevin.dewitte@nret.tas.gov.au

Minister for Primary Industries and Water: gavin.pearce@parliament.tas.gov.au

Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA): enquiries@apvma.gov.au

Chief CEO APVMA: melissa.mcewan@apvma.gov.au

Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture: julie.collins.mp@aph.gov.au