

MERCURY

We need to get this right

Tasmania's aquaculture sector holds great promise as one of the industries which will help provide the state's economy a secure and sustainable future.

While some of the revelations of Monday night's *Four Corners* investigation have been described by some as overplayed, a perception is growing that regulation of the industry needs to be as world-class as the aspirations of the fish farmers themselves.

The program again revealed deep divisions within the industry — particularly about the sustainability of operations in Macquarie Harbour.

These were the basis of last year's Senate inquiry where none of the major players bothered to turn up and left the talking to their industry association.

Decisions on such critical issues should not be seen to be decided merely by commercial imperative, or by the marketplace.

Successive Tasmanian governments have promoted the expansion of aquaculture.

The Liberal Government aims to grow the \$500 million industry to \$1 billion by 2030.

All of that potential could be at risk if the same approach is applied to aquaculture as has been tried without success in the forestry industry.

A lack of transparency, overzealous legislative protection and non-critical political support have proved over decades to be unproductive in that sector.

Primary Industries Minister Jeremy Rockliff yesterday declared the Government's "total support for the salmon industry". But uncritical support is not what the industry needs.

The assertion that aquaculture could become the next environmental battleground must not be allowed to become reality

Even in an era where a laissez-faire approach to regulation is sometimes in vogue, there is a still a place for strong leadership to aspire to outcomes which benefit the long-term interests of the community, the environment, the economy and those with vested financial interests at the same time.

The growth of the industry must not come with a blanket guarantee that its interests will always triumph over smaller players, or other sectors such as tourism, or the amenity of some of our much-loved places.

The assertion that aquaculture could become the next environmental battleground must not be allowed to become reality.

Government and opposition parties must show leadership to ensure decisions made on the future expansion of fish farms are based on open, rigorous and independent scientific consensus and have strong community support.

Such outcomes have to eluded Tasmania too many times on issues from the pulp mill to the Ralphs Bay housing development.

The coming months will decide if aquaculture can break the pattern.

If *Four Corners* has provided Tasmania's big fish farmers with no other service, it is that perceptions are critical to the industry's future.

The best way to influence the perceptions of consumers near and far is to create an industry which is beyond the reach of reasonable criticism — something surely within our grasp.

A robust solution may well involve some more painful public airings of grievances, but a better outcome is not going to be achieved without a better approach.

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