

Scotland's aquaculture sector could expand beyond inshore waters in the next few years, in a move that could boost the sector's economic value by around £3.7m, creating more jobs.

Leading aquaculture equipment supply firm, Gael Force Group Limited, has secured a £457,000 contribution from the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), more than half of which is from the agency's Accelerating Aquaculture Innovation (AAI) fund.

The public sector funding was announced today (Friday 7 December) by Rural Economy Secretary, Fergus Ewing, during a visit to the company's Inverness office.

The money will support a £914,000 project to develop new fish farming pens that can be used in offshore environments, while increasing productivity and improving fish welfare.

Inverness and Moray based Gael Force has been investing significantly in research and development activities around aquaculture supply chain products and has grown its workforce to more than 220 employees in Scotland.

This latest project is to develop an integrated offshore pen to operate in more exposed locations, where deep waters and rough seas represent a more challenging environment for both fish farmers and design engineers.

The sites will require more structurally robust pens that are specifically designed to withstand those sea conditions as well as provide a safe and secure environment for the fish and for the staff working on these new farms.

Designed to exceed the detailed requirements of the Technical Standard for Scottish Finfish Aquaculture, the new pen will increase the current pen size from 120m circumference to 160-200m. With nets deepened from 15m to 20m, this will increase growing volumes from around 17,000 cubic metres to 40,000

cubic metres and beyond, whilst the new integrated technologies and additional growing space in higher energy locations will improve fish welfare.

Confirming the funding, Rural Economy Secretary Fergus Ewing said:

*“Scottish salmon was the UK’s largest food export in 2017, and it makes a vital contribution to the local economies of some of Scotland’s most remote and vulnerable communities, providing high value employment in many cases. Innovation and investment in the sector to ensure it has a long term, sustainable future is key to its continued growth and to achieving the industry’s ambitions.”*

Iain Bolland, HIE’s business development account manager for Gael Force, said:

*“This project reflects Gael Force Group’s commitment to innovation and research and development activity and could be a game changer for fish farming in Scotland. It will help grow turnover domestically and internationally, as well as create and retain valuable jobs, particularly in rural areas.*

*“We are very pleased to be able to approve the funding and look forward to seeing the project take shape.”*

Stewart Graham, Gael Force Group’s managing director, said:

*“Innovation is at the core of our strategy and this investment from HIE and the Accelerating Aquaculture Innovation fund supports us in our drive to deliver a highly innovative product built on the foundations of strong R&D and close collaboration with our customers. Not only will our new offshore pen reinforce a move towards higher energy sites and unlock Scottish aquaculture’s huge growth potential, it will help spearhead our export initiative and enable us to create job*

*opportunities here at our base in Inverness, and at our pen-building facilities in Argyll.”*

The AAI fund was launched in 2017 as a 30-month pilot programme, led by HIE, and delivered in partnership with Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre (SAIC). It offers SMEs in the aquaculture supply chain in the Highlands and Islands the opportunity of match funding to help commercialise innovative new processes, products, services or technologies.