

**Legislative Council
Hansard
Tuesday 24 March 2026**

The President, **Mr Farrell**, took the Chair at 11 a.m., acknowledged the Traditional People and read Prayers.

MOTION

Florfenicol Use in Tasmania

[4.50 p.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Thank you, Mr President. I am pleased to rise to make a brief contribution to this debate. I thank the honourable member for Hobart for raising what I believe is an important matter and, as the member for Murchison pointed out, not a Greens matter but a whole-of-community matter that's of considerable interest to many Tasmanians.

The member for Hobart has provided a comprehensive, strong and detailed analysis of concern surrounding the recent use of the antibiotic florfenicol by the salmon industry in Tasmania. I also appreciated the detail that the member for Murchison went to in her contribution here today as well, covering many of these matters quite comprehensively. I don't intend to do that in my contribution, but there are some things that I wanted to touch on that I think it's worth noting in relation to this matter.

Clearly, there's an engaged and ongoing public interest in the ramifications of usage of antibiotics such as florfenicol in industrial fish farms and in our marine and fresh waterways. It affects not only our natural environment but it also potentially affects people. Importantly, it also affects the levels of trust the community has in public authorities. I find it quite astonishing to suggest that calls for greater transparency are somehow a way of undermining public trust, when in fact they are quite the opposite. They are seeking to build and solidify public trust in our public authorities. It's the lack of transparency that's the problem here, and that's one of the things this motion points to as needing to be addressed.

Trust is eroded not just by concerns over the degree to which this antibiotic may or may not be detected in our waters, but also the lack of transparency around government information sharing and decision-making. For example, I'm sure we all here recall the degree of public frustration voiced at the end of last year when people were trying to ascertain where swimmers and recreational fishers should or should not safely access certain coasts and waters, following mass salmon mortality incidences and also following the use of antibiotics.

We saw the temporary closure of unrelated fisheries such as the rock lobster industry, as the motion before us notes in part 3, which is incredibly concerning that we're having to

basically pit industries off against each other, in a way. We're having to take actions, apparently to serve the interests of one industry, which is distinctly at odds with the interests of another important industry for this state. I know the member for Hobart and member for Murchison spoke about that in some detail, and I endorse the comments that they made.

Further, it's a concerning matter of fact, well-established on the public record now, that as detailed in clause 2 of the motion before us, a large amount, 815 kilograms of florfenicol was used over three weeks in fish farms last year, only to come to light due to parliamentary questioning and examinations. Public disquiet over the impact of industrial-scale use of antibiotics in the fish farms, as well as the broader impact of those fish farms, is growing. Public disquiet is growing. We need to take action to help address that.

This is evident in the CSIRO report released last week which presented data collated in April 2025 examining 900 Tasmanian residents' connection to and concern for the local marine environment. The report, undertaken by behavioural scientists Dr Corinne Condie and marine scientist Dr Scott Condie [both checked], found that:

Salmon aquaculture stands out as the only local industry posing both a significant threat and a major concern among respondents.

Further, the study found that the salmon industry experienced:

a significant and sustained shift from the strong community support experienced from 1986 to 2015, when the industry held an enviable social licence to operate.

According to the report, more than 90 per cent of respondents said Tasmania's waterways were central to their way of life and 70 per cent were 'worried or angry' about its health. There are two significant matters distinct from its content when considering this CSIRO report: one is that the survey occurred in April last year, prior the most recent and egregious salmon mortality incidents. Yet even then, 90 per cent of the respondents were worried or angry about the health of our waterways; the other is the composition of those 900 residents that were surveyed. These were not necessarily those who have been campaigning for years against the impact of salmon farms, although I contend their input would be as valuable as anybody else's. But instead, those surveyed by the CSIRO researchers consisted of aquaculture workers, marine scientists, government employees, commercial fishers, marine tourism operators, environmental and Aboriginal advocacy groups, and recreational water users. A pretty broad section of our community.

Hence, it's a straightforward proposition to concur with paragraph five of the motion that the use of florfenicol and other increasingly strong antibiotics is a matter of significant public interest and concern. Saying that is absolutely uncontroversial. There's literally no reason the government couldn't, for example, agree with that part of this motion. It's absolutely uncontroversial to say it's a matter of public interest and concern, of course it is. The point does not go on to say 'and therefore it should all be stopped'. It doesn't say that. It just notes the public interest and concern.

A significant and growing area of community concern is the potential long-term impacts of intensive and widespread use of antibiotics such as florfenicol in our marine environment, especially the potential for antibiotic resistance and any resulting antimicrobial resistance

across the impacted ecosystems. These concerns are very real and are not going to go away with a few reassuring pats on the head. This is one of the main areas of concern which are regularly raised with me when it comes to finfish farming.

Recently, I've had my attention drawn to a research article published in the March edition of the *Journal of Fish Diseases*. The article in question is called 'Sub-Inhibitory Concentrations of Florfenicol Modulate the Expression of Biofilm Formation and Antibiotic Resistance-Associated Genes in Biofilm-Embedded *Piscirickettsia salmonis*'. That's a big long title there. This research has considerable bearing for the Tasmanian situation in light of the departmental statements that the response to the recent outbreaks of *P. salmonis* was not to try to eradicate the disease, but to instead provide sufficient antibiotics to help the immune system of the affected fish cope with the disease. In other words, to provide a sub-inhibitory or sub-lethal dose.

This very recent and published research appears to be raising the prospect that sub-inhibitory doses of florfenicol have been found to enhance biofilms and antibiotic resistance. I am not a marine scientist, right here, I'm stating that very plainly. However, I've had this research distilled for me by someone who is and basically it has found the bacterium forms biofilms on surfaces where it can persist for a long time, basically hiding on those surfaces and mutating.

Further, sub-lethal doses of antibiotics kill off the weak bacterial cells and leave the resistant bacterial cells as the breeders for the next generation. It's been explained to me that this then can result in these biofilm colonies of antibiotic-resistant bacteria forming, ready to seed another infestation as soon as more fish are added.

In such a sub-inhibitory or sub-lethal dose scenario, the disease, in fact, never eradicates, it just keeps getting worse, according to this particular research. A deeply concerning prospect, which would be consistent with the points that are made in this motion's paragraphs 6, 7 and 8.

I'm not peer reviewing that research; I don't have the expertise to do so, but what it points to is that that this is a matter of discussion, it's a matter of research, it's a matter of debate and it's one that is entirely uncontroversial to say it's of public interest and continues to need to be discussed.

I would also say - just to pick up on that contribution from the government - point 8 of this motion which says:

Agrees the long-term use of antibiotics by industrial salmon farms is not supported by science or sustainable for marine ecologies

Is again entirely unremarkable.

Ms O'Connor - Statement of fact.

Ms WEBB - The government has deliberately misconstrued that in responding to it in their contribution and are pretending that point 8 says, 'We should never use antibiotics in the marine environment,' which is of course not at all what point 8 says. There is nothing controversial or contestable about saying the long-term use of antibiotics that are going on and on and on in the marine environment by industrial salmon farms is not supported by science or

sustainable from marine ecologies. No one would say that it is. It's only when you misconstrue the point with a strawman argument that you get to oppose it.

Which brings me to the last paragraph calling for the establishment of a publicly accessible portal, detailing in real-time where, when and in what quantities antibiotics are being used in Tasmanian fish farms so the public, recreational and other commercial fishers can make safe, informed decisions. This comes back to public interest and trust. This, of course, is a responsible and sensible course of action to suggest. It is in the public interest, and it is about building trust. It's about empowering communities to feel that they can make informed decisions. Real-time reporting is an investment in public trust and confidence, as well as fostering a sense of real-time responsibility when assessing the need to take any form of remedial action. I realise that the definition of real-time is something we've visited in this chamber on a range of issues and can be interpreted differently. In this context, I would consider it appropriate, feasible, and manageable for the antibiotic-use data to be published via the proposed portal at the same time it's received by the relevant authorities such as the EPA.

The government seems to suggest that sometimes the thing reported initially is not what ends up actually being put into the water. Well, that can certainly be demonstrated and provided as information on the portal. You could literally have the portal say, 'Initial notification, X amount,' and then have final amount used, 'X amount'. It's not very complicated to provide information to people if you're prepared to be honest and transparent about it. You can explain the data that you're presenting and people will understand how best to interpret it. Transparency is defensible; secrecy isn't defensible.

I do not think that in this Chamber we necessarily have a responsibility to work through the practical logistics of exactly how the proposed portal would work or not work. Instead, the purpose of the debate is to make it clear that this Chamber, if it supports this motion, indicates it wants a portal to exist, and wants this real-time data provision to be an output of this new piece of public information infrastructure.

I note that although the member for Hobart tabled this motion in December last year, the need for such a piece of timely public information infrastructure, as the proposed portal, was highlighted again with recent revelations reported in February this year of a different antibiotic in use in the Huon Aquaculture Meadowbank hatchery.

This use of the antibiotic Oxytetracycline (OTC) in the Meadowbank hatchery in January this year, only came to light due to a journalist's inquiries. Despite the company in question voluntarily disclosing its antibiotic use to the EPA. Good on Huon Aquaculture for making that voluntary disclosure to the EPA. It wasn't required as a matter of its licence; it did so off its own bat. It was the EPA who then kept it entirely secret. The public was not informed, and who knows if the public would ever have been informed if it hadn't come to light through those other means.

I said at that time that the revelations that came to light of the failure to inform the public of the serious community concerns over secrecy surrounding the use of florfenicol last year, is it's shocking failure to learn lessons in this industry necessary to build public trust and maintain confidence. Again, the failure in that case was on the part of the regulator, the EPA, and the government in terms of policy and what would be required of industry. It wasn't a failure of the industry who voluntarily disclosed it.

Tasmanians have a right to expect rigorous regulation and timely reporting of all antibiotic use and environmental conditions of fish farm hatcheries located near freshwater rivers; particularly those which feed into our public water supplies, as well as in our marine based fish farms. The basic fact of the matter is we will not rebuild public trust and confidence, we will not turn around that extent of upset and anger over the deteriorating health of our waterways, without moving to a mandatory reporting of antibiotic use and across both marine and freshwater fish fisheries along with real-time disclosure of monitoring processes. Whether it's called a portal or a dashboard or whatever is the current government-speak for such a facility outlined by this motion, this needs to be put in place as soon as possible. It also needs to be funded, resourced and maintained in order to fully deliver on the intent of this motion and the community calls for such a reliable public information tool.

One last comment before I end my contribution. I believe the establishment of the proposed portal can be acted upon immediately as it does not cut across, or impede in any way, the current independent study into Tasmania's salmon industry. Nor is it reliant on the outcomes of that inquiry to be progressed. There is no good or logical reason for the proposed portal, as outlined in the motion before us, to not be supported or implemented. I support this motion.