

A RESTOCKING programme headed by producers in Denmark has seen a significant improvement in European eel stocks, with the EU now set to follow the Danish lead, reports **QUENTIN BATES**.

Denmark has been the forerunner in addressing the issue of declining eel stocks and 10% of the 3-10g fingerlings that Danish producers have been supplied with have been returned to nature instead of being raised for food production.

"It works – and we have the documentation from the DTU-Aqua studies to back this up," says Mogens Mathiasen, managing director of the Hanstholm-based Royal Danish Seafood eel farm.

He comments that alongside the Danish programme, parallel projects have run in Poland, Germany and Sweden, but from 2009 a European-wide project will run on the Danish example to restock eel populations.

The recirculated water plant at Hanstholm takes glass eels from UK and French suppliers that are then grown for production – apart from those returned to nature.

"We recirculate 98-99% of our water here, more than anyone else does, with 7000m³ recirculated every hour, which makes us the largest land-based recirculation plant in the world," says Mathiasen.

"We even have our own environmental station and clean our own water. We allow no visitors here. These are live animals we are dealing with here so they need to be treated with care and respect.

"We produce the best quality and we want to continue to do so."

The Royal Danish Seafood plant produces around 1000 tonnes of eels every year, with glass eels taking some 18 months to grow to maturity. The eels are graded by size every six weeks until they are delivered to producers.

Mathiasen says that there are no difficulties with the supply of glass eels, but this will become even better when the EU-wide programme is underway.

"When this in progress, there won't be a problem with European eel stocks in future," he says.

Restocking works

says Danish eel producer



taking 80% of Japanese glass eels and the result is that there is no *Anguilla japonica* left. Now they want to do the same with European eels, but at five minutes to midnight, the EU made a decision and there will be a future for the European eel after all."

Mathiasen attributes the decision to heavy lobbying by fishermen, farmers and producers across Europe, who have all taken a stand together on this.

"In Denmark, Danish Aquaculture and Danish Fish have done a great job and it's fantastic to see how everyone was ready to fight on something that really has been a cross-Europe effort," he says and comments that the dark side of the issue is that NGOs are now calling for eel fishing to be stopped.

"We have not seen as many wild eels as in the last few years – and this is because of the restocking work that has been done. There was a definite strategy used here to restock eels, but if we stop, as Greenpeace and WWF are calling for, who is going to be putting fingerlings back into nature and carrying on the restocking process?"

"The EU listened to what we had to say and saw what had been done in Denmark – and it works. So now we hope that Greenpeace and WWF will listen as well.

"There is a big demand for fish everywhere and aquaculture is the biggest growth industry in the world. Royal Danish Seafood is working with tilapia in Africa and trout in the Balkans, all for local markets," says Mathiasen.

He says that water quality is the main issue in locating production and Montenegro and Croatia were chosen for trout production because of their clean water supplies that have a steady year-round temperature, as well as the

opportunities for interesting local markets and local partnerships.

"We are testing water quality all the time. Quality, temperature and flow all have to be right and in some locations these come together to provide some very interesting opportunities in different parts of the world."



Mogens Mathiasen,
managing director of the
Royal Danish Seafood
eel farm

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Royal Danish Seafood produces around 1000 tonnes of eels every year

"What is a problem is that 80% of the glass eels go to China – and Chinese producers are able to use hormones and drugs that are not available to us," he says, adding that Chinese producers are able to produce eels that are 80% female.

He explains that male eels stop growing at around 150g, while females continue to grow, with the gender determined at the glass eel stage.

"On the 1 May 2007, the FDA in the US placed a ban on the import of eels and a number of other fish products from China and the following day the Japanese food agency introduced a similar ban. The EU was informed and did nothing," he says.

"In 2006 100 tonnes of frozen eel products were exported to Europe from China – and in 2007 this rose to 4000 tonnes as their US and Japanese markets disappeared, while Europe ignored the issue.

"There's certainly a risk to consumers here, especially in Germany where a high proportion of eel products come from Chinese producers. The consumer wants quality, but there is no control on this and this is the biggest problem we have. We've tested these products and we know what's in them."

EU decision at five to midnight

"The future looks bright for the European eel, as from 2009 it will be illegal to take European glass eels out of Europe. Ten to 15 years ago, Chinese producers were



Glass eels take 18 months to reach maturity