THE highest recorded levels of sea lice on farmed fish in Ireland were found on two Donegal fish farms in recent months, it has emerged.

According to industry-circulated Marine Institute reports leaked to the Donegal News, the worst affected fish farms were those in Lough Swilly and Mulroy Bay.

The reports were passed to us by an international anti-fish farming activist, Mr Don Staniford, who visited Donegal this week.

Mr Staniford said the figures proved the sites in Mulroy Bay and Lough Swilly recorded the highest sea lice levels during the months of August, September and October.

Sea lice from fish farms, he said, were destroying local, long-established wild Atlantic Salmon stocks.

Marine Harvest has said that it operates controls laid down by the Marine Institute which are of the highest international standard.

Mr Staniford said: “Marine Harvest (stock) is disease-ridden with more than 70 lice recorded on some fish at their site in Lough Swilly and Mulroy Bay. The reports were passed to us by an international anti-fish farming activist, Mr Don Staniford, who visited Donegal this week.

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Sea lice problems at fish farms

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September and as many as 56 per fish in Mulroy Bay during the same month. "These figures come from official Marine Institute reports which have been leaked to me," Mr Staniford said.

"Sea lice is a result of the intensification of fish farming and lethal chemicals are being used to kill them," he added.

The figures quoted by Mr Staniford were confirmed by copies of the same reports which were released to us by the Marine Institute.

A spokesperson for the institute said these reports are circulated to stakeholders, including Inland Fisheries Ireland and Salmon Watch Ireland, on a monthly basis.

"You will note that each report contains a statement that they should not be cited or passed on without prior permission of the Marine Institute. They are intended for information only. The full set of inspection results together with a detailed commentary is published annually and posted on the Marine Institute website," the spokesperson said.

A spokesperson for Marine Harvest said it is untrue to say that they have exceeded sea lice limits every month of this year to date.

"Marine Harvest Ireland would also like to point out the control protocols in respect of sea lice are operated by the Marine Institute on behalf of the State and are more advanced than those operated in other jurisdictions," the spokesperson said.

"This is because the regime is totally independent of the industry, data obtained as a result of their inspections are published and treatment trigger levels are set at a low level. These controls are widely accepted as representing best practice internationally," Mr Staniford also claimed that Marine Harvest would be forced to close sites in Mulroy Bay as a result of an outbreak of the deadly Anomie Gill Disease (AGID). The naturally occurring disease affects farmed salmon and is attributed to an increase in water temperatures.

The spokesperson for the company said it had been impacted by AGID this year but denied this would lead to the closure of any of their sites.

"Mulroy Bay will be followed following Christmas 2013 and will be operational again in the future. This is in accordance with good farming practices. Similarly, Lough Swilly will be followed early next year," the spokesperson said.

Meanwhile, Mr Staniford heavily critiqued government plans to develop a "super size" fish farm off the coast of Donegal near Gola Island.

Mr Staniford was in Donegal as part of a tour of the west coast of Ireland where he outlined the damaging effects that common fish farming practices which he described as "fundamentally flawed".

"It has become clear that factory farming in Ireland causes mass discards and the public has a right to know what diseases and treatments affect farmed salmon," he said.

Mr Staniford referred to the first study on salmon farming in Ireland in 1989 which said the use of hydrogen peroxide to combat sea lice heath problems would normally return to their rivers are being killed by sea lice.

DONEGAL Volunteer Centre has offered to include its core group of 250 registered volunteers by inviting them to take the opportunity to participate in local events for the Donegal Gathering 2013.

John Curran, Manager of the centre said, "We are delighted to be able to assist and lend our support to The Donegal Gathering. Our unique service provides volunteers qualified to assist in every aspect of work The Gathering 2013 may require."

Caroline John, Placement Officer for the Donegal Volunteer Centre added, "This is an exciting opportunity for Donegal and a fantastic initiative. The Donegal Volunteer Centre is focused on supporting volunteers and local groups by connecting people to opportunities to help support a vast array of community initiatives, and the mission of The Donegal Gathering is exactly the same."