

How 'flying fish' can boost airport



The development of a depuration centre in Dunmore East Harbour could provide Waterford Airport with an unprecedented non-passenger-related commercial link. | Photo: Eoin Murphy

Creation of Depuration Centre would have knock-on benefits for Killowen

A rejuvenated Dunmore East Harbour could prove an unlikely strategic ally in securing the long-term future of Waterford Airport, a public meeting in the village was told on Wednesday last.

The benefit of developing a Regional Depuration Centre in Dunmore East (where shellfish subjected to low levels of bacterial contamination are purified for 48 hours in depuration tanks, thus ensuring the delivery of a clean product to restaurants and suppliers) could also provide Waterford Airport with a welcome fillip.

Speaking at the publication of the 'Turning The Tide' survey, from which it's hoped a five-year plan for Dunmore East can be developed, Mayo-based oyster farmer and marine biologist Fergal Guilfoyle said oysters, mussels and clams would be primarily handled at such a facility.

And were such a business to develop locally, given the demand for such produce abroad, then the nearby Waterford Airport would provide an ideal facility to develop a local export market for South East sourced, depurated, packed and branded shellfish.

The waters off Dunmore East are categorised as 'B' (referring to the aforementioned low levels of bacterial contamination) which means any produce fished from it would require depuration.

"At present," as Mr Guilfoyle noted, "there is no depuration centre in the region," and given the quality of shellfish between Dungavan and Bannow Bay, there's a genuine opportunity to create a new and sustainable industry in Dunmore East, he felt.

"There are great oysters in Dungarvan, and there are tonnes of mussels being produced in Wexford, but you can't buy either product locally, so the FLAG Project here in Dunmore East suggested the development of a depuration centre in the village."

Mr Guilfoyle, who previously worked for Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM) added: "Ireland exports the vast majority of such products, so the mussels from Wexford largely go to Holland, where the market is, and they're depurated there."

“Ninety per cent of Irish oysters are sent to France in one ton bulk bags; so France depurates them, then re-packs them and makes a lot of money that really ought to be getting made here, so there’s no doubt that we are losing out, we’re not adding enough value to what we’re producing here.”

Local product, right now, “is going right past your door to Rosslare Harbour,” Declan Guilfoyle added, given the absence of a depuration facility.

“Eighty to ninety per cent of the product is being transported by road, to the continent, for depuration, and if such a centre was created in Dunmore, then there’d be an immediate added value from a regional perspective.”

He continued: “It would give local producers the opportunity to sell directly to the local market, which they largely don’t do at all at present; it would give them access to national markets – we’re only a couple of hours from Dublin, and right now there’s a huge demand from Dublin restaurants for shellfish.

“And added to that, there’s the opportunity to go international and establish a link with the Chinese market, for example, because you could potentially fly a lot of this product to Hong Kong or elsewhere in China directly from Waterford Airport and get a much better price for the product in so doing...so there is a chance here to add value to a product that is exported in bulk.”

A greenfield facility might be required for the creation of such a facility in the event of a large scale development, but a smaller scale operation, which, in theory could be based in the Harbour, could still access foreign markets directly by air.

Capital requirements would be needed to purify the seawater (via a UV filter) in any such facility, Mr Guilfoyle added, but he noted: “the infrastructural requirements are not huge”.

Fergal Guilfoyle also stressed that a community owned facility would represent the ideal management model, thus ensuring the greatest possible added value from a local and regional perspective. And given the nature of the trade, such a facility would be a year-round operation.

Meanwhile, efforts to secure a replacement carrier at Killowen for the outgoing Flybe service are ongoing, according to a statement issued to The Munster Express on Friday last.

In a brief comment which can only be described as tight-lipped, a spokesperson confirmed that “negotiations are ongoing and are strictly business discussions at present”.

As soon as the Airport is “in a position to discuss the activity in a public forum,” the local media shall be alerted to any good news, news which simply cannot come soon enough.

According to Waterford Chamber Chief Executive Nick Donnelly: “We know that management are working day and night to find a new carrier; it’s a critical situation, a real challenge, and it’s vital that, in the short term, we find a solution.

“And I know from my discussions with the Chief Executive and his team at the Airport that they’re leaving no stone unturned in their efforts to secure a new carrier, so let’s hope we’ll have good news on that front very soon.” (See News 20 for more from last Wednesday’s meeting in Dunmore East).