

Trout Fishing in Armenia

Author: [Lilit Arakelyan](#)

Environmentalists see commercial fish farms as latest threat to Lake Sevan.

Environmentalists in Armenia are alarmed at plans to introduce fish farming in Lake Sevan, the region's biggest freshwater resource. They say the industrial feeding process could cause pollution.

In February, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan said fish farming was a government priority because it would create jobs and income.

For Lake Sevan, the plan is to breed large numbers of the endemic species of lake, using artificial food rich in phosphorus and nitrogen. There could be nearly 80 fish farms around the lake within the next ten years. The project's backers say it will create 5,000 to 6,000 jobs and boost exports.

A dozen environmental groups have written to the president asking him to block the plans, although that seems unlikely to happen.

Armen Yeganyan, head of the industrial policy department at the economy ministry, told IWPR that the farmed trout would go to Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia.

According to Yeganyan, fish enclosures will occupy just 0.03 per cent of the lake – “one-fiftieth of the international standard”. In addition, he said, the density of eight kilogrammes of fish per cubic metre of water was “five times less than the average for caged or netted fish farms”.

Green activists like Liana Asoyan of the Aarhus Centre dispute the claim that the impact of commercial fish farming can be contained so easily.

“They intend to make money at the cost of water purity, even though this lake is our reservoir of clean drinking water,” Asoyan told IWPR. “If they go through with this programme, we’ll end up with a waste dump full of fish. The water in Lake Sevan will be good for nothing after it’s had so much artificial feed poured into it,” she said.

In recent years, environmentalists have raised concerns about successive government programmes, warning of pollution from mining projects, water supplies blocked behind hydroelectric dams, and increased volumes being drawn off for irrigation. (See **[Setback for Lake Sevan](#)** and **[Greens Take On Hydro-Schemes](#)**.)

The latest plan potentially contravenes a law passed in 2001 to preserve Armenia's largest lake.

Gagik Tadevosyan, a former member of parliament who helped draft the law, argues that it is illegal to engage in any kind of commercial activity that could harm the ecosystem. In the case of fish farming, he said, “The fish won't be able to totally absorb all of the nitrogen and phosphorus feed that will be poured into the lake. The remains of the feed will sink to the bottom of the lake and form a layer of chemical waste that will rot and stagnate. The organic elements will then enter the water.”

Artashes Ziroyan, head of the environment ministry's bioresources agency, denied that feeding methods would lead to pollution.

“They will use European, ecologically pure kinds of feed, and these will not just be dumped into the lake, but added gradually. I am sure that 98 percent of the feed will be consumed,” he said.

Ziroyan argued that commercial fish breeding would have a positive effect on the lake's eco-balance since wild stocks of Sevan trout were currently badly depleted, but would be replenished as part of the new scheme. The commercial fish farms would release between five and ten per cent of their stocks into the wild each year.

He said a final environmental assessment was now being carried out, and if this was positive, fish farming would start this year.

The government intends to create a Sevan Protection Fund, built up from a percentage of the revenues from sales of farmed fish and expected to hit nearly 60 million dollars within a decade.

Inga Zarafyan, head of the Ecolur group, believes the economic assumptions behind government projections are questionable.

“It isn’t clear whether they’ll have so many fish, or whether prices will change,” she said. “There’s a high possibility that in such a large project, fish will start dying, diseases will spread among them, and medication will need to be bought.”

Lilit Arakelyan works for Araratnews.am in Armenia.

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