

NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

STRATEGIC PLAN 2012 TO 2014

Introduction

Ness District Salmon Fishery Board (“the Board”) is established under the “Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 2003.

The principal objectives for which “the Board” is established are:

- (a) the protection or improvement of the fisheries
- (b) the increase of salmon; or
- (c) the stocking of the water of the district with salmon. (Salmon include sea trout)

The Board may do such acts, execute such works and incur such expenses as may be expedient to achieve these objectives.

However we do not operate in isolation and our plans need, where they do not totally conflict with our objectives, to take cognisance of other users of the system. The system is a major tourist asset and a significant source of hydro electric generation. Much of its length forms part of the Caledonian Canal and the needs of British Waterways have to be recognised. The system is also used by the aquaculture industry with smolt rearing cages present in both Loch Ness and Loch Garry and land based units at Foyers and Inchmore.

Where we are

The Board's catchment area is one of the most varied in Scotland both in terms of its waters and the genetic diversity of its salmon population. Throughout the system catches have been in decline with the upper part of the system suffering particularly badly.

While there has been a general decline in the number of salmon returning to Scottish rivers the problem appears to be particularly acute on the Ness system, raising the question of whether something fundamental is happening within the system itself. Undoubtedly there is a combination of factors at play. Some – for instance smolt survival at sea – are well known. Others may be more difficult to establish with certainty. Identification of the problems that the system is facing, together with the identification and implementation of remedial actions - presents the biggest challenge that the Ness Board has ever faced. That challenge will be manifest in terms of the board's technical resources, its very limited financial capabilities – and in harnessing the will of a diverse range of system users – both fishermen and non fishermen – to face up to those challenges and accept the potentially difficult decisions that may need to be made.

In 1964 the system produced 3300 fish to rod and line. Fifty years on the system will produce less than 1,000 fish. This shows the potential of the system but also its decline.

In order to try to address this fundamental downturn in the productivity of the system a well thought out set of Strategic Objectives, supported by detailed implementation proposals,

needs to be drawn up. The proposals and actions initially outlined will be subject to constant review and updating as more data becomes available.

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Strategic Objectives

- 1 ensure that all possible available habitat is opened up to salmon access and is fully utilised.
- 2 develop a cohesive plan to tackle the problems of the upper part of the system
- 3 work with the salmon farming industry to ensure that salmon farming activities presents NO risk to the wild salmon population.
- 4 work with SSE to mitigate the effects of their present and future developments on the salmon population and to ensure that they fully comply with their obligations in respect of their existing facilities.
- 5 implement a catch and release policy which spreads the conservation effort evenly across the system and is straightforward to police
- 6 ensure a complete and accurate return of all fish caught is made to the Board
- 7 ensure the system remains as free as possible from non-native species.
- 8 work with and through the NBFT and all other interested bodies to promote and publicise the environmental, leisure, tourism and heritage benefits that a vibrant and sustainable salmon fishing resource will bring to the Ness District and its inhabitants.
- 9 develop such systems, management structures and methodologies as are required to implement these strategic objectives.

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Methodology

The above Objectives cannot be achieved by the Board working alone. The Board neither has the financial resources or the technical or practical expertise to do so. Mobilization of that support both from the fishing proprietors, the fishing community, from those whose actions affect the system, and from those whose interests will be affected by the system, will be required. The Boards principle role will be in working with these communities of interested parties to agree the direction to be taken and to coordinate the actions required. In this capacity – the Board must be capable of providing strong and unified leadership.

There is no doubt that our objectives will not necessarily sit easily with those who will be instrumental in influencing the outcome. SSE and the Fish Farming Industry can both play a major role in our success. But equally, their interests could conflict with ours. Conflict rarely leads to success for either side and we must work hard to find ways of achieving shared goals.

But first we need to ensure that the objectives of the systems' proprietors are aligned. Presently – this is not the case. Strong divisions of opinion exist, particularly within the angling proprietors, over the key issues of the Boards finances and its approach to catch and release.

The first challenge for the Board is therefore to create the unity that is required to enable it to fulfil its role. Education and communication has a big part to play in making progress as it has become clear that the role, finances and objectives of the Board have not been clearly communicated. We need to have the anglers support for our objectives and a willingness from them to self police the tiny minority who wish to act as if nothing has changed and, by doing so, jeopardize the future of the fishery. While we have compulsory powers which can be used the Board hope that this will not be necessary. If our strategy is sound and well communicated the Board should reasonably anticipate cooperation. While the application of our statutory powers will always remain as an option, the Board will hesitate to do so unless it is clear that they are unable to discharge their obligation under the 2003 Act (to protect the fisheries) without doing so.

There is good evidence that all but a few anglers are moving steadily towards accepting the Board's broad policy that all spring fish should be returned. The policy to return at least 50% of the remainder has not received acceptance by all anglers. The division in adherence to these guidelines will, unless, resolved, continue to hinder the unity and effectiveness of the Board.

The Board recognises the operation of the legal netting stations within the system and the netsmens right to catch fish. Their use of proper fishing methods and awareness of the needs of the system as a whole is welcomed.

Conclusion

We are seeing a system in decline. If that decline is to have any chance of being reversed then practical policies supported by sufficient financial resources will need to be brought to bear on the problems. Over 2011 the emphasis has been on making the Board and its structures and systems fit for purpose and communicating that to all of our stakeholders. While significant progress has been made that work is not yet complete.

This strategy document attempts to provide the correct direction for the Board to reverse the decline. Evidence from other systems shows that sound management practices do help. There are no guarantees of success. We are the current custodians of the system – we use it but also hold it in trust for future generations; it represents a wonderful and unique asset to the area. We owe it to future generations to make a serious attempt at maintaining it in good and sustainable working order.

06 December 2011

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Strategic Objective 1

Ensure that all possible available habitat is opened up to salmon access and is fully utilised

Following the buildings of the Hydro Dams in the late 50's early 60's huge areas of salmon breeding habitat were either drowned or became inaccessible. Much of the system was converted from running water to still water.

In addition to this, the severely diminished survival rate of smolts at sea makes it even more important that all potential smolt rearing habitat within the system is utilized.

While a hatchery was built and some funds made available for restocking this has never really seemed to work. The merits of hatchery stocking are now being questioned but stocking of the river both to compensate for spawning grounds lost due to the hydro schemes and to utilize any other potentially under utilized areas of the system still represents a potential opportunity to increase the systems smolt yield. The Board will therefore:

- (a) initiate a study into the areas of the system presently inaccessible to salmon to establish a priority order for achieving open access
- (b) Develop an action plan to maximise the utilization of all suitable areas of the system and the means by which they can be stocked – including the potential use of a hatchery
- (c) Engage all appropriate bodies and, in particular, The Highland Council, SEPA and SNH to gain their support for this initiative particularly through cooperation within the implementation of the River Basin Plan
- (d) Engage the Forestry Commission and other relevant private forestry interests in discussions on the impact of their works on the system and on the need to develop a plan of action to mitigate against any potential adverse consequences of their operations.
- (e) immediate target areas are River Farigaig and the upper Garry

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Strategic Objective 2

Develop a cohesive plan to tackle the problems of the upper part of the system

In 2011 the Board established an upper river sub-committee to look at the problems of the upper part of the system and to report back with a working plan for their solution. A significant element of this study was to consider the merits of re - establishing a hatchery.

The Boards agreement with SSE (and enshrined in law) specified they would pay the costs of providing operating and maintaining a hatchery in compensation for spawning grounds lost on the River Garry and River Moriston due to the hydro schemes. That hatchery has not been in operation for some years but has been replaced by a conservation grant – the main purpose of the grant being to establish the underlying issues which effected the operation of the hatchery and the more general problems apparent in the upper river system.

To this end the Board through the sub-committee will:

- (a) gather all available information on the present state of the upper system including fish numbers, habitat spawning issues, barriers and the like
- (b) engage such technical expertise as may be required to report on the range of solutions to the problems
- (c) work with all interested parties SSE, SEPA, SNH and Fish Farm Industry to ensure they all buy into the proposed solutions
- (d) deliver to the Board a fully costed proposal for bringing about the required improvements along with the physical and management resources required to deliver it.
- (e) engage with SSE in discussions to clarify SSE's legal liabilities together with any further contributions that SSE may be prepared to make to remediate the system effected by their operations

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Strategic Objective 3

Work with the salmon farming industry to ensure that salmon farming activities present NO risk to the wild fish population.

The Board supports the development of an environmentally sustainable and competitive salmon farming industry and recognises the benefits that such an industry can bring to the Highlands. However, to be environmentally sustainable the growth of this industry must not lead to damage in the wild fish population.

It is now widely recognised – both in the wild and farmed fish arenas – that salmon farming activity creates two primary risks to the wild fish stocks. These are (1) escapes from smolt rearing facilities located in fresh waters connected to river systems and the consequent risk of “genetic pollutions” in the wild fish stock – and (2) sea lice infestations which present a risk to smolt migrating in to the sea. Other potential risk may include the possibility of increased nutrient inputs to the fresh water environment due to an over abundance of feed

There is currently one fish farm (smolt rearing) site in Loch Ness, and one in Loch Garry. There are also two land based sites. There are presently no sea based cages in the Boards area of jurisdiction.

The Boards duty under the 2003 Act is to protect the fishery. This implies the elimination of the above risks and it is difficult to see how this can be achieved without the removal of the existing smolt rearing facilities from the system. This will clearly present a challenge for the present operators and the Board must work with these operators to find a way of achieving mutually agreed goals.

To this the end the Board will:-

- (a) update our knowledge of the licences, planning consents and other framework under which these farms operate.
- (b) monitor the farms on a regular basis for evidence of fish escape.
- (c) ask all anglers to report immediately to the Board, preferably with photographic or scale sample evidence, escapees caught.
- (d) meet with the fish farm owners to discuss our concerns and to seek mutually agreed goals for the TOTAL elimination of the risks that their activities present to the wild fish stocks.
- (e) Explore with the aquaculture industry the development of strategies for effective and appropriate stocking of the system.

- (f) ensure adequate publicity is given in local and national press to the importance of developing a truly sustainable salmon farming industry which does not pose risks to wild fish stocks. Where those risk (escapes of smolts in to the system) materialize – ensure that these events are recorded, publicized and that adequate compensation is sought.
- (g) as it is unlikely that the risks associated with fish farm activities can be totally eliminated the board will need to work with the fish farm owners towards a goal of either the removal of smolt rearing activities from the systems, or to supporting the fish farmers in transferring their activities to a “closed containment” operation.
- (h) The Board will vigorously oppose any attempt to reintroduce sea cage based salmon farming within its area of jurisdiction.

Strategic Objective 4

Work with SSE to mitigate the effects of their present and future developments on the salmon population and to ensure that they fully comply with their obligations in respect of their existing facilities

Scottish and Southern Energy (SSE) are the major industrial user of the system. Several dams were built in the 1950's on the Moriston and Gary. A pump storage system was built in the 1990's at Foyers and in the 2000's a traditional facility Glendoe near Fort Augustus. A further pump storage system is proposed and will shortly come to the planning stage.

The affect of all these facilities on the salmon stocks has been hotly debated over the years. Salmon catches have been in steady decline since the 1950's and while all the factors affecting this are yet to be fully understood, the presence of hydro activities and dams on a river system is widely believed to be detrimental both in the short and longer term.

However we have to accept as a Board that SSE are not going to go away. The demand for green energy and the political force behind it mean we will have to manage the fishery in conjunction with SSE use of the system.

SSE have in the past entered into agreements to fund a hatchery and still pay for that and will do so for the foreseeable future. This proposed increased activity will undoubtedly make the future management of the system more expensive and we need to work closely with SSE to ensure the needs of both parties are recognised and, where possible, met.

On a positive note, the SSE has shown considerable willingness to work with the Board. There can be no doubt that in actively supporting the regeneration of the system the SSE presents itself with an opportunity to demonstrate its own commitment to the environment and to play the role that an organisation of its stature should play in supporting one of Scotland's most prized natural resources. The Board should provide every opportunity for SSE to capitalise on this opportunity.

The Board will therefore:

- (a) support the existing liason group with SSE so the Board remains fully aware of SSE plans and can comment in a constructive way well in advance of these plans becoming a reality.
- (b) review the system with SSE and the marine biologist to establish where upriver access could be opened up or improved, particularly at dam sites. To work out a funding basis for any works required.
- (c) engage with others to bring about a study into the effects of fluctuating water levels both in the rivers and the lochs on the life cycle of the salmon
- (d) instigate a river and loch level change pre warning system delivered by text message by SSE.

- (e) ensure full statistics on all river and loch water levels are maintained to better monitor the effects of change on salmon catches.
- (f) make available the results of all research to ASFB, RAFTS and other interested bodies

Strategic Objective 5

Implement a catch and release policy which spreads the conservation effort evenly across the system and is straightforward to police.

A catch and release policy is in operation on most rivers in Scotland. Compulsory catch and release is used mainly for the spring fishing with the rest of the season being left to voluntary arrangements. On most systems these voluntary arrangements work very well and Board policies are fully implemented.

The Board will:-

- (a) review the present catch and release policy and update it where appropriate
- (b) ensure the Board's policies are applied fairly throughout the system.
- (c) ensure all users of the system are made aware of the policy and educate them as to the reasons for it.
- (d) work with proprietors and others to ensure that the small number of anglers who refuse to buy into the catch and release policy face sanctions including, in the most serious cases, having their right to fish withdrawn.
- (e) encourage a voluntary ban on the use of worms, live bait and multiple hooks throughout the system.
- (f) develop a monitoring system through the bailiffs to measure compliance with the Board policy.

Strategic Objective 6

Ensure a complete and accurate return of all fish caught is made to the Board

It is only logical that organisations with statutory responsibility to manage stocks of salmon within a catchment have access to reliable data on numbers of fish caught. Without this information the Board may take decisions on poor or inadequate information to the long term detriment of the fishery.

The Board will therefore:

- (a) utilise its powers under “The Conservation of Salmon (Collection of Statistics) (Scotland) Regulations) 2006.
- (b) ensure publicity for the 2006 regulations to ensure all proprietors and others due to make returns are fully aware of their responsibilities under the Act.
- (c) develop a section within the Board website where returns by beat, boat or other permit are made on a regular basis.
- (d) ensure all returns are made six monthly on a by month basis and contain such information as the Board may require.
- (e) develop a monitoring system through the bailiffs to ensure compliance with these requirements.

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Strategic Objective 7

Ensure the system remains as free as possible from non-native species.

Biosecurity issues associated with invasive non native species, fish diseases and parasites have a growing ecological significance. Sea lice infestation has already had a serious effect especially to sea trout populations. The threat from other invasive non native species like signal crayfish, giant hogweed and American mink pose potentially bigger threats. The Board will therefore:

- (a) ensure through adequate publicity that all anglers are aware of the nature of the threats.
- (b) establish a system whereby threats can be reported to the Board.
- (c) maintain, and where appropriate, update the existing Biosecurity Plan.
- (d) appoint river champions to assist in monitoring for likely threats.
- (e) eradicate any threats as soon as discovered.

Strategic Objective 8

Work with and through the NBFT and all other interested bodies to promote and publicise the environmental, leisure, tourism and heritage benefits that a vibrant and sustainable salmon fishing resource will bring to the Ness District and its inhabitants.

The Ness District has a long association with salmon and salmon fishing. A river system devoid of salmon or where salmon fishermen are no longer important, would have a deep impact on our culture, our environment and our economy. The progress in the reintroduction of salmon runs to the damaged river systems of the south of Scotland and England have given a focus to the millions of pounds of investment that have been needed to remediate these damaged environments. We have a river system to be proud of, its health, embodied in the health of its salmon runs, is a statement of our own values. The Board should be a leader in promoting the understanding and pursuit of these values.

- (a) Continue to work with and provide financial support to the NBFT.
- (b) Continue to work with The Salmon Netsmens Association and their local representatives.
- (c) Engage with all relevant environmental, economic and tourism bodies to promote the importance of our river system and salmon population in supporting their own aims.
- (d) Publicise the aims of the Board to local community and in particular to our younger community.
- (e) Work with Highland Council to ensure we buy into their Vision Plan and work with them to identify potential third party sources of funding
- (f) Work actively to raise the additional funds to support the actions needed to deliver the objectives set out in this Strategy Plan.
- (g) To encourage fishing on the system and spread the joy of angling to a wider community particularly younger people so the fine traditions of the sport may be carried on.

Strategic Objective 9

Develop such systems, management structures and methodologies as are required to implement these strategic objectives.

The strategy developed in this documents and the programme of work that flows from it requires a rethink of the way the Board is organised and run. The Board will therefore:

- (a) appoint a “chief executive” The “chief executive” will be retired or semi retired and have the time, energy and drive to see the strategy delivered.
- (b) develop a sound framework for the Bailiffs to work within covering how they support the Board’s policies and the physical resources they require.
- (c) refocus the efforts of the Bailiffs towards monitoring and educating anglers throughout the system to comply with the Board’s catch and release policy and to ensure returns of all fish caught are made. To assist in doing this effectively a boat suitable for the loch and inner Moray Firth will be required.
- (d) prepare an annual budget matching expenditure to the strategic objectives.
- (e) prioritise the items in the plan so as to achieve the majority of objectives within the next three years.
- (f) develop a web site as the main tool of communication of the Board’s policies, vision, education and information.
- (g) carry out alone or in conjunction with others, such research or monitoring as will improve our knowledge of the salmon and its environment.