
**NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
BOARD MEETING MINUTES**

Time: 14:00

Date: 19th September 2013

Location: Board Room, Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club

Present:

Andrew Duncan: Ness Castle, Chairman (AD)
Annie Girvan: River Moriston, Mandate (AG)
Bob Morgan: River Gary, Mandate/Alternate (BM)
Nigel Fraser: Dochfour, Mandate (NF)
Ryan Rutherford: Ness Side, Mandate (RR)
William Armstrong: River Oich, Mandate (WA)
Alan Scott: Highland Council, Mandate/Alternate (AS)
Alexander Patience: Nettsman, Co Option (AP)
Graham MacKenzie: Co-Option (GMcK)
Neil Cameron: Ness & Beaully Fisheries Trust (N&BFT), Co-option (NC)

In Attendance:

Alastair Stephen: SSE (ASt)
April Conroy: Board Secretary (AC)
Chris Conroy: Chief Executive/Clerk (CC)
John MacColl: Head Bailiff (JMCC)
Keith Williams: (N&BFT), (KW)

Apologies:

Angus MacGruer: Co-Option
Ben Leyshon: SNH
Michael Martin: Co-Option
Paul Williamson: River Gary

1. WELCOME

AD introduced AS attending with a mandate for the Highland Council, CC the new Board Director and AC the Board Secretary. AD explained that the public had been given the opportunity to attend and would be given the same at all future meetings of the board. AD reviewed the apologies as listed above.

2. APPROVAL OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

The minutes from the Board meeting held on Thursday 20th June 2013 were approved by the Chairman without amendment.

3. ACTIONS

JMcC advised that he had not made any progress with regards to facilitating the purchase of sea trout permits in the Firth. He would discuss options with AP and the other netsmen in time for next season.

KW updated the Board on progress with the genetic report describing the makeup of fish sampled at sites throughout the Ness system. The report is now likely to be split into two, the first detailing findings relating to the genetic make-up of the populations published in partnership with Marine Scotland. The second detailing the level of Norwegian influence within the Ness system, published in partnership with RAFTS via peer reviewed scientific journal.

BM asked for sight. KW agreed to circulate to the board but requested that this not be circulated further as it is not a final draft. AD suggested that this matter be placed on the agenda for the next meeting.

KW stated that Marine Harvest had not yet formalised their containment strategy for the Inchmore Salmon Farm. Highland Council has confirmed that they have granted permission. It was agreed by the Board that the current plan for a land system with closed containment was preferable.

4. H&S REPORT

CC noted that there have been no reportable health and safety accidents or issues. He also noted that the Safety Manual has been updated and a set of new generic risk assessments have been produced.

CC reported that two SPOT Satellite GPS Messengers have now been purchased and activated. He explained that these devices provide a line of communication with colleagues when out of mobile phone range and allow the user to call for emergency assistance when required.

AD confirmed the H&S risk assessments add a lot of value. AD offered to share these with KW, NC and the NBFT by way of working closely to promote Health & Safety. NC concurred.

5. DIRECTOR/CLERK REPORT ON KEY ISSUES

CC provided an overview of river conditions, stating that river levels had remained low throughout the summer. CC said that despite the poor conditions, he had received reports that more fish had been seen running the river this year, with more fish hooked but lost. ASt noted a nationwide trend for good runs of spring salmon followed by much lower catches later in the season this year. GMcK noted that fish had always been 10lb plus this late in the season, not the 4 to 6lb fish currently experienced.

CC noted that voluntary return of catches for the 2013 spring period had been sent out to all qualified proprietors with a deadline of 10th September. To date only 16 out of 53 voluntary returns had been sent back. CC kindly requested as many returns as possible.

CC reported that the 2012 total Ness District salmon catch was 847 fish, the lowest for the last thirteen years, with an overall trend for declining catches. There has been a slight increase in 'spring' catches since 2009, suggesting that although 'spring' component is still in decline, the rate of decline has reduced. Overall multi sea winter (MSW) salmon catches have continued to decline since 2009, suggesting that numbers of summer and autumn salmon in particular may be in decline.

CC noted an overall trend for increasing numbers of grilse. Notably, where National salmon catches have shown an overall increase during the period 1989 to 2012, Ness District salmon catches have shown an overall decrease.

CC noted the 2012 release rate across the district was 75% and that this was above the national average. The 'Spring' salmon release rates have shown the greatest improvement, rising from 0% in 1994 to '97%' in 2012. CC reported that the MSW fish release rate stood at 88% and the grilse release rate stood at 58% in 2012.

ASt commented that the main improvement in release rates has been in the last 5 to 7 years and that considering the lifecycle of the salmon; any improvement in numbers of returning adult fish resulting directly from the improved release rates would only be seen now.

River Tarff

CC advised that in-stream works had been identified on the River Tarff. On consulting SEPA, he was informed that SSE had been authorised to carry out emergency works in the area to repair an exposed subsurface electricity cable. CC reported that the works seemed to have extended well upstream of the cable crossing.

ASt reported that he had visited the site and identified that works had indeed been carried out substantially upstream of the site of the cable crossing. He said that further investigation was required by SSE to determine whether the upstream works were related to those commissioned by SSE. If so he would need to sit down with CC to agree the appropriate course of action. AD noted that the initial response from SEPA was not taken seriously.

WA asked about the blockage on the Coilte Burn. KW confirmed that the contractor has been asked to produce a method statement for digging a small channel around the blockage by hand. This has been reviewed by CC and KW. CC confirmed that the latest method statement has been submitted to SEPA and SNH and that he was waiting for a reply.

Electric Burn.

CC and KW had met with representatives from SEPA, Highland Council and the Inverness Canoe Club. KW explained that under current management practices the sluices are closed at the end of the summer. This stops the water flow into the Electric Burn and fish populations in the burn are then liable to die over the winter months. CC noted a letter from SEPA to Highland Council that asks HC to put measures in place to prevent this from happening and for their activities to be licenced under the CAR Regulations. CC also noted that the Canoe club have built a brash structure that is impassable to fish. KW/CC will need to contact SEPA and the Canoe club about removing it.

Netting Buyout

CC reported that one off compensation payments had been made for the Kincurdie and Longman Point netting stations to cease fishing during the 2013 season through to May 2014. AD confirmed that the Beaully District Fishery Board had also contributed. CC reported that CKD Galbraith have been commissioned to value the netting stations to inform a proposed long-term buyout of the heritable interests.

Fish farm escapes

CC noted that Marine Harvest had reported the escape of 200 salmon parr from their Laddie Wood site on Loch Garry. ASt noted that it is positive that the escapees are being reported. All agreed.

Key meetings attended

CC noted the meetings attended as listed in his report. The meeting with British Waterways had been productive and that they had offered their support going forward. All agreed the positive nature of building better lines of communication going forward.

CC explained that at the meeting with the Inverness Angling Club (IAC), he and AD had asked if they could see weekly catch data. AD noted that he suggested an IAC representative would be welcome on the board and that it would be positive for a NDSFB member to be voted onto their board. AD also noted a suggestion to IAC about buying-out the worst offenders for taking fish on Town Water. AS noted that all three suggestions have subsequently been declined by IAC. AS thought it was important to note that IAC did support the wider initiatives discussed during the meeting.

CC reported on the Spey Board Public Meeting that he and KW had attended, in particular a presentation of the results of genetic work investigating the contribution that their hatchery makes to catches.

Assessment Payments

CC noted that there was still a significant amount of unpaid assessments. He confirmed that action would be taken to confirm all contact details are correct and to recover outstanding debt. AD confirmed that 10-12k in missing assessments and suggested delegation to MM & CC. GM drew attention the minutes and how this was agreed previously.

6. FINANCE REPORT

The Quarterly Management Accounts and Trading accounts to 15 August 2013 were noted. AD advised that income was broadly in line with the budget. We had not budgeted for the legal fees associated with drawing up contracts for AC and CC, however he had started later than planned. Bailiff budgets also looked over budget due to the later finish date for Billy Orrock.

AD noted that motoring budgets were over budget as the repair costs were becoming excessive. AD advised that CC would replace the two existing vans with one new suitable pool vehicle and report on this at the next meeting.

AD advised that a one off payment of the netting station buyout was shown in the accounts and that the NBFT had contributed £2k towards the buyout. AD asked AS whether the Highland Council had won their valuation appeal. AS confirmed they had not. AD confirmed that the 2.5 years of provision for paying the angling club back could therefore be removed from the budget.

AD noted that the Ness Strategy Report costs had not yet been incurred, making a surplus in this quarter, however the costs would be spent later.

AD advised that assessment notices would be going out in the next 4-6 weeks. Alan Scott said that that the Inverness Angling Club has a meeting in late November when they approve budgets. CC therefore made a commitment to get them out by 1st November or before.

AD advised that the management accounts were now finalised and had been circulated. AD requested that the annual accounts to 15 May 2013 be approved as suitable to go forward to the AGM and Annual Report. GMcK proposed and NF seconded this.

7. HEAD BAILIFF'S REPORT

JMcC advised that 3 individuals been been caught and a further 3 that had gotten away on Monday. He went on to provide an update on the prosecutions and forthcoming court cases on the 23rd September and 8th November 2013.

He reported that a digger had been on a tributary of the Moriston. It was believed to be related to Scottish Water's work to put in new mains. KW did not recall being consulted by SEPA dingwall and AG thought that the works had been completed back in June. JMcC reported that further in-stream works had been identified on the Coilte Burn.

JMc reported that 17 blockages have been noted for clearance over the winter and that he expected more to be identified. He had successfully cleared three to date. AD noted that budget could be provided for hire of equipment in the future.

ASt asked about sightings of seals. JMcC confirmed that since the last action was taken, no sightings have been noted. AD asked whether there had been people fishing without permission in the town water / angling club. JMcC confirmed that there were a large number this year.

AS advised that signs are due to be placed on the railway bridge in English and Polish before next season. The signs are awaiting approval from Network Rail but should go up in time for next season. AD noted that it had previously been agreed that the board would make a 50% cost contribution towards the signs.

JMcC confirmed that there were a number of individuals catching sea trout kelts below the railway bridge. AD asked whether it would be worth putting this clarification on the permit. CC offered to forward a poster to AS for publication.

8. NBFT BIOLOGIST'S REPORT

KW advised that they had concluded the electro fishing surveys on the Upper and Lower Garry. During this process they had successfully collected between 150 and 200 fin clips.

KW provided an update regarding saw bills and in particular the recent meeting in Pitlochry. He explained that there are developing research opportunities to gain a better understanding of the population and in particular whether those in the river are the same as those on the coast.

KW reported that a survey was carried out above the man-made obstruction on the Farigaig burn and no juvenile salmon were found. KW had advised SEPA that this may be the case and had arranged for a barrier assessment to be completed using the Scottish and Northern Island Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER) protocol.

NC asked about fish counters and specifically new technology. CC advised that Marine Scotland Science are looked at extending their fish counter network and that they are looking for sites where they could test new technologies such as Didson Counter. ASt noted that considerable funds would be needed to put it in place any Didson counters and further funds for maintaining them and he did not think that they would provide useful data for offshore developments. ASt acknowledged that it would be helpful to know explicitly what was coming into the system.

9. PROJECT UPDATES

ASt provided an update on the Upper System projects. He noted that the project was moving forward with Marine Harvest; however they had not yet signed on dotted line. ASt had been at a meeting to show their environment manager and others around the River Conon to show them the hatchery arrangements there.

Marine Harvest had come back with a proposal to look after the smolts over on Loch Eilt. There were two main issues outstanding. Firstly they need a way to grow on smolts so that they do not mature as grilse but as MSW fish. Further to this, the Loch Eilt site agreement between Marine Harvest and the Loch's proprietors is currently based on alternating years with a fallow year in between. ASt confirmed that a meeting had taken place between the ASFB and the Loch Eilt proprietors which had helped to move the understanding forward.

The primary concern remaining relates to the move from sea to fresh water. This is where disease risk is likely to be the highest. One option is to move the fish back to the Loch Garry, but disease risk would be too great. Another option is to consider refurbishing the Inver Garry unit. ASt advised that the hope was Marine Harvest's contribution to the project would be 'in kind', however this was not confirmed.

BM asked whether the smolts would be genetically screened. ASt confirmed the plan would be to catch the smolts, pit tag them, genetically type them and select only the 'Garry wild'. KW confirmed that the NBFT have fin clips from parr captured this year. He suggested looking now to see what the composition of smolts is likely to look like. AD agreed that this should be a priority. ASt confirmed that the money was available this year and should go ahead as this would provide a critical baseline.

AG raised risks of using Inver Garry, specifically because if no one is living at the site the risk of a failure on site would be high. BM asked if we would be relying on Marine Harvest. AG expressed concern that this was the arrangement last time and then the water was turned off and the whole stock lost. GMcC concurred this was a concern.

AD asked ASt if the plan was still to collect smolts in May 2014. ASt confirmed that this was still the plan. KW expressed concern that the catch might be small and that the majority may be of the wrong genetic make-up, especially if only one trap is used. ASt explained that the procedures in place for maintaining the fish counter might allow for maintenance of a further trap at a higher site. The use of a rotary screw trap was being considered.

10. NESS SCOPING STUDY

AD introduced progress on the Ness System Scoping Study. He reported that we had received an initial proposal from Dr Eric Verspoor (RLI) with a ballpark cost of £16,300. CC went on to explain that the costs had not yet been finalised and that he had consulted with KW, ASt and BM resulting in a number of constructive comments to be returned to Eric Verspoor before a final proposal.

AD advised that this cost was as expected, but that the budget had accounted for half the work being completed this year and half next year, not all this year. AD confirmed that when a final project proposal was written it would be circulated to the Board for comments.

CC advised that the first step would be to 'get our own data in order' and then identify whether it is sufficient before initiating the project and that we may need to delay this project to make this possible.

11. RESEARCH FACILITY

AD noted that the benefit of having the rivers and lochs institute on our doorstep offers a substantial opportunity and that the knowledge and skills of Dr Eric Verspoor provided great potential value. AD advised that the proposal would be to have a hatchery that would do something new. This would not restock the whole system. The purpose would be for research and improvement.

NC noted the importance of working with the university and institute to see whether they think this is what is needed. ASt noted that there is already a site on the Conon. NC questioned how important it was to the RLI to have an in depth understanding of the river on their own doorstep and whether they might consider carrying out the work at no charge. ASt advised that it would be prudent to go see what is happening on the Conon. He advised that they use family selection, strip more than 5,000,000 a year, and that they understand capacity estimates.

NF suggested that this should be led by the RLI and not by the board. BM questioned what the facility would, when functional, be able to add to what is already known in this area. His feeling was that the academics should be justifying it and driving it. BM asked how would this differ from what is happening on the Upper Garry. ASt cautioned that it would require significant time and investment to set something up that would make a significant impact.

NC noted that the Ness system has lots of problems that need to be answered. For example, the survival of those fish shown to be of Norwegian origin. ASt advised that some of the options to address this may not be palatable, such as letting nature take its course by letting the genetic makeup decide what survives. KW confirmed that this is the suggestion of Phil McGinnity.

AD asked whether it was worthwhile forming a working party with UHI. AG, GMcC, NC, all agreed.

12. AQUACULTURE AND FISHERIES ACT 2013 - IMPLICATIONS FOR DSFBS

CC noted that the new obligations regarding openness and accountability came into force on the 16th September 2013. He advised that the ASFB have provided useful guidance on Annual Reports and Accounts, Meetings of the Board, Compliant Procedures and Registration of Members Interests. CC summarised the paper.

AD questioned which would be the first set of accounts submitted on a formal basis. CC advised that it should be whichever will be included in the 2013 annual report. AD suggested that it should be the accounts for the period May 2013 to May 2014.

CC advised that the Board must now advertise Public Meetings and the AGM no later than 21 days before the day on which the meeting are to be held. The public should be given the opportunity to attend all other meetings. CC noted the complaints procedure, Register of Interest and asked all board members to complete and return their own register of interest form. AD noted that the board must all fill in the form and advised that they would be issued to all members.

The Board Members were asked to formally approve the complaints procedure. All agreed. The Board Members were asked to formally approve the register of interest format. All agreed. AD advised that this item will become a standing item on the agenda.

13. MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

The Media Development report was noted. Board members were asked to approve the new Ness District Salmon Fishery Board logo included on the papers. All agreed.

CC gave an interactive presentation on the new website, stressing its importance given the new obligation to advertise forthcoming meetings. AG commented that the website is good, but would prefer not to include the fish counter data for the upper catchment until the end of the season. ASt agreed.

AS suggested that pictures should only be included in the gallery if they followed the advice given regarding catch and release. AD agreed and noted that no fish should be shown more than 18 inches out of the water. Only best practice should be shown.

All members were asked if they approved of the format of the website, all agreed. AD advised that members would be given one week to review the content in detail and suggest any changes to CC by Friday 27th September or before. AD advised that thanks was due to Paul Williamson for all the work that he put into getting the first web site up and running moving us so far forward. AD also noted the Press Releases.

14. AOCB

AD advised that the Board should consider how many members it would be appropriate to have on the Board going forward. AD provided clarification on the demarcation between upper and lower proprietors being the downstream tip of Ness Islands and recommended 6 upper and 2 lower as a maximum, all agreed.

GMcK noted the International Stocking Conference in late November with the Atlantic Salmon Trust 27/28 Nov.

AD concluded the 3 year period of the outgoing board and thanked them for their tremendous support. GM thanked the chairman and the rest of the board concurred. With there being no further business to discuss the meeting closed at 17.00.

Next meeting is to be held on 12th December 2013, in the Board Room at the Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club.