

NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD Board Meeting Minutes

Time: 14:15

Date: 14th December 2017

Location: Telford Board Room, Inverness Caledonian Thistle Football Club

Present:

Michael Martin: Dochfour, Mandate (MM) Chairman

Alexander Patience: Netsman, Co Option (AP)

Angus MacGruer: River Oich, Proprietor (AM)

Bob Morgan: River Gary, Mandate/Alternate (BM)

Gordon Armstrong: Ness Castle, Mandate/Alternate (GA)

Graham Mackenzie: Co-Option (GM)

Neil Cameron: Ness & Beauly Fisheries Trust (NBFT), Co-option (NC)

In Attendance:

Alastair Stephen: SSE (AS)

April Conroy: Board Secretary (AC)

Chris Conroy: Chief Executive/Clerk (CC)

Frank Spencer-Nairn (FS-N)

Iain McMinn: SSE (IM)

John MacColl: Head Bailiff (JM)

Nick Barker: NBFT, (NB)

Apologies:

Andrew Steel: SEPA (AS)

Ben Leyshon: Scottish Natural Heritage (BL)

David Sutherland: Ness Castle Lodges, Proprietor (DS)

Eric Craig: Angling Club, Co Option (EC)

Helen Gray: River Moriston, Mandate (HG)

Janet Campbell: Highland Council, Mandate (JC)

Kenneth Knott: Forestry Commission (KK)

Melanie Smith: UHI Rivers and Lochs Institute (MS)

Ryan Rutherford: Ness Castle, Mandate (RR)

1. APOLOGIES

Michael Martin (MM) introduced the meeting and noted apologies as above.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

NDSFB Board Meeting (Sept 2017) meeting minutes were reviewed and one change was required – an action had been assigned to AM who was not present (this should have read GM). Pending this change the meeting minutes were approval was approved by NC and seconded by AS.

3. ACTIONS LOG

16.03 Convene the Financial Working Group prior to the next Board Meeting. **MM Reported that the group had not yet come together, but that individual input had been sought and feedback would be given alongside the Financial Report (Agenda Item 6).**

16.04 Take forward the preparation of a solicitor's letter for fishery assessment debtors. **CC reported that this action is in progress and would be covered in the Financial Report section (Agenda Item 6).**

4. HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

CC reported that there have been no reportable H&S accidents or issues since the last meeting.

The H&S paper contains a quote for an independent H&S review by Greens of Haddington. There was discussion regarding the necessity and value of this independent review. MM proposed that a desk-based review would be sufficient at this time. This was agreed.

Greens would look at the H&S policy and procedures of both the Ness DSFB and NBFT at the same time and produce one report that would cover both organisations. It was therefore important to consider the opinion of the NBFT trustees before taking this action forward.

Action 17.01: CC to present the Greens of Haddington H&S proposal for a full external review of the Ness DSFB and NBFT health and safety policy and procedures at the next NBFT meeting.

ASt outlined a current proposal of SSE to provide a bespoke training package for fisheries staff covering safe working practices on SSE sites. ASst extended an invitation to include the Ness DSFB staff. This was accepted.

5. GOOD GOVERNANCE

CC reported that an updated 'Register of Interests' has now been submitted to the Scottish Government and posted on the 'Publications' page of the Ness DSFB website.

No complaints have been received. Some discussion took place regarding the proper classification of a complaint.

Action 17.02: CC to check whether any other DSFB has received a formal complaint and what was the nature.

6. FINANCE REPORT

MM noted the finance paper and invited questions and comments.

MM reported the current position and identified that as the year-end approaches, the costs for the Garry Project genetics work would be incurred and the total loss for the year is expected to fall in line with the budget.

MM reported that the finance group did not all manage to get around the table at the same time, but he has discussed the current financial position with the individual members, and Andrew Duncan in particular.

MM reported that the current position is unsustainable. The current income is considered to be fixed. MM reported that it is not considered feasible to increase the levy. Furthermore, the income from SSE has been essential, but this is also ring-fenced. The income is not expected to change.

MM noted that the costs of operating the Board will need to be reviewed. The role of the board is to protect and enhance the fishery. Any activities or costs that are not essential to this aim will be reviewed. For example, the current contribution to the Rivers and Lochs Institute AS3IG is desirable, but unfortunately unsustainable. The current funding contributing to Inverness Angling Club in recognition of its work to promote 'angling for all' was also desirable but cannot be sustained in future years. The primary activities of the board are those of the board staff and the contribution to the Ness & Beaully Fisheries Trust.

The core functions of the board, the overheads associated with the Head Bailiff and the CEO positions are deemed to be essential. The contribution to the NBFT is also deemed to be essential in order to inform our 'evidence-based management' and to fulfil the conservation measures. The current financial position cannot sustain the summer bailiffs.

ASt questioned whether the current cost of the Garry project genetics work is competitive. MM confirmed that the current expenditure with the Rivers and Lochs Institute is one of the largest portion of the budget and therefore it is wholly appropriate for the competitive procurement process to be reviewed to ensure that a transparent assessment process be carried out. This year it will cost £30k to analyse the samples from two years.

Action 17.03 – It was agreed that MM would contact MS from UHI to discuss the costs associated with the Garry Project genetics work.

ASt confirmed that there is precedence on the West Coast for the SSE contribution to be allowed to be directed to some elements of other work, such as bailiffing. MM requested to take this information away and consider it.

JM noted that during the summer months, there are and there will be call-outs. These tend to come during the evening and can stretch over the entire area. Even with summer bailiffs, it can be challenging to respond to them all. MM commented that it may be beyond the financial resources available and that the current board staff cannot be expected to do more.

GA suggested communication with the Fisheries and Anglers so that they understand the current situation. CC agreed but added that the public communication of less bailiff's resource should be handled carefully. GA and MM suggested the potential to engender more 'self-policing' of fisheries.

ASt suggested that the policing of the upper system, the Moriston and the Garry, could potentially be redirected funds from SSE as long as the core project funding and activity was not diminished.



GA proposed that if funding were to be secured, the board should consider resourcing a summer bailiff that is based in the upper system and that would check the smolt trap to save on the daily travel required to that area.

BM challenged whether the competitive comparison of the genetics work would still be carried out if external additional income could be found. MM confirmed it would.

BM challenged whether there is enough capability within the board to carry out an appropriate competitive procurement process. CC and ASt confirmed that there are appropriate skills available within the board to technically evaluate any proposal for this kind of work.

MM confirmed that the finance meeting would be brought together (as per action 16.03).

CC returned to the finance report and confirmed the value of outstanding debts from 6 proprietors owing. Solicitors will be instructed to issue a seven-day letter to the top three debtors (as per Action 16.04).

7. DIRECTOR / CLERK REPORT

CC introduced the Director's report.

CC summarised the catch returns to date. CC expressed disappointment in the late returns from a number of fisheries this year.

CC reported that to date a total of 873 fish had been returned across the district, however he was expecting in the region of 900 fish (give or take a few) in total. This would represent a decrease of approximately 15 per cent on the previous year and seems to specifically relate to a decline in the numbers of MSW salmon (with grilse catches similar to the previous year). This seems to be due in part to poor fishing conditions in the 'spring' period, but more concerningly a lack of summer and autumn fish. This has not been a Ness specific phenomenon, with other east coast rivers also seeing a decline in catches.

ASt commented that it is the grilse that are declining on the Tweed, Tay, Spey reports and the West Coast fish counters. CC commented that the grilse returns on the Ness seem to be increasing. ASt described the trends that have been reported by Ronald Campbell from the Tweed Foundation.

Action 17.04 – CC to circulate link to the 'Historical Changes in Tweed Salmon Runs' YouTube video from Ronald Campbell from the Tweed Foundation (<https://youtu.be/Lu4tt7078DM>).

CC reported the overall release rates across district will be in the region of 93 per cent. No fish were reported as being retained during the 'Grade 3' period (January through to the end June).

The Ness Weir upgrade is now complete. A temporary fish pass was in operation between the 21st September and 1st October 2017 whilst the crest and toe of the weir in the area of the spout were piled. No adult fish were detected by the camera, although this was thought to be due to a lack of fish moving rather than a problem with the design of the fish pass.

All instream works associated with the West Link Bridge project were completed before the deadline of the 15th October 2017 (to protect spawning salmon and trout). CC commented that the contractor has been excellent to work with, and in particular the works manager communicated well.

CC reported that works to improve fish passage at the Holm Burn Weir were completed by the 25th August 2017, at which point a good flow of water was passing through the structure. He expressed initial concerns about the effectiveness of the new stone pre-weir, however at present the structure seems to be functioning well. The NBFT will complete a juvenile salmonid survey next summer to determine if there has been any initial improvement in abundance above the weir as a result of the works.

The redundant Scottish Water structure on the River Coiltie was completely removed during the week commencing the 2nd October 2017 and the results look good. CC reported that the NBFT intend to monitor the situation and assess the re-colonisation of juvenile salmon and trout above the site.

CC reported that damage was discovered on the screens at the intake to Whin Park Lade during the West Link Bridge dewatering works. The issue was raised with the Highland Council (THC) who were quick to rectify the situation. A discussion regarding the proposed Torvean Hydro Scheme which would be located at the site then followed, including the pros and cons of the proposed Archimedes screw designed.

Action 17.05 – CC to circulate the YouTube link of the recent video of salmon trying to ascend an Archimedes screw trap on the River Wear in Durham (<https://youtu.be/W9G3yjieZVE>).

AG requested an update on the Garry Screens Project. ASt reported that there were two attempts this year to remove the tailrace screens and install of catch nets and associated frames. The nets did not hold. A further re-design still required. ASt described how the force of the water was not equally distributed as first thought. CC requested that the contracted supplier fully consult proprietors on the Garry and Oich. AM commented that a freshet date had changed this year without communication.

Action 17.06 - ASt to ensure that the contractors APEM keep local proprietors up-to-date on the timing of any future changes in the schedule of works.

CC and ASt summarised the progress and findings of the recent genetic profiling work undertaken on the 2016 and 2017 fish. This identified four main groups or 'clusters' of fish in both the 2016 and 2017 Garry smolt samples. These represent genetically distinct sub-populations of salmon. Males and females from this cluster will only be crossed individuals from this same cluster. 'Genetic profiling' has allowed the identification of 'full siblings' which has allowed us avoid the negative effects of inbreeding,

BM questioned whether any of the fish could have originated in a tributary of the lower Garry. CC confirmed it was possible, but that the idea of the project was to capture brood fish from as close to the upper Garry as was 'feasibly possible'. The essential outcome of the genetic profile was to (a) ensure farmed fish genes were not introduced and (b) that inbreeding between sibling groups was avoided.

Discussion took place on whether the broodfish fish should be retained beyond two years. ASt described how the current facilities for holding these fish were not as large as those where fish have previously been held long-term, in other areas.

NC recalled some previous genetic work. NB confirmed that that work was carried out with very different methodology. NC considered whether the lower number of Norwegian genes detected could be an indication of lower escapes.

NC asked whether there is inbreeding in the wild. ASt commented that as fish populations within an area decrease, the likelihood of that is much higher. ASt spoke of an evidence base in one area where the a very large proportion of the fish population in a small area were relatable to a single pair.

CC gave an update on the Pacific pink salmon incubation box work. He reported that a newly hatched pink salmon 'alevin' was recorded on the 23rd September 2017, the first ever record of wild hatching in the UK. Further eggs were found to have hatched in subsequent days and, although survival was low (approximately three per cent), a number of the alevins were developing well and beginning to develop a silver colouration in preparation for their seaward migration. On the 15th November 2017 none of the fish had gone on to survive to the point of emergence (when they swim up from the gravel).

Despite the mortalities experienced in the incubation boxes, CC believes it likely that at least a small proportion of pink salmon contained in natural 'redds' in the River Ness will go on to emerge. It seems that this may occur earlier than it would in their natural range (November/December rather than April/May). This may reduce their chances of survival in the marine environment.

8. HEAD BAILIFF'S REPORT

MM introduced the Head Bailiff report and invited JM to comment.

JM noted that the reports requiring prosecution were taking longer than in previous years. This may be indicative of resources within Police Scotland.

JM reported that the upper system rivers are looking high. GA commented that the Ness fish are looking ready to start spawning. CC commented that the underwater cameras had caught the first spawning behaviour on the Ness. ASt commented on just how different the spawning times on the Ness are to other river systems.

JM described some of the characteristic behaviours of current offenders. Some of the individuals caught this year were challenging even for the police to deal with and this attitude extended to any and all other authorities. In some areas of the Ness system the turnover and incident of new offenders was high.

Discussions moved on to the new Marine Harvest Hatchery at Inchmore on the River Moriston. Board members expressed an interest in visiting the site.

Action 17.07 – CC to arrange a visit to Inchmore hatchery.

9. NBFT SENIOR BIOLOGIST REPORT

NB introduced the Biologist Report. NB commented that large scale development projects on the Ness system this year had resulted in a large volume of work for trust staff this summer.

Holm Mill Lade was discussed in terms of the West Link crossing project. GM questioned whether salmon would spawn there. NB suggested that juvenile salmon and trout were present but would move into the main River Ness. Definite evidence of trout spawning in the form of redds, but salmon may only be using the burn as a juvenile nursery area.

NB reviewed some of the survey results. ASt commented on 'amazing densities' of juvenile salmon in the River Ness. CC confirmed that the recruitment in the Ness is very high and he invited members to spread the word on this. The levels are excellent.

NB invited comments. No further comments were raised.

10. CONSERVATION REGULATIONS UPDATE AND WILD FISHERIES REFORM

CC introduced the paper, confirmed that there is very little new to report.

CC Reported the current cut-off for each grading. CC questioned the Scottish Governments assessment that the River Moriston SAC only has a 0.05 probability of meeting its conservation limits. This is not believed to be correct. ASt commented that this is a reflection of their model.

Furthermore, the exploitation rate predicted for the Ness system seem unrealistically high. CC reported that these issues have raised in our response to the consultation on 2018 conservation limits, together with a request for a 'habitat working group' to consider systems such as the Moriston.

ASt described how in Norway, rivers are looked at in habitat groups. This model caters for differing characteristics.

CC noted that the conservation policy has been updated and included in the Annual Report. CC invited comment and/or approval for the policy. Approval was proposed by GM and seconded by GA.

11. NETTING RESEARCH PROPOSALS

AP reported on the situation this year in terms of funding from the Scottish Government for a tagging project in the Moray Firth. He had contacted Mike Palmer from Marine Scotland and anticipates that funding will be found.

He has had a number of meeting with CC, NB and Paul Thompson from the Marine Mammal Research Unit at the Cromarty Lighthouse over the last few months in terms of developing an outline project. AP reported that he had secured a further meeting with Simon Dryden from Marine Scotland which will be held sometime at the end of January.



AP reported that Alturlie netsman Dougie McDougal believes the treatment plant at Alanfirn is resulting increased algae and that a visit to the site was organised, including AP and Dougie McDougal. AP also requested to meet with Andrew Steel from SEPA to ensure the water is tested.

CC reported that the meeting at the lighthouse with Paul Thompson was very productive. There was potential for a partnership project between the Ness DSFB, NBFT, local netsman, University of Aberdeen and Marine Scotland Science to look at dolphin/salmon interactions in the inner Moray Firth.

AP reported that fish could potentially be captured and tagged in the Chanonry Point area and ferried further out before release. AP asked whether Atlantic Salmon Conservation Trust approval would be required to fish at Chanonry Point. MM confirmed that this may be required but that securing funding for an appropriate project was potentially the larger challenge. CC agreed with MM and stressed the first stage was to develop a robust project proposal which had Marine Scotland's backing.

12. 2018 ANNUAL PUBLIC MEETING

CC circulated the proposed poster for the 2018 Annual Public Meeting and spoke of the arrangements in place for Marina Gibson to speak. All agreed.

13.AOCB

MM invited AOCB.

MM asked whether anyone has been watching the One Show programming on looking at the mortality rates on fish farms.

FS-N noted that BBC Alba's forthcoming 'Journey of the Salmon' series will include coverage of 'Scotland's Salmon Festival' in Inverness, together with features on the Rivers Ness and Beaully.

MM thanked Chris and John and the team for a year of hard work. MM wished everyone a happy, safe Christmas.

MM thanked Frank Spencer-Nairn for attending.

The meeting closed at 16:36.