
NESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Board Meeting Minutes

Time: 14:00

Date: 17th September 2020

Location: via Zoom, online video conference

Present:

Michael Martin: Dochfour, Mandate (MM)
Neil Cameron: Ness Castle Lodges, Mandate (NC)
Angus McGruer: River Oich, Proprietor (AM)
Steven Gray: River Moriston, Mandate (SG)
Graham Mackenzie: Co-option, Ness District Anglers (GM)
Bob Morgan: River Garry, Mandate (BM)

In Attendance:

April Conroy: Board Secretary (AC)
Chris Conroy: Chief Executive/Clerk (CC)
John McColl: Head Bailiff (JC)
Alastair Stephen: SSE (AS)
Victoria Prichard: UHI Rivers and Lochs Institute (VP)

Observers:

Andrew Adamson, Wildlands (AA)

Apologies:

Andrew Steel (SEPA)
Billy Orrock, Inverness Angling Club
David Sutherland, Dochfour
Janet Campbell, Highland Council
Nathan McLaughton, NatureScot
Paul Williamson, Lower Garry
Scott Mackenzie, Ness side

1. APOLOGIES

MM introduced the meeting as chair. CC noted apologies as above.

CC noted that, with the continued risk associated with COVID-19, this meeting was being held electronically using 'Zoom'. This had posed difficulties in terms of facilitating public participation and as such it had to be held in private.

The latest advice from Fisheries Management Scotland states that, should a board decide to hold a meeting electronically, public participation would not be possible under the current restrictions. As such the board may elect to conduct the meeting in private, but must state the reason for this decision in the minute of the meeting.

2. MINUTES AND ACTIONS

CC noted that, due to the cancellation of this year's March and June board meetings (as a result of COVID-19), the minutes for the '2019 Annual Meeting of Qualified Proprietors', '2020 Annual Public Meeting' and the Ordinary December Board Meeting were approved via email and subsequently published on the Ness DSFB webpage.

AS asked for clarification regarding outstanding Action 20.03 (December 2018) relating to a review of the current situation regarding smolt escapement at Ceannacroc Weir. CC explained that this related to concerns that, under high flow conditions, smolts may be washed over the crest of the weir (rather than through the fish pass) and damaged after falling onto bedrock. This action was being left open so that it could be addressed at an appropriate time.

3. HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT

MM invited comments on the H&S Report. None were raised.

CC provided two further updates:

Two members of staff in the same household have children who were asked to self-isolate as a precaution after coming into contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case. These team members are not required to self-isolate but have taken additional precautions and stayed away from others. No further action is required.

One team member suffered significant swelling after an insect bite and sought medical advice. This team member will be asked to wear additional protective equipment including wearing a midge net more often, as a precaution.

ACTION 24.01: The staff member should be advised to seek medical advice on whether it is appropriate for them to be get a personal injectable epinephrine. Personal medical advice is required.

4. REGISTER OF FINANCIAL INTERESTS'

CC presented a new updated Version 4.7 – 17/09/20 of the 'Register of Financial Interests' for approval. It was agreed that, in addition to board members and their mandates, 'alternates' should also be asked to complete a form and included on the register.

ACTION 24.02: CC to issue Register of Financial Interest form to all alternates.

5. THE 2019/20 ANNUAL ACCOUNTS

CC presented the 2019/20 Annual Accounts (Year Ending 15 May 2020) were presented to the board for approval prior to the December Annual Meeting of Qualified Proprietors. These were proposed for approval by GM and seconded by NC.

6. 2020/21 LEVY

CC stated that the annual fishery assessment notices are issued by the Ness DSFB in October for payment by the end of February. As such, it is requested that board members formally agree the levy for the 2020/21 period.

MM proposed that the Ness DSFB retains the levy at its current level of £1.55 in the pound, but uses surplus funds achieved in the 2019/20 financial year to apply a 50% 'COVID-19 Discount' to this year's assessment. He stressed that this is only possible because the team was successful in bringing additional income during the last financial year.

MM stressed it unlikely this discount could be repeated. It would be a 'one-off' occurrence to help share the burden of the hardship resulting from the global pandemic.

MM proposed that the £1.55 in the pound remained, with a one off 50% discount applied for this financial year only (2020/21). GM seconded this proposal.

AS noted, that the SSE Purchase Order for its annual contribution to the Ness DSFB would be raised as early as possible in the new financial year. MM noted thanks as this contributes to the financial stability of the Board.

CC noted that feedback has also been taken on board about the format of the levy invoices. Estate owners who have more than one levy to pay, will now receive one single invoice listing their multiple payments on one page.

7. ACTIONS REPORT

CC reported that the team continued to deliver its fisheries monitoring, management and protection duties that throughout the COVID-19 lockdown and summer period.

Much of the survey work continued with new safe working protocols to ensure social distancing. More electrofishing surveys were completed on the Mainstem River Ness than ever before.

MM noted deep concern regarding the issue of smolt entrapment in the Caledonian Canal. The Board agreed that the issue must be pursued vigorously and escalated to the highest level.

AS expressed, frustration that despite SSE have committed considerable sums to resolve issues in the upper system, the smolts do not have free passage to sea due to these issues in the lower system.

Members present were frustrated to hear that this matter may not be covered by the current Caledonian Canal CAR licence and that the board should pursue this with SEPA and Scottish Canals.

ACTION 24.03: CC to pursue a review of Caledonian Canal CAR licence to ensure that it makes specific reference to the maintenance of fish passage.

In addition, the board noted concerns about the potential for any fish that successfully negotiated the canal to return to the canal rather than the River Ness. This would leave them vulnerable to being delayed in a tidal zone and predated upon by seals and dolphins.

AS noted that the issue of smolt exit on rivers should be a top priority for the Scottish Government.

CC noted a growing call for work on the River Ness where smolts are declining. Drone surveys show that the habitat is relatively well utilised, compared to areas in the upper system. If we are to increase the natural production on the Ness the only way to do this is to increase the quantity of available habitat or to improve the quality of what is there.

CC noted that Fluvial Geomorphological survey could provide specific guidance on where and exactly what works would be most effective in improving spawning habitat quality and quantity. AS suggested that CC contact the SEPA Geomorphologist to seek initial advice.

ACTION 24.04: CC to contact SEPA fluvial geomorphologist to seek initial advice on the proposed River Ness Habitat Improvement Feasibility Study.

8. NESS & BEAULY FISHERIES TRUST

MM noted that the Ness and Beaully Fisheries Trust have resources including cash and assets. The NBFT is in a position to receive requests in writing for funding for projects that are in accordance with the Trust's aims and objectives. These requests can come from the Beaully DSFB and the Ness DSFB. Other bodies may make requests to the Trust. The Trust Board will need to made decisions about these matters. CC noted that the proposed 'River Ness Habitat Improvement Feasibility Study' would meet the requirements.

[Bob Morgan joined the meeting at this point.]

9. GENETICS WORK

VP confirmed that the UHI Rivers and Lochs Institute Genomics Laboratory is back up and running and that the remaining 'Upper Garry Salmon Restoration Project' brood stock samples will be completed in time for hatchery spawning operations.

10. 2020 ANNUAL REPORT

MM noted the format of 2020 Annual Report and proposed dates of 2021 meetings (circulated prior to the meeting). MM proposed that the same format of the report be continued and the dates confirmed. GM seconded this proposal.

11. CONSERVATION POLICY

GM requested that the updated conservation policy be issued as soon as possible. CC proposed that the policy remain the same as the previous year, despite the Scottish Government upgrading the system from a Grade 3 to a Grade 1.

CC explained that this was due to the fact that the grading of the Ness recognises the effectiveness of existing 'non-statutory' local management interventions. Given this and an overall trend for decreasing catches in the Ness district, he believed that the best course of action was to roll the existing 2020 Salmon Conservation Policy into the 2021 season.

MM asked whether the policy should be issued to each proprietor and that they be directly asked whether they intend to comply with this policy. Should a proprietor not confirm intended compliance then the Board will know where further conversations are required.

CC noted that the majority of proprietors go over and above the current policy and so this should not be required. AA confirmed that Wildlands policy is 100% catch and release on all rivers and lochs in their area. After discussion, it was decided that the best course of action was to issue the policy as agreed by the board

MM proposed that the policy remain the same. GM seconds this proposal.

ACTION 24.05: CC to issue 2021 Salmon Conservation Policy to all proprietors.

12.AOCB

CC asked AS for an update on the fish counters. AS described issues being experienced since the upgrade of the SSE counters from MK11 to MK12. They believe that a processor issue had led to a significant undercount. Their team are working to resolve this issue, but their efforts had been hampered by the impacts of COVID-19.

The meeting closed at **15:28**