

**MINUTES of the BOARD MEETING of the
NORTH AND WEST DISTRICT
SALMON FISHERY BOARD held on
Friday, 10th November 2023
at 2.30pm via video conference**

Attendees

Mr Alan Balfour
Ms Kathryn Bontoft
Mr David Davies (Vice-chair)
Mr Keith Dunbar
Ms Sarah Harkins
Mr Tim Kirkwood
Mr Dougal Lindsay
Mr Cathal Macleod
Mr Gerald Osborne
Mr Robin Vestey (Chairman)

In attendance

Dr Shona Marshall (West Sutherland Fishery Trust)
Mr Rob Whitson (Bell Ingram – Clerk)
Ms Anastasia Young (Bell Ingram – Clerk)
Chris Conroy (Laxford project)
Charlotte Middleton (FMS)

Apologies

Mr Richard Haldane
Ms Gabi Rex

1. Apologies

2. Declarations of Interest

A formal declaration of interest is required from Sarah Harkins. No further conflicts noted.

3. Complaints

Keith Dunbar raised a complaint from the Director of Salmon and Trout Conservation over a delay in publishing the meeting minutes on the website.

Rob Whitson confirmed the website is now up to date with the last board meeting.

4. Minutes of Meeting held on 10th May 2023

RW to include that KD reported that a complaint from the former Scottish Director of Wildfish (formerly Salmon and Trout Association) had been made over delays in publishing the meeting minutes on the website.

RW to also mention in response to question from DD, that MD of LDL stated that he felt the future of Salmon farming lays in closed containment, but the technology is not yet reliable. RW to also include that Mark's attendance was in response to the Laxford letter.

5. Matters arising

No comments.

6. Financial Report – Budget / Actuals

The bank balance is currently £28,985.74.

Aged receivables summary is £19,216, with both recent and longstanding debt.

Tim Kirkwood and Sarah Harkins haven't received their assessments, RW to confirm correct invoicing address.

David Davies queried whether reminders are sent, RW confirmed reminders are sent but will aim to be more proactive with the gathering of assessments.

RW mentioned reference to the 2024 P&L is a mis-type.

£11,000 is excess of income over expenditure. Budgeted to make a slight loss to avoid surplus funds in bank.

7. Laxford Project update – Chris Conroy

An update on the Laxford project was given by Chris Conroy.

The catchment audit is now complete and the project is at the design stage, which focusses on habitat restoration. The woodland element covers 27 km sq. and will require a reduction in deer numbers. Pre-consultation work has included internal consultations with the Estates and wider Grosvenor, and a public consultation in Scourie. Workshops were held with DMGs, NatureScot and SEPA.

Detailed discussions have taken place with Scottish forestry regarding funding. Plans include large areas of fencing with trees in key areas, however not all areas will fit into forestry grant schemes. The NatureScot CEO visited and the Scottish Government have provided feedback. CC is currently finalising detailed designs and exploring funding streams.

Monitoring work is underway, a marris counter is recording images and sound of fish passing. This has proved effective however there have been a few connectivity issues. Data processing is ongoing, with 20 days a month committed to processing the data. The data will include fish numbers, length and sex. Fish numbers are currently less than expected, CC will provide an update when possible.

CC confirmed 1400 salmon parr were tagged in Autumn 2022, most moved out in the spring although some remained. This can be used to investigate how long it takes them to travel through the river systems. This Autumn 2000 parr were tagged, 230 of which were precocious (sexually mature males).

CC mentioned a new invertebrate monitoring programme, which focus' on the food chain. The programme uses temperature monitors. A peak in temperature was noted in January/February, this will affect invertebrates and therefore salmon feed availability.

RW queried whether AI could be used to reduce the amount of data processing. CC mentioned this a possibility once the software improves.

KD queried the timings of smolt migration between salmon and sea trout. CC only tagged salmon smolts however Shona Marshall's acoustic method shows salmon and sea trout are migrating at slightly different times.

DD asked for survival rates. CC requires tags showing various parts of freshwater and marine survival in order to gather this information, this will take years therefore it's too soon for reliable results. DD also asked about predators, CC confirmed the importance of monitoring predators and that the pit arrays have shown strange fish movements, likely from predator events.

Dougal Lindsay queried how long the pit tag project would last. CC confirmed as a 10 year project initially, with potential to extend.

CC noted similar monitoring projects are taking place on the Deveron and River Shinn, with 20 years of existing data on the River Frome.

8. FMS – Charlotte Middleton

Charlotte Middleton provided an update on current work, regulatory changes and the new SEPA framework.

SEPA are implementing a Wild Salmon Protection Zones to control sea lice. A second consultation has been carried out and a framework is expected shortly. FMS asked SEPA to offer more protection of salmon from existing farms, as the framework focusses on new farms. A separate sea trout framework is expected in due course. This framework will affect planning applications for new farms, however it's uncertain if the framework will apply to existing applications. CM to provide summary paper for the board.

CM noted the need for an escapes reform over the coming months.

CM mentioned the West Coast Tracking Project, currently collecting information from acoustic receivers for analysis. This will show how salmon are travelling and how they are using the coast.

Loch Long Salmon have submitted containment applications for three sites. These are not replacing existing sites, but new additional sites. The containment is designed to prevent movement of sea lice and salmon escapes.

Alan Balfour queried how SEPA will define the protection Zones. CM explained a criteria will outline those who need to comply. Existing sea farms seeking planning alterations will fall into the framework. If sea lice travel to zoned farms from out with, these farms will be held accountable.

KD queried whether discussions have taken place regarding the regulations and existing farms. CM mentioned SEPA have included existing farms however it will not apply until 2027. Existing farms are to be categorised as either high or low risk, with high risk receiving the most scrutiny.

CM informed attendees of her plans to leave FMS at the end of January. The role is currently being advertised on the FMS website. RW thanked CM for all her work.

9. West Sutherland Fisheries Trust – Report

No comments were received on the report.

10. Any Other Business

KD gave an update on mortalities, two of the sites are up on mortalities due to predation, however a reduction on sea lice is noted.

AB mentioned a change in seal behaviour, they have been working in teams to get through top nets.

DD asked if Loch Duart can attend the Spring meetings to give an update. It was queried if another business could attend and Scottish Sea Farms were proposed, the Chairman was in agreement with inviting them.

11. Date of next Board meeting

The next in person meeting was agreed as 2pm on Friday the 24th May at the Macphail Centre, Ullapool.

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RSMW/NW/1
November 2023