

# CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

## ANNUAL REPORT

2015

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### BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2015

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|---|---|
| <b>Chairman</b>                                   | Viscount Thurso   |
| <b>Upper Proprietor<br/>Representatives</b>       | Earl of Caithness – Forss House Fishings<br>Sir Richard Dunbar – Wick River<br>S W M Threipland – Dunbeath River<br>A MacAuslan – Berriedale/Langwell |
| <b>Lower Proprietor<br/>Representatives</b>       | J Mackay – Wick Angling Association<br>S W D Laird – Thurso River Ltd   |
| <b>Co-opted Salmon Angler<br/>Representatives</b> | I Cormack – Wick Angling Association<br>T Stitt – Thurso Angling Association  |
| <b>Co-opted Tenant Netsmen<br/>Representative</b> | R Willis  |
| <b>Scientific Advisor</b>                         | A Youngson  |
| <b>Inspector/Head Bailiff</b>                     | E McCarthy  |
| <b>Clerk</b>                                      | Mrs E Constable   |

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### CONTACT DETAILS

The Clerk, Skerraboe, North Keiss, Keiss, Wick, Caithness, KW1 4XF  
Tel 01955 631325 / Email cdsfb@outlook.com  
Website <http://caithness.dsfb.org.uk>

The purpose of the report is to summarise the work of the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2015 and plans for the current year, with particular regard to the board's statutory functions and responsibilities.

## 1. 2015 ACTIVITY

### Catch data

The board is required to publish catch data for the district. Cumulative figures for salmon and grilse for 2015 are given below, as reported by proprietors, river managers and agents and cross referenced with Marine Scotland Science (MSS) return records. Figures for 2014 are shown in brackets.

|                      | Total Catch: Salmon/Grilse |        | Released |       |
|----------------------|----------------------------|--------|----------|-------|
| <u>Rod Catch</u>     |                            |        |          |       |
| Berriedale           | 124                        | (70)   | 84       | (61)  |
| Dunbeath             | 182                        | (99)   | 120      | (45)  |
| Wick                 | 530                        | (404)  | 142      | (131) |
| Thurso               | 2064                       | (951)  | 1843     | (811) |
| Forss                | 199                        | (250)  | 89       | (104) |
| <u>Fixed Engine</u>  |                            |        |          |       |
| Thurso area          | 1429                       | (1496) |          |       |
| <u>Net and coble</u> |                            |        |          |       |
| Berriedale area      | 42                         | (3)    |          |       |

### Conservation

There has been no change to the board's policy regarding conservation. The majority of the rivers in the district are in single ownership, which facilitates conservation action by those owners. As each river is actively engaged in conservation measures the board believes it is not appropriate to adopt single policies covering all rivers where different rivers have different requirements. The board regularly reviews salmon stocks and juvenile populations in all rivers in its area and discusses conservation policies adopted by each river.

Regarding the Scottish Government (SG) consultation on the proposed ban on the killing of wild salmon in Scotland except under licence, it was agreed for the same reasons that it was not appropriate for the board to make a joint response. Proprietors, angling associations, and other interested parties were expected to contribute individually to this and other consultations on conservation measures in light of their respective circumstances.

### Regulatory measures

CDSFB procedures are kept under continuous review in accordance with terms of the 2003 Salmon and Freshwater Fisheries Act, the 2013 Aquaculture and Fisheries Act, and subsequent changes in legislation. Guidance is promulgated on the website as the need arises. The catch and release regulations which came into effect on 1 January 2015 were acknowledged.

Electric fishing: Individual rivers and SEPA were authorised to carry out electric fishing during the year. The board's own team undertook electric fishing on behalf of private contractors requiring habitat survey information for development purposes.

Hatcheries: Requests from the Dunbeath and Wick rivers to continue hatchery operations for restocking with their own broodstock in the spring were approved.

## **Fish surveys**

Following the district wide surveys of 2013 and 2014 it was agreed that a third full survey should take place in 2015. It was the last opportunity to conduct a repeat survey before Meygen's underwater turbine trials begin in the Pentland Firth in 2016. The recent SG focus on sustainability and the application of conservation limits to fisheries gave added impetus to the requirement for maximum reliable and up to date scientific data on the status of stocks in the rivers to be available.

The survey was duly completed in September. Twenty six sites were examined, including some commissioned by third parties as well as the sites covered in previous years. Habitat surveys of all 26 sites were carried out in October. Scale reading and analysis was undertaken during the winter, culminating in the publication of the following reports in early 2016, available to view on the website.

### - 2015 Survey of Juvenile Salmonids in Caithness Rivers

This was prepared using the same format as for the 2013 and 2014 reports. Data for the larger streams surveyed for the third parties was also included.

### - CDSFB Index of Electric-fishing sites (2013-2015)

This is a reference document which provides locational and habitat data on all electric fishing sites. It will ensure that the same survey sites can be exactly identified for repeat work in future years and that the physical characteristics of the sites can be monitored for change.

### - Juvenile Salmonids in the Caithness Rivers: Consolidated Report, Electric Fishing Surveys 2013-2015

The purpose of this report is to provide a definitive account of the status of salmon populations in Caithness over the three year programme period. The report is structured to ensure that all the results of the board's surveys will be indefinitely available for inspection or re-assessment by other parties. The 2013-15 consolidated report uses a new, more informative approach to assessing the status of salmon populations based on biomass density.

The results of the combined surveys are generally highly favourable. The River Wester is an exception: fry and parr recruitment were consistently sub-optimal for reasons that are not known. Fry recruitment in Berriedale/ Langwell was atypically low in 2015; however, based on the strength of the links previously evident between fry and parr at the same sites it is not clear that this will impact on parr recruitment in 2016.

## **Electric fishing archive**

Historic electric fishing reports issued by the board over several decades were reviewed to bring all records together. A list of reports has been compiled and is lodged with the Clerk for reference.

## **Consultations**

The board received numerous requests for advice and comment during the course of the year. SG Local Energy Consents Unit, Marine Scotland Science and Highland Council consulted with regard to various operating licences whilst BEAR Scotland, SSE, associated subcontractors, and a number of private developers sought guidance and approval for installation and maintenance work, and for compliance with planning requirements. The range of matters to which the board contributed included:

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Wind farm planning - | Bad a Cheo turbines: fisheries protection plan<br>Proposed Golticlay wind farm: EIA scoping report |
| Harbour works -      | Dunbeath harbour: breakwater reconstruction & pier renovations                                     |
| Electricity -        | Spittal to Noss Head underground cabling: stream crossings   |
| Transport -          | A9 maintenance work at Achingills, Lochend & Fheoir burns  |
| Ecological studies - | Fish and fisheries habitat surveys, Thurso and Wick catchments                                     |

### **Bailiffs**

The bailiffs were kept busy with coastal protection duties during most of the summer. A couple of police inspectors (one active, the other recently retired) came along to speak to the bailiffs during the season and this was very well received. A group of bailiffs took part in the electric fishing surveys in September, and assistance was provided for the habitat surveys of sites in October.

### **Incidents**

There were no incidents during 2015.

### **Flow Country Rivers Trust (FCRT)**

The Trust presented its first Annual Report for the board to consider, covering 2014 and early plans for 2015. There is a standing item on the agenda of all board meetings for representatives of the Trust to update the board on any matters of mutual interest. Further information on Trust activities can be found on the website <http://fcrt.org/>.

## **2. GOOD GOVERNANCE**

### **Administration**

The board complied fully with its obligations during 2015.

### **Organisation**

The Rivers Improvements Committee, a sub-set of the board, was wound up and replaced with the Development and Conservation Committee, coordinated by the Scientific Consultant. This was to bring the two entities together and reflect the team's scientific and environmental function.

### **Wild Fisheries Review (WFR)**

The proposed management reforms arising from the WFR were on the agenda throughout the year. The intention for DSFBs to be replaced with a smaller number of regional Fishery Management Organisations (FMO) is expected to go ahead and the CDSFB has been keen to contribute to proposals for the new structure and how it might operate. A special meeting of the board was held in July to consider the SG consultation paper and accompanying questionnaire to stakeholders on reform proposals "Wild Fisheries Reform: a response to the report of the Wild Fisheries Review". A very comprehensive response was drafted by a 4-man working group, agreed by the board and submitted to SG. A copy of the board's submission is available from the Clerk for anyone who may be interested.

For a summary of the board's proposals with regard to a local FMO see Section 4, Proposals for 2016 on page 6.

### **Education and publicity**

The board was approached during the summer by Glasgow based film & TV company MaraMedia Ltd to contribute to a promotional film commissioned by the Peatlands Partnership (RSPB) as part of its "Flows to the Future" project on work to understand and preserve the Flow Country habitat and to explain the importance of healthy fisheries. The chairman met the producer in September and provided a piece to camera, and the electric fishing team were filmed in action during their surveys of Berriedale Water.

## **3. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year. The Complaints Procedure is reviewed on an annual basis but has not changed since 2013.

## **4. PROPOSALS FOR 2016**

### **Meetings**

Board meetings are scheduled for March, June, August and November 2016. The Annual Meeting of Proprietors will be held on Monday 13 June. The Annual Public Meeting of the board is due in late August. Further details can be found on our website at least 21 days prior to meetings.

### **Fish surveys**

The board proposes to maintain the comprehensive database built up over the last 3 years by keeping it current and in due course extending it to take in all other burns and minor streams within the district's network which have not yet been sampled. A rolling programme of mini surveys is planned, with the aim of re-surveying all existing sites at least once within a 5 year period, with those rivers where there may be concerns taking priority. The number of sites to be surveyed annually has yet to be agreed.

### **Other scientific studies: smolt tracking programme**

Plans for the board to collaborate with Scottish Natural Heritage and the Environmental Research Institute (ERI) in a smolt tracking programme at Berriedale in the spring of 2016 were shelved when the developers of the of the BOWL Moray Firth marine wind farm decided to withdraw support for the location for data-gathering for their statutory environmental assessment. ERI adapted the plan, proposing a scaled down project to gain experience with the tracking technology and study the initial direction of migration of smolts exiting an alternative East coast river. This was scheduled to take place at the River Wester but owing to commercial activity in Sinclair's Bay within the same timeframe is now going ahead at the mouth of the River Wick, with a double array of listening stations positioned beyond the harbour to track direction of movement.

The acoustic tags attached to individual smolts to be tracked are being funded by the FCRT. Several members of the board and the trust are assisting with aspects of the project.

### **Bailiffs**

As new conservation measures take effect, restricting the amount of wild fish available for consumption and inflating prices, it is likely that increased effort may be necessary on the coastal monitoring front during the coming season.

One of the bailiffs has been selected to attend an electric fishing course at Inverness College prior to surveys this September. The qualification, in addition to several years' field experience, will enable him to lead the team without supervision in the future, a necessary contingency measure as the board has been reliant on the consultant for the last 3 years to provide the obligatory supervision for all electric fishing operations.

### **Future fisheries management: FMO proposals**

In terms of geography, the board is in favour of a local FMO with the Flow Country at its core, to include all the rivers arising therefrom and flowing to the North and East. The chairman has had discussions with the chairmen of the neighbouring Northern and Helmsdale DSFBs, with whom we share watershed and topology, to discuss such a grouping. A relatively low-cost management model to serve such an organisation, with expertise bought in when required, has been proposed for consideration by all three DSFBs. The prospective FMO would include the participation of the FCRT and ERI, both of which have been consulted and have expressed an interest in the proposals.

The intention is for these proposals to be developed during the year with the agreement of all parties. If mutually acceptable then a fishery management plan will be produced as a pre-requisite for making an application to form an FMO as and when new legislation comes into effect.

**Revaluation of Salmon Fisheries**

The next revaluation of the board is scheduled to take place in 2017 (the previous one took place in 2010). Questionnaires are being issued this year to all fisheries by the Assessor and Electoral Registration Officer for the Highland and Western Isles Valuation Joint Board for this exercise. DSFBs have been asked to impress upon recipients the need to complete and return all questionnaires.

With impending changes in the management of salmon fisheries post WFR it is particularly important on this occasion that a revaluation is carried in all areas to ensure a consistent baseline for future funding calculations.

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