**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2019**

**BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2019**

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| **Chairman** | The Viscount Thurso |
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| **Upper Proprietor**  **Representatives** | Sir Richard Dunbar – Wick River  S W M Threipland – Dunbeath River  A MacAuslan – Berriedale/Langwell  M R Newton – Forss |
|  |  |
| **Lower Proprietor**  **Representatives** | J Mackay – Wick Angling Association  S W D Laird – Thurso River Ltd |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Salmon Angler**  **Representatives** | I Cormack – Wick Angling Association  D Mackay – Thurso Angling Association |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Tenant Netsmen**  **Representative** | R Willis |
|  |  |
| **Scientific Advisor** | A Youngson |
|  |  |
| **Inspector/Head Bailiff** | E McCarthy |
|  |  |
| **Clerk** | Miss M Blackwood |

**CONTACT DETAILS**

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Website http://caithness.dsfb.org.uk

The purpose of the report is to summarise the work undertaken by the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2019 and plans for the current year, with particular regard to the Board’s statutory functions and responsibilities.

**1. ACTIVITY IN 2019**

**Rod Catch Data**

The Board is required to publish catch data for Caithness District. Rod catch figures for salmon and grilse caught during the year by each river together with numbers released are shown below. The first two sets of figures show the total catch of salmon and grilse, combined, for 2019 with comparative figures for 2018 shown in brackets. The second set of figures shows the total number salmon and grilse released 2019 with comparative figures for 2018 shown in brackets.

Total Catch of Salmon and Grilse Number Released

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rod Catch | 2019 2018 | 2019 2018 |
| Berriedale | 174 (146) | 137 (146) |
| Dunbeath | 130 (64) | 87 (64) |
| Wick | 903 (386) | 410 (226) |
| Thurso | 2135 (691) | 1943 (664) |
| Forss | 153 (74) | 153 (67) |
|  |  |  |

It should be noted (1) the 2019 figures for Forss are incomplete and (2) that the 2018 figures were highly impacted by the severe and prolonged summer drought. In 2019 the year started with a dry spring and low water but later in the year there was much more rain and river levels were consistently higher.

Total Catch of Salmon and Grilse Number Released

Net Catch data 2019 2018 2019 2018

Berriedale 26 NA NA NA

**Conservation and Regulatory Measures**

Hatcheries

Requests from the Dunbeath and Wick rivers to continue hatchery operations for restocking with their own broodstock were approved again. The Scottish Government developed a new policy and any new requirements will be reviewed when more information is available.

River gradings

Gradings for 2020 were issued in August 2019. Berriedale had been graded only at 2 for 2020. This was due to late return of the 2018 catch data and their omission from the MSS grading exercise. The Board’s consultant queried this on behalf of the Board, asking MSS to re-run the model with the 2018 data included. This resulted in an upgrade to 1. All the other Caithness rivers retained their 2018 Grade 1 for 2020.

**Fish Surveys**

The MSS NEPS electric-fishing survey was undertaken again in 2019. Caithness District had been allocated 30 sites of which 10 are repeat visits to sites surveyed in 2018 and 20 are new sites. Many of the sites are of obvious interest in relation to the Board’s own programme. This work is fully funded by Marine Scotland.

It was also proposed that the set of 6 Board sites (Shurrery, Rumsdale, Clow, Culvid, Gobernuisgach and Wag) that have been surveyed each year since 2013 should again be surveyed to provide continuity.

In addition, it was proposed that 4 new sites of the lower Wick catchment should be surveyed to increase spatial coverage. Currently, the lower Wick is the only substantial part of the Caithness rivers for which the Board does not have extensive data. Examination of these new Wick sites will complete the exploratory part of the Board’s overall programme to date. At that stage, it would be timely to consider re-focussing the Board’s ongoing programme in the light of all the information gathered to date (2013-2019).

The 2019 electric-fishing survey was completed more-or-less as planned despite the wet summer. Densities of fry were lower than usual throughout the Caithness rivers but probably still adequate to generate reasonable densities of parr in most places. The low densities of parr observed at all sites in the River Forss is a concern, however, and is being further investigated.

**External Consultations**

Formal responses were issued in respect of the following works and planned infrastructure:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Wind farms** |  |
| Limekiln Wind Farm grid connection    Tormsdale Wind Farm | SSE requested information and comment  Scottish Government requested comment |
|  |  |
| **Water** |  |
| Undertaking a full revision of the Caithness Land Management Plan (LMP) | Forest Enterprise Scotland request for scoping comments |
| Redevelopment of Scrabster Harbour marine biodiversity report | RPS Group seek guidance on possible impacts of salmonids and mitigation |
| High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) cable - Weisdale Voe to Noss Head - Environmental Appraisal Additional Studies Proposal | SSEN requested comments prior to works |
| Wick Harbour Authority - Maintenance Dredging and Sea Disposal | Scottish Government request for comment |
| Broubster Woods Records | BSC Ecology request for information |
| Todholes Railway Bridge Scour Repairs | Taziker Industrial sought advice prior to works |
| **Roadworks** |  |
| Application under Water Environment (Controlled Activities) Regulations for works in connection with A9 Berriedale Braes | SEPA request for comments prior to works |
| A9 Lochend scour Repairs at Achavanich | Bear Scotland requested advice prior to works |

**Bailiff Report**

2019 was a quieter year and the Bailiff kept a sharp look out however, there were no major concerns.

**Incidents**

Diseased fish - There had been reports of diseased fish from rivers around the North since the beginning of May. Fish were showing a belly rash on river entry and subsequently became infected with the fungus, *Saprolegnia*, which is a naturally occurring and opportunistic pathogen in all fresh waters. Diseased fish were not present everywhere but some rivers suffered notably heavy losses.

The Fish Health Inspectorate obtained samples near the start of the outbreak. The results of the lab tests were inconclusive although FHI discounted all of the more sinister possibilities.

Forss - Board received an email from a longstanding fisher of Forss who stated their concern at the diseased fish and asked a professor they knew for their opinion. The answers to what have caused this to the fish seem to be unknown. Board discussed this and agreed that FMS needed to intervene and give more information as to what work has been undertaken and what the findings were. The Board Chairman wrote to them asking for this information.

River Pollution - An email of about river pollution had been received from a fisher. The pollution complaint is the same as made two years ago. It was previously reported to SEPA. SEPA did not identify the exact cause, but think it may have been a septic tank. It was agreed to report the matter to SEPA again to have them re-investigate and let board have report of their findings. The Head Bailiff was also happy to take a look/ accompany SEPA. Chairman wrote to the fisher who sent the complaint to make them aware of what action has been taken. Further liaison was ongoing with SEPA to have the issue resolved.

**2. GOVERNANCE**

**The Board**

The Board seeks to follow best practice in good governance and in particular to adhere to the Code of Conduct for District Fishery boards in addition to the requirements of statute.

In 2019 the board held its customary 4 meetings in March, June, August and November. All meetings are publicised on our website and open to the public. Minutes are published on the website as soon as practicable after the meetings.

The board conducts its meetings in accordance with best practice and in particular asks its members to adhere to the code of good conduct for board members in public life. A register of interests is maintained and reviewed regularly.

As required by statute the board holds an annual proprietors meeting and an annual public meeting which is advertised and whose minutes are published.

The board publishes all data from its research activities on its website as soon as it is practicable to do so and in particular data regarding its electrofishing programmes of juvenile stocks.

There were no changes to board membership during the year. Triennial elections will take place in 2020 and a new board composed thereafter.

**Data Protection**

The board is registered with the Information Commissioner’s Office under the Data Protection Act (Ref. No ZA427263). Our Privacy Statement and Data Handling Policy are set out on the website and will be kept under annual review. The Clerk is the nominated Data Protection Officer and first point of contact in the event of enquiries.

**Membership of Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS, formerly ASFB)**

Following on from Dr Alan Wells visit in late 2018, It is understood that FMS is to review the basis on which future fees are calculated (currently 5-yearly fish catch figures); in the meantime the Board agreed and committed to the £5,619 set for 2019.

**3. Education and Publicity**

In September a PhD student, Liam Godwin joined ERI in Thurso to start a project with Dr Roxane Andersen, supported in part by CDSFB, NDSFB and FCRT. The project will link peatland restoration with invertebrate and salmon assessment. The Board’s archive of survey data on juvenile salmon in Caithness will form an important resource for Liam’s work and, it is anticipated, will lead to new insights imparting additional value to the Board’s dataset.

**4. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year.

**5. FLOW COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST**

The Trust provided support to the Caithness and Northern DSFBs for the fieldwork phases of the NEPS Programme.

Other projects undertaken in support of the Board add extra pieces to the jigsaw of the understanding of Board’s area. These include:

a. A fish survey had been carried out at the Bad a Cheo windfarm site on the Causeymire before construction and the same sites were re-surveyed in September 2019 after construction. No effect of the development was detected on the Little River.

b. A habitat report on the proposed Loch Toftingall windfarm site was completed.

c. Work was completed to delineate the transition in conductivity of the streams and rivers from east to west Caithness. A report will be published in due course.

d. Last year the conductivity measurements of all the rivers in the North was carried out in low water conditions. Further work will be done in high flows for comparison.

e. The Wick Smolt Tracking Project 2016 will be peer reviewed and put forward as a scientific paper.

Further details of Trust projects, including a report on the Conductivity Measurements in the Northern Rivers, can be viewed on the Trust's website (www.fcrt.org).

**6. PROPOSALS FOR 2020**

**Meetings**

The first meeting of the year was held in March. The Proprietors AGM has been postponed due to COVID-19, but will be held at a later date and next Board meeting will be held on 26 June. The Annual Public Meeting of the Board is scheduled for August and a final board meeting is expected to be scheduled for November.

**2019 Electrofishing Programme**

Due to the global epidemic of COVID-19, The NEPS programme 2020 will not be going ahead. It is hoped to continue the Board’s programme in September if Covid-related restrictions permit.

**Other scientific studies**

The Board will continue to look at other potential projects with the ERI and FCRT if this can be done safely and in compliance with such rules that apply at the time.

**Bailiffs**

Bailiff will continue to keep a visual lookout