**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING: 26 June 2020**

**Present**

Chairman: Lord Thurso

Members: SWM Threipland, R Dunbar,vSWD Laird, A Macauslan, M Newton, J Mackay and R Willis

Officers: EC McCarthy, A Youngson and M Blackwood

Observer: NA

**1. Register of Interests**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the first meeting as a new Board and a Revised Register of Interests was documented.

**2. Apologies**

 D Mackay and I Cormack

**3. Minutes of the last meeting**

1. **Approval**

 The minutes of the meeting held on 13 March were approved. Actions are ongoing.

**4. Finance and Admin**

 **a) Approve final estimates for 2020**

The final estimate were approved.

 It was recommended that the assessment rate remain at 17p in the £, as per previous year.

1. **Confirm assessment rate for 2020**

The Board was asked to consider rates in the light of the Covid 19 emergency and confirm its assessment for the year. The board agreed to maintain the rate as agreed in March 2020 with out taking any payment holidays or deferring payments.

1. **Annual report 2019**

The Annual report was circulated to and approved by the board with minor adjustments made.

1. **Admin and Correspondence**

A table of correspondence was circulated to and viewed by the board, there was nothing urgent arising or to be questioned.

1. **Proprietors AGM**

 The proprietors meeting that was usually held in June had been postponed and the board was asked how it wished to proceed. With options being, to hold a proprietors meeting before the August Public and Board meeting. Or to hold it on the same day. The Board agreed to hold the Proprietors meeting on the on 19 August, being the same day as the Public and Board meeting.

**5. Consultant’s Report**

 **a) Diseased Fish**

The disease that was present in some rivers in 2019 has returned this year; there are reports from Ireland and Norway as well as from rivers in Scotland. As previously, the patterns in which the worst symptoms appear seems to be patchy among different rivers and patchy among sequential runs of fish. There is an obvious advantage in trying to find out what is going on with a view to addressing the problem in some way.

In 2019, the Fish Health Inspectorate examined samples obtained from several rivers including the Forss and subjected these to lab analysis for the various diseases for which they can specifically test. However, FHI were not able to identify a cause for the disease.

This year, FHI’s attempts to obtain further samples are being hampered by the Covid restrictions. However, it is not obvious that further lab work in 2020 is likely to succeed in identifying the disease agent when it failed to do so in 2019, unless some new methodology has become available.

The alternative approach is to gather data on the distribution and numbers of affected fish to try to discover why the observed patterns of variation emerge. Recently FMS has agreed to act as collecting point for reports on the incidence of disease coming from individual rivers. This initiative is worth supporting. From the CDSFB point of view, the best approach would be for managers of the individual rivers to liaise directly with FMS, keeping the lines of communication as short as possible.

FMS has issued guidance on how to record and report information. The Board should consider supporting this scheme. The Board has access to the FMS guidance and should pass it on to those rivers that wish to make reports to FHI. The scheme really should have been instituted earlier in the year. So, rapid action is required.

 **Action; Board agreed for chairman to write to FMS**

 **b) Shurrery Dam**

At the last Board meeting I undertook to make contact with Scottish Water re. the continued operation of the dam at Shurrery. This was precipitated by the interruption of river discharge that occurred in August 2018 and also the decreasing reliance by Dounreay on the Shurrery water supply. Subsequently, I discovered that discussions would be better directed to SEPA, as the issuing authority for the dam’s CAR License, and with the Chairman’s agreement, I redirected my enquiries to SEPA.

These enquiries have cast light on a number of matters. None of these has been resolved so far because of the Covid restrictions - for example, an on-site meeting with SEPA and Scottish Water has not yet been possible. However, I will continue to pursue the various issues on behalf of the Board as quickly as the Covid restrictions permit.

In the meantime, I have re-examined and summarised extracts from 10 documents that were passed on to me by Tom Stitt. These documents cover the last review of the dam’s operation, starting around 1998. The most recent document (November, 2005) covers what is probably the most recent agreement between UKAEA, Scottish Water and CDSFB. The document specifies Scottish Water’s responsibilities re. the discharge of water from the dam to the lower river. It seems to me that slippage has probably occurred in the extent to which these responsibilities have been fulfilled and a review of the dam’s operation may therefore be necessary, as well as timely.

In addition, it may also be time to consider fish passage at the dam. The dam and the fish-pass were completed in 1957. Some alterations have been made over the years but the basic structure of the fish-pass remains unchanged; the original design would not be acceptable today because of the position of the fish-pass and the lack of flow-attraction in the deep gully running along the face of the dam; fish are likely to find it difficult to locate the fish-pass entry.

 **Action; Board agreed for consultant to liaise with Scottish Water and SEPA and thanked him for this.**

 **c) 2020 Electric Fishing project**

Marine Scotland’s NEPS programme has been suspended for 2020 because of Covid. However, it is looking increasingly hopeful that the Board’s own programme may be able to go ahead in late August/ early September. If it does go ahead, consultant recommend that the following work should be done.

1. The six key Board sites (Shurrery, Rumsdale, Clow, Culvid, Gobernuisgach and Wag) should be surveyed as usual.
2. Because of the uncertainty regarding the fish populations on Forss following the malfunction at Shurrery Dam in 2018 and the disease episode of 2019, all three existing Forss sites (including Shurrery) should be surveyed.
3. A new site at Rangag in the upper Little River catchment on Thurso should be surveyed; we have not worked in this area before. The existing site at Tacher on the lower part of the Little River should be repeated to provide a within-year comparison with the new Rangag site and also with the Braehour site (see below).
4. The existing Braehour site should be re-surveyed because the stream was observed to be heavily infested with filamentous algae in 2019. The excess algal growth is likely to be due to the release of nitrogen from the felled areas in Strathmore Forest around Loch Meadie. We need to know whether the fish are being affected by these changes.
5. We should extend our understanding of the contribution of the main River Thurso to parr production. In the past, fish densities at Hoy, Dalemore, Smerrary and The Fanks have been very high. Electric-fishing the main river is somewhat dependent on low river flow and in some years fishing is not possible. However, it is likely that some of the braided areas present between Westerdale and Loch More will always be accessible. I recommend surveying two sites on the main river if conditions permit.

This programme would include 13 sites in all. As in previous years, consultant asked for a minimum amount of discretion to address any additional queries that may arise in the course of survey work without further recourse to the Board. Board agreed.

**6. Flow Country Rivers Trust**

No points to discuss due to COVID-19

**7. Bailiff’s Report**

 Bailiff reported that For April and May there was very little activity reported along the coast.  Lybster has only been visited a handful of times when it would normally be an almost daily occurrence.

It was decided that there should always be a “presence” there on occasion, so as not to undo what has been achieved in the past many years.  Other areas were also visited.

Just recently, the arrival of some good numbers of salmon arriving in the Thurso Estuary was witnessed.  Sadly, this was also witnessed by known poachers.  I am sure that this would have been repeated at the mouth of many of our rivers

I think that, with the easing of restrictions, we will need to up our game to our normal policing activities.

**8. Any other business**

 None to note

**9. Meeting dates**

 The next meeting of the board will take place on Friday 20 November 2020 at 11am