

# CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

## ANNUAL REPORT

2016

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### BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2016

<b>Chairman</b>	The Viscount Thurso
<b>Upper Proprietor Representatives</b>	Earl of Caithness – Forss House Fishings Sir Richard Dunbar – Wick River S W M Threipland – Dunbeath River A MacAuslan – Berriedale/Langwell
<b>Lower Proprietor Representatives</b>	J Mackay – Wick Angling Association S W D Laird – Thurso River Ltd
<b>Co-opted Salmon Angler Representatives</b>	I Cormack – Wick Angling Association T Stitt – Thurso Angling Association
<b>Co-opted Tenant Netsmen 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

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The purpose of the report is to summarise the work of the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2016 and plans for the current year, with particular regard to the board's statutory functions and responsibilities.

## **1. 2016 ACTIVITY**

### **WILD FISHERIES REVIEW (WFR)**

The issue of Wild Fisheries reform was a primary focus for the board during the year. The formation of a regional Fisheries Management Organisation (FMO) to reflect the conclusions of the WFR had been given considerable attention in 2015 but the publication by the Scottish Government (SG) of a draft Wild Fisheries Bill in February 2016 brought an added urgency to discussions.

#### Flow Country Fisheries Management Organisation (FCFMO)

An initial draft template for a potential FCFMO embracing the Caithness, Northern and Helmsdale DSFBs, with links to the Environmental Research Institute and the Flow Country Rivers Trust, was prepared by the chair of the CDSFB in March and presented to all three boards for consideration. The draft was refined and agreed with all parties over the following months, approved by the members of the Caithness board in August and subsequently by the other two boards.

The template outlines the role and objectives of the FMO, a model of the organisation, the financial structure and the associated scientific, regulatory and administrative resources.

As of November it was reported at the RAFTS/ASFB conference that pilot FMOs were planned by SG in early 2017 and that the FCFMO was being considered as a potential candidate for a pilot. In February 2017, however, SG announced that it was calling a halt to Wild Fisheries reform "at this time". The intention had been for the template to remain as a live draft until such time as SG began the legislative process of the WFR, so for the time being the plan is in abeyance.

#### Fisheries Management Plan

The draft Wild Fisheries Bill required an FMO to have a fishery management plan (FMP) in place to support its function. The consultant was commissioned by the CDSFB, NDSFB and HDSFB to devise a single plan for the future scientific management of all the fisheries in the Flow Country rivers currently under their administration.

The draft FMP was prepared with the collaboration of fishery managers and their main staff from all the major rivers. The prospect of such a plan was widely welcomed by those on the ground and participants were eager to contribute. The result is a comprehensive and valuable working document ready to be put to use. The draft was well received and approved by the CDSFB in August, on the understanding that it would be subject to iteration as circumstances required.

For the next steps post WFR see Section 4 below, Proposals for 2017.

The FCFMO and FMP proposals have been published in final draft form and can be viewed at <http://caithness.dsfb.org.uk/publications/>

### **Catch data**

The board is required to publish catch data for the district. Cumulative figures for salmon and grilse for the year are given below, as reported by proprietors, river managers and agents and cross referenced with the returns to Marine Scotland Science (MSS). Figures for the district for 2016 are shown in brackets.

2016 was the first of a 3-year moratorium on netting by SG so there are no figures to report for fixed engine or net & coble catch.

	Total Catch: Salmon/Grilse		Released	
<u>Rod Catch</u>				
Berriedale	200	(124)	156	(84)
Dunbeath	105	(182)	41	(120)
Wick	607	(530)	156	(142)
Thurso	2631	(2064)	2436	(1843)
Forss	323	(199)	170	(89)

### **Conservation and Regulatory Measures**

The board monitored the latest Conservation Regulations from Marine Scotland (MS). River proprietors were notified of the assessments planned for the latter part of the year and possible implications in the event of reassessment of conservation status.

The consultant linked up with the Marine Scotland and Local Biologist Liaison Group, created to steer the development of the methodology behind the Conservation Status system, and was tasked with keeping a watching brief on activity for the board.

#### Electric fishing

A request from the Wick Angling Association (WAA) to carry out an electro-fishing survey in several areas of the Wick catchment in late August/early September was approved and permission given for the use of the board's backpack equipment. Formal approval for electro-fishing on the Dunbeath was also given. A developer request to survey the upper Haster area of the Wick was refused to avoid further disturbance to the river following the WAA activity but arrangements were made for an exchange of data between the organisations in lieu.

#### Stocking

The consultant discussed the possibility of preparing a fuller genetic policy for the board with geneticist Matthew Gage (Professor of Evolutionary Ecology, School of Biological Sciences at the University of East Anglia and consultant to the Dunbeath river) in the expectation that a formal policy would be required under the latest Conservation Regulations and as part of the proposed River Management Plans. MS's proposals have not been followed through and as matters stand the board considers that its current policy document meets all its requirements.

#### Hatcheries

Requests from the Dunbeath and Wick rivers to continue hatchery operations for restocking with their own broodstock in the spring were approved at the August board meeting.

### **Fish surveys**

2016 saw the start of the rolling 5 year programme of annual mini surveys to maintain and enhance the baseline data accumulated from 2013 to 2015. One or two sites were selected to re-survey on the Forss, Thurso, Wester, Wick and Dunbeath and the six sites on Berriedale/ Langwell to follow up on low densities of fry observed there in 2015.

A report on the survey has been posted on the website. The results indicate that the rivers continue in good health. The poor fry year that affected parts of Berriedale and Langwell in 2015 was not replicated in 2016. The Wester performed poorly but was consistent with low expectations based

on previous years; there were one-off anomalies at single sites on the Dunbeath and the Forss; otherwise, all the sites performed as well as or better than previously.

### **Consultations**

As in previous years the board received numerous requests for information and advice. The following is a list of the formal requests to which the board responded. The majority relate to the granting of licences by MS or the SG Energy Consents Unit, for coastal/river projects and land-based development respectively.

(Note: EIA = Environmental Impact Statement, ES = Environmental Statement)

#### Wind farm applications

Limekiln, Reay resubmission of plans:	EIA and ES consultations
Camster II:	E.ON contractor request to conduct fish surveys, including electrofishing, preparatory to ES
Drum Hollistan, Reay:	EIA consultation
Golticlay, Rumster:	ES consultation

#### Offshore wind farm proposals

Brims Tidal Array, NW Pentland Firth:	ES consultation linked to application to construct and operate a tidal array
Dounreay Tri-Floating Wind Demonstration Project:	ES consultation

#### Electricity installations

Gills Bay overhead cable:	Consultation on supplementary ES information
Shetland to Noss Head HVDC subsea cabling:	Consultation on SSE Scoping Report

#### River and harbour works

Coghill footbridge refurbishment, Wick river:	Highland Council contractor request for comments on proposed site investigation works
Wick harbour modifications for Beatrice offshore windfarm support operations:	Pre-licence consultation

#### Ecological studies / environmental monitoring

Wick ecology survey, lower Yarrows catchment:	SEPA pre-survey advice sought
Yarrows mapping, fish habitat mapping:	Scottish Water request for advice and data
Dounreay environmental monitoring:	License application for taking a salmon from Thurso River

### Concerns

The only item to cause the board significant concern was the proposed tidal array off Orkney in the NW Pentland Firth. Having reviewed the ES accompanying the developer's licence application for the installation the consultant was not satisfied that enough scientific information existed on salmon movements in the area for a realistic risk assessment to be made, even though the statutory criteria for the ES had been met.

With the prospect of at least three such projects in the Pentland Firth (with Meygen already embarking on underwater turbine trials and plans for Ness of Duncansby known to be in the pipeline) and the potential impact on fish migrating from all of Scotland's east coast rivers the board wrote at some length to Marine Scotland urging them to consider obtaining the type of crucial

information necessary before further decisions are taken in respect of the area and highlighting the need to involve all those DSFBs at risk.

### **Bailiffs**

At the start of the year Mr McCarthy retired from Thurso River Ltd. He continues as Superintendent for the Thurso river and was re-appointed as Inspector/Head Bailiff to the board at the March meeting.

In the wake of the ban on netting activity there were rumours of individuals exploiting the situation and selling fish on the black market. The bailiffs maintained a high profile throughout the season to deter illegal fishing around the coast and this appears to have been successful. No reports were substantiated.

### **Incidents**

There were no incidents during 2016.

### **Flow Country Rivers Trust**

The Trust embarked on a number of projects during 2016 which supplement the work of the board. The first two of these projects form part of the Pentland Salmon Initiative, an umbrella project run by the Environmental Research Institute (ERI).

#### Smolt Tracking (Phase 1)

This was conducted in Wick River and out into Wick Bay. The methodology for the acoustic monitoring of fish migrating from an east coast river was tested successfully and ERI will be publishing the data captured in the scientific press. The board will be notified when Phase 2 gets underway, expected to be in 2018 in Sinclairs Bay.

#### Fishermen's Knowledge: Salmon in the Pentland Firth

This research project, supported by the Fishmongers' Company, focused on interviews with salmon netmen and has attempted to harness all available information from non-scientific sources on the movement of salmon in the Firth. The findings contribute in some measure to a better understanding of fish movements through the Firth, in the absence of scientific data referred to above (see under Consultations/ Concerns).

#### River Wester Survey

In light of the poor results identified in the board's 2013-2015 Wester electro-fishing surveys the Trust conducted surveys at a further 8 sites on the river to establish the likely causes and consider the feasibility of improving the fishery, with funding support from Subsea 7. The results were sufficiently encouraging to set up a Wester Fishery Regeneration Project and funds are being sought to move this forward. The board is keen to see the river achieve its former potential.

#### Saturation stocking

An exercise aimed at determining whether biomass densities observed in the Dunbeath and Wick rivers in the course of the board's 2013-2015 electrofishing programme were the maximum possible values and any possible conclusions on the use of hatchery stocking. The survey results of the sites selected (Culvid and Clow) were included in board's 2016 electrofishing report and database; stocking did not demonstrably enhance the number of fry present at either site.

#### Resources

Staff and equipment for the electrofishing work on the Wester, Dunbeath and Wick rivers were sourced from the board. For its part the Trust invested in a microscope and associated training to carry out scale readings from samples taken during electrofishing instead of having to send them away for analysis, which in turn will benefit the board's programme.

The CDSFB and NDSFB each contributed £5000 per annum for 3 years to setting up the Trust. This commitment came to an end in 2016.

Further information on the activities of the Trust can be found on their website at [www.fcrt.org](http://www.fcrt.org).

## **2. GOOD GOVERNANCE**

### **Administration**

The board complied fully with all governance obligations during 2016.

SG is notified of all statutory meetings and associated paperwork. The website is kept up to date and includes all annual reports and accounts, meeting minutes, policy guidance and scientific reports issued over the last 4 years. All online guidance and procedures are kept under regular review.

The board was represented at the final conference of the ASFB/RAFTS in November to learn more about their reorganisation and reconstitution as Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS) as well as to keep abreast of developments on the WFR front.

### **Education and publicity**

The film produced by Maramedia for the RSPB on the Flow Country, to which the board contributed in 2015, was launched at Caithness Horizons in June and is now on permanent show at the Forsinard Nature Reserve in Sutherland.

## **3. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year.

## **4. PROPOSALS FOR 2017**

### **Meetings**

Board meetings are scheduled for March, June, August and November 2017. The annual public meeting of the board will be held on the same day as the regular August meeting, date to be announced nearer the time. Triennial elections are due this year and will take place at the Proprietors' AGM on Friday 16 June.

### **Future fisheries management**

With the suspension of Wild Fisheries reform the board does not intend to pursue plans for an FCFMO for the sake of it. There are no perceived benefits in a reorganisation, which will involve costs, administrative upheaval and effectively an extra tier of management. Should circumstances change, with legislation enacted in the future, good communication has been established between the boards and it should be a straightforward matter to resurrect or adapt the proposed template as appropriate.

The WFR/FMO exercise has demonstrated the value of collaboration between the various parties, and most particularly at the river management level and in the production of a common FMP. The three DSFBs have already begun cooperating from a science perspective, starting with electro-fishing operations. The Caithness board is keen to explore other areas they might usefully collaborate and will liaise with the other boards on the possibilities.

### **2017 electrofishing programme**

The strategy for the year is to focus on the River Thurso, expanding the range of sites to cover upcoming events in windfarm development and forestry clearance while maintaining surveillance elsewhere in the district and checking up on minor issues identified in 2016. The programme proposed is as follows:

### Forss

Check Shurrery (last visited in 2016), following up low fry density.  
Return to Cnoc-glas (2015) in upper catchment.

### Thurso

Repeat Rumsdale (2016) and return to Dalganachan (2015), both in upper catchment.  
Return to Tacher (2015) and Inchag (2015) on the Little River before the new windfarm goes ahead.  
Set up a new site on Olgrinmore – one of the few lower tributaries, and also to keep an eye on forestry activity upstream.  
Set up a new site on Sleach (middle tributary) at Altnabreac prior to forest clearance.  
Add Hoy (2013) in lower main river or Smerrary (2014) in middle main river if the river is low enough.

### Wick

Check Bilbster (2015)

### Dunbeath

Check Culvid (2016) following low fry density.

### Berriedale/ Langwell

Check Gobernuisgach (2016) and Wag (2016) following high fry densities.

### **Other scientific studies**

With regard to concerns in respect of a lack of scientific information relating to the Pentland Firth, exchanges have taken place since the start of the year with the Brims tidal array developer and the board continues a dialogue with Marine Scotland.

### **Bailiffs**

Whilst conservation measures remain in place coastal monitoring will continue as last year, with a robust, visible bailiff presence.

The electric fishing course at Inverness College scheduled for last year was cancelled. The next course takes place this summer and one bailiff with extensive electrofishing experience to date will attend so the board has a qualified backup team leader as soon as possible.

