

## CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

### MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING: 2 MARCH 2018

#### Present

Chairman: Lord Thurso  
Members: J Mackay, A MacAuslan, SWM Threipland, SWD Laird,  
Officers: A Youngson, E Constable  
Observer: Andrew Heath

#### 1. Register of Interests

No change.

#### 2. Apologies

Apologies received: Sir Richard Dunbar, M Newton, T Stitt, R Willis, I Cormack, E McCarthy.

#### 3. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 November were approved. There were no issues arising.

#### 4. Finance and Admin

##### a) 2017 Draft Accounts

The draft Expenditure & Income accounts and the Balance Sheet were approved, to be formally presented at the Proprietors' AGM in June.

##### b) 2018 Draft Estimates

The draft Estimates were considered and approved in principle. It was proposed that the assessment rate remain at 17p in the £, subject to agreement at the next meeting.

Questions were raised regarding the value of the £5000 subscription to Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS). The board was minded to withdraw from membership after this year unless there was evidence of its interests being effectively represented at the Scottish government level and the chairman would write to FMS accordingly. It was suggested that other DSFBs in the north might share this view and should be consulted to consider whether our respective funds could be used to better advantage.

**Action:** Chairman

##### c) Consultation activity

Details of exchanges with developers and planning authorities since the last meeting were noted.

#### 5. River Gradings

The final river gradings for 2018 had been announced recently, with the Forss, the Dunbeath and Berriedale/Langwell downgraded from a Grade 1 last year. This was despite the robust submission from the board to Marine Scotland (MS) and with the evidence of the 2013-2017 electrofishing (EF) studies to confirm an abundance of healthy stocks in the rivers. The consultant was thanked for his efforts to challenge the proposals at the consultation stage.

The consultant explained the assessment system applied and provided future projections for the rivers, demonstrating that these grades are unlikely to be reversed for some years. Further details of the ramifications of the river gradings, the mismatch with the results of the 2017 EF survey, and the scientific response to the downgrading can be found on Page 1 of the Appendix to these minutes.

The board encouraged the individual rivers affected to appeal their gradings in whatever way they considered appropriate. But it also acknowledged that within its own remit it had a duty to contest a system of assessment which undermines scientific data, is weighted against short, low spate rivers of the type found in the north of Scotland and positively promotes high catch numbers over conservation. Having considered possible options it was agreed that:

- The chairman and consultant, having already sounded out their peers at an executive and scientific level within SG / Marine Scotland in respect of the assessment system, should continue to lobby their respective contacts for change.
- The chairman to write to the Superintendent of Marine Scotland (Simon Dryden) to propose a review of the system and enquire what supplementary information would be needed for the gradings to be reconsidered.
- The board to augment the number of locations surveyed on the downgraded rivers this year to strengthen the data set already available to prove actual numbers of fish present.

A series of questions from Forss House Fishing Association (FHFA) in connection with the downgrading of the Forss had been forwarded for the board's consideration via Mark Newton. The majority of the concerns were addressed in the course of the board's discussions above and the chairman would duly respond.

**Action:** Chairman & Consultant

## **6. Consultant's Report**

The consultant made recommendations for the electrofishing programme for 2018. The board was informed of the possibility of genetic studies starting up at ERI this year and that results were beginning to be achieved from the temperature loggers in the River Thurso. See Appendix, page 2, for further details.

### **a) 2018 Electrofishing programme**

The board stipulated that the policy of revisiting at least 2 sites per river was to be maintained. In light of the gradings controversy (see para 5 above) a number of new sites on the Berriedale, Dunbeath and Forss would be surveyed in addition. Possible proposals by SNH to survey Berriedale/Langwell in 2018 should proceed independently, without impacting on the board's programme or survey methods. The consultant was asked to prepare a schedule of sites for consideration at the next meeting.

**Action:** Consultant

## **7. Flow Country Rivers Trust Report**

The Trust's 2017 annual report had been distributed to inform board members about recent activities and future plans. The Trust chairman provided further detail on plans for the Wick river pilot biometry study and water chemistry testing at Berriedale.

## **8. Any other business**

Andrew Heath, currently working under contract for the RSPB, introduced himself. He attended in a personal capacity and raised concerns about the presence of giant hogweed along some of the rivers as well as the potential for Himalyan balsam to reach Caithness from locations in Sutherland.

A representative of the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group had contacted the chairman wishing to raise awareness of the group's services amongst proprietors. Simon Laird was to meet her to find out more and would report back to the board at the next meeting.

## **9. Meeting dates**

The Proprietors AGM was fixed for 2 pm on Friday 8 June, with the next board meeting to follow on immediately afterwards.

**CONSULTANT'S REPORT – 2 MARCH 2018**

- 1. Ramifications of river gradings.** Best estimates of the minimum annual catch required to achieve 100% compliance with egg deposition targets set in the 2018 grading exercise can be calculated for each river from SG estimates of the probability that the egg target has been met each year and on declared catches for the same year for the period 2012-2016.

best estimate of target catch	
berr/ lang	330
dunbeath	270
wick	680
thurso	1240
forss	650

Rates of catch and release will affect these values. An increase in the rate of release over the values reported for the years 2012-16 will reduce the size of the target values given above. However, in most cases, the reduction is not likely to be particularly large because (1) catch and release is already widely practised and (2) the fish available for release (ie, the rod catch) is always a relatively small part (roughly 20%) of SG's calculated value for the annual spawning stock.

The average probability value used by SG in the grading exercise is for a run of 5 years. Therefore, after down-grading there is no guarantee of the immediate restoration of a higher grading even if the target values above are met or exceeded from 2017 onwards. Indeed, in most circumstances, there is no action that river managers might take to rapidly restore or attain a higher grading – although increasing rates of catch and release will help.

**2. CDSFB 2017 electric-fishing survey.**

The 2017 survey results were uniformly favourable and, generally, better than ever before (ie. since the survey series started in 2013). The juvenile survey results were also entirely at odds with SG's catch-based assessment for the Forss (Grade 2), and Dunbeath (Grade 3) and, less certainly, for the Berriedale/ Langwell system (Grade 3).

**3. Scientific response to downgrading for 2018.**

- a. We do not agree that the 2018 gradings are appropriate for some Caithness rivers. This position is based on juvenile survey data and on reasoning contained in the Board's response to the recent consultation. We have additional criticisms of the SG methodology that were omitted from the Board's consultation response in the interests of brevity.
- b. The Board/ rivers might enquire from SG what additional, local information would be required to enable SG to reconsider their position on the background science in relation to the next (2019) river grading exercise.
- c. Otherwise, the Board might unilaterally consider strengthening its own scientific case and then, if appropriate, vigorously challenging any unfavourable SG gradings for the 2019 fishing season.

#### **4. Board strategy for 2018 electric fishing survey.**

As previously, the Board should continue to examine sites on all the Caithness rivers each year.

In the specific cases of Dunbeath and Forss, the Board could respond to the unfavourable 2018 river gradings by increasing the number of electric fishing sites in order to provide more detailed spatial coverage.

Berriedale/ Langwell also requires special attention but the options are more complex because of SNH interest in the catchment's SAC status. AY attended a meeting with SNH and MSS at Pitlochry October 2017. It was stated that SNH are to adopt the SG position by also using SG catch-based assessment methods for site condition monitoring of salmon SACs. The meeting itself was to discuss collaboration on monitoring of Berriedale/ Langwell SAC by developing an alternative/ complementary approach based on juvenile survey data obtained by electric fishing. Following this discussion, it now seems that this approach may be evaluated more widely by SG/ MSS, paving the way for eventual inclusion of electric fishing data in SG river grading exercises and also, presumably, in site condition monitoring by SNH.

Site visits with SNH and MSS are now proposed for the near future for both Berriedale/ Langwell and Thurso SACs. The possible outcome will be that SNH will support additional field work in Berriedale/ Langwell in collaboration with Board/ Trust.

SNH/ MSS requirements for data may not (or not fully) match the Board's existing strategy for gathering data. The Board should therefore consider the potential implications of any mismatch, aiming to maintain its own strategy overall in order to maintain continuity while also supporting any collaboration.

Since the matter is still very fluid, consideration of the Board's 2018 survey plan should be delayed until the next Board meeting. However, the outcome may well be to increase survey effort on Forss and Dunbeath in order to secure the Board's position for these rivers. The associated extra costs may be offset if collaboration on Berriedale/ Langwell becomes included in some other arrangement to be supported by SNH.

**5. RLI/ERI PhD Student, Sunny Bradbury.** This project is now underway. It will examine relationships between genetics and smolt migration timing. It is intended to include genetic analysis of the Board's archived scale collection obtained in course of previous juvenile survey work. The project may also therefore produce index of spawner abundance generating (genetic) familial relationships at electric fishing sites – a subject the Board has discussed in the past. Among other insights, such an index might ultimately support an alternative route to producing more accurate river gradings.

**6. Scottish Rivers Temperature Monitoring Network.** The Thurso set of 13 continuous temperature loggers has been looked after by the Board/ Trust and downloaded twice a year since 2014 as part of national river temperature monitoring network run by MSS.

The results, relating to welfare of salmon in rivers in relation to high temperature and, in particular, future prospects with global climate change, are now beginning to emerge from modelling studies carried out by MSS. See <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/marine/Salmon-Trout-Coarse/Freshwater/Monitoring/temperature/references>