**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING: 19 AUGUST 2020**

**Present**

Chairman: Lord Thurso

Members: SWM Threipland, SWD Laird, M Newton, R Dunbar, A Macaulsan, I Cormack, J Mackay

Officers: EC McCarthy, A Youngson, M Blackwood

Observer: F Kinnear

**1. Register of Interests**

None to register

**2. Apologies**

D Mackay

**3. Minutes of the last meeting**

1. **Approval**

 The minutes of the meeting held on 26 June were approved. All actions are ongoing.

**4. Finance and Admin**

**a) Correspondence/Consultation**

The clerk had no consultations to report and noted it had been a quiet time due to COVID-19 and current restrictions. Correspondence had been passed to chairman by clerk received from a member of one of the rivers, regarding the process of which a river is graded. Chairman provided a clear answer to the question.

1. **Expenditure to 30 June 2020**

A table of Expenditure was circulated to and viewed by the board. It could be seen that expenditure was on track to the final estimated budget of 31 December 2020.

**5. Consultant’s Report**

**a) The NEPS electric fishing report for 2019**

The report is now available at <https://data.marine.gov.scot/dataset/national-electrofishing-programme-scotland-neps-2019> . The analytical basis of the report is complex but the headline findings are that Caithness District is graded 1 (the highest category) for parr in 2019 but only 2 for fry; in 2018 both fry and parr were grade 1.

It is the consultant’s view that the 2019 assessment of fry for Caithness arises in part from a misinterpretation of the data. As things stand, the NEPS gradings are not used by MS to regulate the fisheries via the annual river grading exercise; only the adult catch data are used. However, this may change in future. Accordingly, the consultant will prepare a simple briefing for local interests to cover the wider Caithness, Northern and Helmsdale Districts in order to make sure we know what the state of play in the north in 2018 and 2019 really was and to set the record straight in case the Board has to argue the facts in future. Consultant will ask clerk to file a copy of this once it is done and the Board agreed to this.

**b) The MS hatchery/ stocking policy**

The new policy now appears to have been finalised (without public consultation). See -<https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/marine/Licensing/fishintros/introduction/SalmonStockingPolicy> Unfortunately, the outcome of the final policy is still contrary to local interests in Caithness. The Board discussed this in depth as to whether there should be a consultation and questioned what power the Board would have to challenge a different outcome. It was agreed the chairman would write to FMS about this matter.

1. **Diseased Fish**

At the last Board meeting it was decided that the Chairman should write to FMS asking them to pressure MSS for a summary account of research findings on the disease that has again been present in some of the Caithness rivers in 2020. Coincidentally, at around the same time, MSS did post such a document. This confirms that MSS' 2019 investigations of the diseased fish were inconclusive as to a possible cause. See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/red-skin-disease-2019-summary/> .

The disease (now called Red Skin Disease or RSD) appeared to recede a few weeks ago as it did at around the same time last year but very recently there have been serious fish-kills in some of the Caithness rivers – two of which were notified to SEPA by members of the public.

Due to Covid19, it is not likely that MSS' investigations will progress much this year and therefore the outlook for 2021 may not be any clearer than before. On the other hand, facilitated by FMS, the consultant had been in touch very recently with the head of the Fish Diagnostics team at Marine Laboratory to press the seriousness of the situation in the north and had received a full account of MSS’ efforts to discover the cause of RSD. MSS has concluded that RSD is not attributable to any of the suite of diseases with which MSS is already familiar. MSS is also very clear that the gill pox virus identified in some diseased Scottish fish (including Forss fish) is not responsible for RSD. Samples obtained from diseased Scottish fish have now been sent to The Institute of Marine Research in Norway where advanced genetic sequencing and electron microscopy techniques that are not available in Marine Laboratory will be used to try to isolate and identify any potential RSD agent.

A lengthy discussion was held regarding this matter highlighting members concerns and thoughts. It was agreed that the Board must keep applying pressure to FMS and MSS in the hope of finding a solution to this matter**.**

**6. Flow Country Rivers Trust**

 The chairman of the trust gave a note of recent works carried out as detailed below.

1. The trust recently electro-fished the Achvarisdale Burn at the road bridge. There is a very healthy population of salmon fry and smolts, trout and eels.
2. A mapping exercise with Sean Dugan of FMS is currently in progress to map the Conductivity, Ph, Geology, Shelly till, fish and eventually insects in the FCRT area.
3. The Wick River smolt-tracking project will soon be published as a scientific paper.
4. Temperature Logging – Analysis of 2013 scales detected a summer growth check due to high water temperatures. 2018 was a similar year and a the exercise will be repeated.

**7. Bailiff’s Report**

Bailiff reported that there are good number of fish being reported all along the coastline. No problems have been encountered.

**8. Any other business**

 None

**9. Meeting dates**

The next meeting of the board will take place at 11am on Friday 20th November 2020, possibly still to be held by tele conference via zoom.