**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2020**

**BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2020**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Chairman** | The Viscount Thurso |
|  |  |
| **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  The Viscount Thurso – Thurso Fisheries Ltd |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Salmon Angler**  **Representatives** | I Cormack – Wick Angling Association  D Mackay – Thurso Angling Association |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Tenant Netsmen**  **Representative** | - |
|  |  |
| **Scientific Advisor** | A Youngson |
|  |  |
| **Inspector/Head Bailiff** | E McCarthy |
|  |  |
| **Clerk** | Miss M Blackwood |

**CONTACT DETAILS**

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The purpose of the report is to summarise the work undertaken by the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2020 and plans for the current year (2021), with particular regard to the Board’s statutory functions and responsibilities.

2020 was dominated by the COVId-19 pandemic which curtailed fishing efforts, particularly in the first lockdown. This created difficulties in many areas of the board’s activities. However, like many other organisations, the board adapted. Meetings were held by Zoom tele conferences, and bailiff work and the electro fishing programme were carried out with social distancing and in a manner compliant with COVID-19 restrictions

**1. ACTIVITY IN 2020**

**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 2020 with comparative figures for 2019 shown in brackets. The second set of figures shows the total number salmon and grilse released 2020 with comparative figures for 2019 shown in brackets.

Total Catch of Salmon and Grilse Number Released

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rod Catch | 2020 2019 | 2020 2019 |
| Berriedale | 207 (174) | 170 (137) |
| Dunbeath | 115 (130) | 92 (87) |
| Wick | 583 (903) | 298 (410) |
| Thurso | 804 (2135) | 668 (1943) |
| Forss | 53 (14) | 50 (14) |
|  |  |  |

**Conservation and Regulatory Measures**

Hatcheries

As reported in the previous year, Scottish government are reviewing their policy related to hatcheries. The work was hampered by covid restrictions but some consultations took place, however the outcome and any new policy has not yet been published.

River gradings

In 2020, Marine Scotland issue River Gradings for 2021 based on reported rod catch data over the years between 2015 and 2019. All the rivers in the Board area were designated Grade 1. This means that there will be no mandatory restrictions on these fisheries in the 2021 season.

Marine Scotland also issued the results of the National Electrofishing Programme for Scotland (NEPS) for 2019. Caithness District was graded 1 for parr and 2 for fry. Both fry and parr had been classed as grade 1 in the NEPS exercise of 2018. The dip in fry densities in 2019 resulted from a poor spawning towards the end of the 2018 drought year.

**Fish Surveys**

The annual Board survey was carried out as planned (despite Covid). In all, 17 sites were examined including the six key sites that are examined every year. As expected, densities of fry (resulting from spawning in 2019) showed a general resurgence from the relatively low levels of 2019. These had resulted from the poor spawning following the prolonged drought in 2018. In 2020, fry levels in the River Thurso were higher than in any previous year since the current sequence of surveys started in 2013. The only notable anomaly in the Board area was for the River Forss where fry and parr levels remained depressed in 2020 continuing a sequence of poor years that first emerged in 2018.

**External Consultations**

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Wind farms** |  |
| Halsary Wind Farm Culvert Upgrades | Farrans Engineering requested comment |
| Draft Sectoral Marine Plan for Offshore Wind Energy | Consultant attended Presentation by MS |
| ELECTRICITY ACT 1989 : APPLICATION FOR SECTION 36 CONSENT FOR THE PROPOSED LIMEKILN WIND FARM EXTENSION IN THE PLANNING AUTHORITY AREA OF THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL | Scot Gov requested comment |
| REQUEST FOR SCOPING OPINION FOR PROPOSED SECTION 37 APPLICATION FOR STRATHY WOOD WIND FARM GRID CONNECTION | Scot Gov requested comment |
| Limekiln Wind Farm - Reay, Caithness | Infinergy requested comment |
| **Water** |  |
| Burn of Whilk cable works | SSE requested Information on access/ ay restrictions |
| Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission PLC - HVDC Link Installation | MS requested comment |
| Scrabster Harbour Trust - Construction and Capital Dredging - St Ola Pier, Scrabster Harbour, Thurso - CEMP Consultation | MS requested comment |
| Hollandmey Renewable Energy Development | Environmental Consultant requested comment |
| **Roadworks** |  |
| NA |  |

**Bailiff Report**

2020 was a quieter year and the Bailiff kept a sharp look out however, there were no major concerns but there was still need to maintain a presence.

Bailiff reported that For April and May there was very little activity reported along the coast.

Lybster had 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.

Mid 2020 saw the arrival of some good numbers of salmon arriving in the Thurso Estuary was witnessed.  Sadly, this was also witnessed by known poachers.  It is thought that this would have been repeated at the mouth of many of our rivers.

It was thought that, with the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, bailiffs would need to up their game to normal policing activities.

Later in 2020 the head Bailiff said that there were good number of fish being reported all along the coastline and No problems had been encountered.

**Incidents**

Red Skin Disease (RSD) - RSD that was present in some rivers in 2019 returned in 2020; there were reports from Ireland and Norway as well as from rivers in Scotland. As previously, the patterns in which the worst symptoms appear seemed to be patchy among different rivers and patchy among sequential runs of fish. In 2019, the Fish Health Inspectorate (FHI) examined samples obtained from several rivers throughout Scotland 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.

In 2020, FHI’s attempts to obtain further samples were hampered by the Covid restrictions. Although, it was not obvious that further lab work in 2020 would be likely to succeed in identifying the disease agent when it failed to do so in 2019, unless some new methodology had become available.

The alternative approach was to gather data on the distribution and numbers of affected fish to try to discover why the observed patterns of variation emerge. FMS agreed to act as collecting point for reports on the incidence of disease coming from individual rivers. CDSFB asked managers of the individual rivers to liaise directly with FMS, using their guidance on how to record and report information. The Board wrote to FMS about this. At around the same time, MSS did post such a document issues by FMS. RSD appeared to recede later in 2020 as it did at around the same time last year (2019) but there were serious fish-kills in some of the Caithness rivers – two of which were notified to SEPA by members of the public.

Due to Covid19, MSS' investigations did not progress much in 2020 and therefore the outlook for 2021 may not be any clearer than before. The consultant has been in touch with the head of the Fish Diagnostics team at Marine Laboratory to press the seriousness of the situation in the north and 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 was also very clear that the gill pox virus identified in some diseased Scottish fish (including Forss fish) was not responsible for RSD. Samples obtained from diseased Scottish fish had 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 were used to try to isolate and identify any potential RSD agent. The Board will keep this under review.

Forss - The Impact of RSD on the Forss River seemed to be particularly severe. In addition, the incident with Shurrery dam, reported below, and other previous pollution incidents gave the board cause for concern in relation to ongoing juvenile populations. The consultant continued to liaise with SEPA to make sure that Forss catchment is free of identifiable environmental problems, and with Scottish Water to request a review of operations at Shurrery dam and its impact on the River Forss.

The Board wrote to Fish Health Inspectorate for information on general findings resulting from sampling of diseased fish in 2019 on the River Forss and in other Scottish rivers.

The Board’s electric-fishing survey in September indicated that the hoped-for resurgence in Forss following spawning in 2019 did not transpire and the population of juvenile salmon in 2020 was still very low. This meant that juvenile numbers in Forss had been very low for two consecutive years. As RSD was also prevalent in 2020 the quality of the 2020 spawning and the size of the fry cohort in 2021 must again be in doubt. The board wrote to SEPA, Sottish water and the Forss river owners and will continue to put pressure on to seek a resolution.

Shurrery Dam – The Board were made aware that the dam at Shurrery had been closed, seriously affecting the water supply to rivers in contravention to the operation procedure as previously agreed with the board. The board determined to arrange a meeting between the board’s consultant, Scottish Water and SEPA and to do so as soon as covid restrictions permit.

**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 2020 the board held its customary 4 meetings in March, June, August and November. All meetings are publicised on the 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.

Triennial elections took place in 2020 and the new board composed thereafter as per board membership at 31 December 2020. Mr Roddy Willis, who had been a member for many years retired and the Board thanked him for all of his hard work over the years.

**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, £5,619 set for 2020 and £5,339 set for 2021

**3. Education and Publicity**

Due to Covid restrictions no educational activity was possible during the year.

**4. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year.

**5. FLOW COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST**

Works carried out by the trust are as below;

The Trust’s annual report had been circulated to inform board members about recent x activities and future plans

The trust had electro-fished the Achvarisdale Burn at the road bridge. There was a very healthy population of salmon fry and smolts, trout and eels.

A mapping exercise with Sean Dugan of FMS is in progress to map the Conductivity, Ph, Geology, Shelly till, fish and eventually insects in the FCRT area.

The Wick River smolt-tracking project was published as a scientific paper.

Temperature Logging – Analysis of 2013 scales detected a summer growth check due to high water temperatures. 2018 was a similar year and the exercise was to be repeated.

FCRT minutes of the 2020 AGM and their board meeting were circulated to the CDSFB members.

Chairman of FCRT notified the CDSFB members that J Fleming had resigned from FCRT and that John Mackay had been appointed in his place.

Insect base infrastructure at Halladale has had a positive result.

**6. PROPOSALS FOR 2021**

**Meetings**

The first meeting of the year was held in March. The Proprietors AGM and next Board meeting will be held on 18 June. The Annual Public Meeting of the Board is scheduled for August and a final board meeting is expected to be scheduled for November.

**2021 Electrofishing Programme**

Marine Scotland’s NEPS programme was suspended for 2020 because of COVID-19. However, it is understood that it will take place in 2021 and the board will take part.

The boards own annual e/f is planned to go ahead as normal covering the six main sites as well as other work to be determined by the board’s consultant in due course. The Board appointed Jamie McCarthy to manage its electro fishing programme for 2021 under the strategic supervision of the board’s consultant.

**Forss River**

Following on from the poor Juvenile report in 2020 and having noted the increase of RDS together with the water flow problem at Shurrery dam as well as previous river pollution, the board will convene meetings with the board’s consultant, SEPA and Scottish Water in order to seek mitigation. In addition, the board will work with FHI on its proposals to examine both juvenile and live fish in an effort to seek a resolution for Forss river.

**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