**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**MINUTES OF BOARD MEETING: 1st December 2021**

**Present**

Chairman: Lord Thurso (LT)

Members: SWM Threipland (TT), SWD Laird(SL), J Mackay(JM), M Newton(MN), I Cormack(IC), RDunbar(RD), A Macauslan (AM)

Officers: EC McCarthy(EM), A Youngson(AY), M Blackwood (MB)

Observer:

**1.Register of Interests**

No new interests to be registered.

**2.Apologies**

D Mackay(DM)

3. **.Minutes of the last meeting**

1. **Approval**

The minutes of the meeting held on 18 August were approved. All actions are ongoing.

**4.Finance and Admin**

1. Admin and correspondence – table of correspondence circulated to members prior to meeting

**5.Consultant’s Report**

1. **Electric-fishing Programmes**

The 2021 NEPS programme and the Board’s own electric-fishing programme were successfully completed. Preliminary inspection of the results suggests that –

1. Fry and parr levels in the Forss are again in a depressed state. The river has been affected by a series of setbacks, with low fry recruitment going back to at least 2019. Spawning in 2021 is likely to be poor once again. Eventual recovery now depends on a large and consistent increase in the number of spawning fish in 2022 and beyond.

2. The River Thurso is again saturated with juvenile fish.

3. The electric-fishing results for Wick River in 2021 were poor following only a relatively modest showing of fry in 2020. The 2021 spawning also appears to have been relatively poor too. This sequence of events is an early sign of trouble to come and every attempt should be made to ensure a good spawning in 2022.

4. The electric-fishing results for Dunbeath River and for Berriedale/ Langwell are satisfactory and, in particular, levels of fry in 2021 were good. This means that the populations as a whole are robust to the poor spawning predicted for both rivers in 2021 and consequent low fry recruitment in 2022. If a good spawning can be secured in 2022, the effects of the poor spawning in 2021 will prove to be a minor setback since high levels of compensatory recruitment of fry in 2023 will restore the populations to stable levels.

1. **Red Skin Disease/ Saprolegnia**

Forss was again beset by disease over the summer. Berriedale/ Langwell was also badly affected. Mortality rates among returning adults in both rivers were high and prospects for spawning were almost certainly affected.

A substantial amount of work carried out by MS Fish Health Inspectorate over the past year has not identified the cause of these problems. Originally, it was suspected that Red Skin Disease was involved but now this is in some doubt. It may therefore be that *Saprolegnia* fungus is the direct cause of the observed mortalities, rather than being a secondary infection, and that the situation has been precipitated by the sequence droughts, low water and high temperatures that has affected summer conditions over each of the past four years. Presumably, the local nature of the outbreaks must be attributable to local factors that combine to precipitate infection and to determine the course of the disease itself. **Action: No complex answer but to keep an eye on next year and hope for wetter weather over summer.** **AY to ask FHS for update in case they have any further answers.**

**C. Pink Salmon**

Pink salmon were again present in 2021 and spawning was extensive in the Thurso. Because the length of their life-cycle is fixed at two years, pink salmon can only occur every second year. A few fish (20-30) were present in the Thurso in 2017 and some were known to have spawned. No fish were reported in 2019. This means that none of the progeny spawned in in the Thurso in 2017 survived/ returned to spawn in 2019 and, equally, that the fish present in 2021 were not the progeny of fish that had spawned previously in Thurso. Instead, the 2021 population of pink salmon must belong to a new group of strays from rivers in northern Norway or western Russia.

The river was very low in August and September and it has therefore been possible to compile an unusually precise account of the pink salmon run based on information gathered by Jamie McCarthy and Geordie Doull Jnr. In July, pink salmon were observed to be present in substantial numbers among the large number of salmon holding in the lower part of Beat 1 but only six fish were reported caught by anglers, all from Beat 1 and mostly in July. Spawning commenced around 10th August and petered out around the beginning of September. A further 80 or so fish were removed from the river by one means or another during and after spawning. About 80 redds were completed over this time although this is probably an underestimate due to merging of neighbouring redds. Redds were constructed throughout Beats 1, 2 and 3 as far upstream as Upper Suilag. On balance, therefore, the 2021 run of pink salmon in the Thurso was probably in the range of 200-250 individuals. There were no reports of pink salmon spawning from other, nearby rivers. The expected post-spawning die-off of the 100+ fish estimated to remain in the river did not occur and the fate of these fish is not known. **Action: To keep records on file for reference and see what happens in 2023**

**6.Flow Country Rivers Trust**

**Insect Survey** – JM gave update and confirmed FCRT had received Insect grant award and rivers had been surveyed.

**7.Bailiff’s Report**

Bailiff did not have anything to report.

**8.Any other business**

**A. Forss New Chair**

Forss House Fishings Ltd have appointed Hugo Cubitt as the new chairman. JT has been in contact with him. As have MRN and AY, with a positive outlook into possibly forming a Forss river committee to help to fix the river issues.

**B. Tree Planting**

MRN reported The Kyle fisheries trust were developing polices in respect of Tree planting. The board noted this but decided not to take any action at this time.

**9.Future dates**

Date for next Board Meetings were scheduled for the following;

Board meeting Friday 11th March at 2pm via Zoom

Annual Proprietors meeting followed by board meeting Friday 17th June 2022 at 2pm

Annual Public meeting followed by board meeting Thursday 18th August 2022 at 2pm

Board meeting Friday 2nd December at 2pm via Zoom

**10. Tormsdale update**

LT and SL left the meeting and JM chaired the remainder to have a discussion/update on Tormasdale. JM reported that the response had been submitted and was published on the energy companies website on 20th November 2021 and this was also circulated to the board members.