**CAITHNESS DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2023**

**BOARD MEMBERSHIP AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2023**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Chairman** | The Viscount Thurso |
|  |  |
| **Upper Proprietor****Representatives** | Sir Richard Dunbar – Wick RiverA MacAuslan – Berriedale/LangwellM R Newton – Forss |
|  |  |
| **Lower Proprietor** **Representatives** | J Mackay – Wick Angling AssociationS W D Laird – Thurso River LtdThe Viscount Thurso – Thurso Fisheries Ltd |
|  |  |
| **Co-opted Salmon Angler****Representatives** | I Cormack – Wick Angling AssociationD 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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 / Email cdsfb@outlook.com

Website http://caithness.dsfb.org.uk

The purpose of the report is to summarise the work undertaken by the Caithness District Salmon Fishery Board (CDSFB) during 2023 and plans for the current year (2024), with particular regard to the Board’s statutory functions and responsibilities.

2023 saw a return to normality with board activities running as usual. We continue to adapt and use zoom calls as well in person meetings.

**1. ACTIVITY IN 2023**

**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 2023 with comparative figures for 2022 shown in brackets. The second set of figures shows the total number salmon and grilse released 2023 with comparative figures for 2022 shown in brackets.

 Total Catch of Salmon and Grilse Number Released

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Rod Catch | 2023 2022 | 2023 2022 |
| Berriedale | 236 (116)  | 236 (111) |
| Dunbeath |  179 (42)  | 179 (42) |
| Wick | 210 (190)  | 169 (93) |
| Thurso | 1127 (956)  | 1010 (897) |
| Forss | 37 (41)  | 37 (40) |
|  |  |  |

**Conservation and Regulatory Measures**

 River gradings

The river gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season had been published. The gradings issued by Marine Scotland for 2023 show Forss being downgraded from 1 to 3 (meaning compulsory catch-and-release) and Dunbeath being downgraded from 1 to 2. Otherwise, Berriedale/ Langwell, Wick and Thurso retain Grade 1 status.

Fish Surveys

The 2023 NEPS programme and the Board’s own electric-fishing programme were successfully completed, with results and report being published and uploaded onto the boards website.

**External Consultations**

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

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Wind farms** |  |
|  Pentland Floating Offshore Wind Farm |  Scot Gov/ Xodus Group – seeking comments  |
| Tormsdale Wind Farm |  Lomond Energy Ltd |
| West of Orkney  |  Offshore Wind Power Ltd |
| Watten Wind Farm |  EDF Renewables |
| Slickly Wind Farm |  Request comments |
| Golacity Wind Farm |  Request comments |
| Moray West Offshore Windfarm |  Request comments |
| **Forsetry**Scottish Forsetry - Strathnore  |  Request for comments  |
| **Other**Network Rail – Waybeam workbank consultation |  Requested comments  |
| Bear Scotland – Hempriggs and Lochend  |  Requested comments  |

**Bailiff Report**

The Bailiff reported it had been a fairly quiet year, with nothing major to report, fish had been observed off the coast but with no poaching activity. Bailiff hoped to continue as last year with their oversights of the coast.

**Incidents**

Red Skin Disease (RSD) - Unfortunately, there are reports of *Saprolegnia* again for 2023 in Caithness, as have rivers further south. A PhD student at Aberdeen University was engaged as part of a project brokered by FMS, jointly funded by all the Boards and led by Prof. van West. The consultant attended an on-line meeting with the student and supervisor set up by FMS towards the end of 2023 to discuss sampling and logistics in Caithness (ie. sampling of Rivers Forss, Thurso, Wick and Berriedale/ Langwell). Work started immediately.

**Forss/Shurrery Dam** – A Recovery Group for Forss was set up. Part of the proposed plan was to ease Forss Falls to improve conditions for fish attempting to leave the lower river in low or moderate flows. For aesthetic reasons emphasis has been placed on minimal intervention. A CAR license permitting the Board to modify Forss Falls has been approved by SEPA. The Board will consider how to proceed when low water permits. The Bailiff had been monitoring adult returns to the river in 2023.

**Toxic algae in Wick River**. Extreme levels of toxic algae were being flushed from Loch Watten into Wick River especially during north-westerly winds. SEPA were monitoring the situation and Environmental Health also became involved regarding public exposure to toxins which may be present in fish captured from the river.

**Roach in Wick River.** Initial reports of roach had been confirmed and they could be seen in substantial numbers in the river below Watten loch. Roach had also been reported by anglers in Loch Watten and NatureScot had been informed because Watten is an SAC. In September, an electro fishing exercise removed 150 individuals from the pool below the road bridge near Watten village. The process will be repeated to find out how quickly the fish are replenished. The exercise was delayed until the H&S hazards of the toxic algae were clarified by SEPA and Environmental Health and it was deemed safe to work in the river.

The Rivers and Lochs Institute at UHI, Inverness supplied sampling kits for eDNA sampling. UHI will screen the samples for all fish species. The aims are 1. To find out if roach is the only introduced species now present and 2. To partially define the present distribution of roach within the catchment.

**Tormsdale Wind Farm**

The Board’s consultant made formal representation to NatureScot on behalf of the Board. Due to conflicts of interest, Lord Thurso and Simon Laird withdrew from any engagement with the Board re. the proposed windfarm. A subcommittee of the Board met a several times during the year to discuss how the Board should proceed, putting any discussion points forward to the full Board for approval.

**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 2023 the board held its customary 4 meetings in March, June, August and December. 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.

**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)**

The Boards fee for 2024 was set at £6,195 an increase from £5,900 in 2023

**3. COMPLAINTS**

No complaints were received during the year.

**4. FLOW COUNTRY RIVERS TRUST**

The Trust’s annual report had been circulated to inform board members about recent activities and future plans. The Zoological Society of London had contacted the Trust to assist with a smolt tracking project on the Wick River in Spring 2023. The project was part of work being carried out around the coast to track the migration routes of juvenile salmon and seatrout. Detection units were placed in Wick Bay and further out to sea on the Beatrice Wind Farm and Moray East. Preliminary data show that some smolts transit through the windfarms: the full results of the study are awaited.

SmartRiver data on stream macroinvertebrates had been circulated and the chairman gave a discussion to explain what work had been done and their findings. New sampling sites had been established on Wick River in the light of the fish declines shown by the Board’s electric fishing survey results.

**5. PROPOSALS FOR 2024**

**Meetings**

The first meeting of the year was held in March. The Proprietors AGM and next Board meeting will be held on 7th June. The Annual Public Meeting of the Board is scheduled for August and a final board meeting is scheduled for 6th December.

**2024 Electrofishing Programme**

The boards own annual electrofishing programme is planned to go ahead as normal. The NEPS programme will not take place in 2024.

**Other scientific studies**

The Board will continue to look at other potential projects with the ERI and FCRT. The Wick Smolt Tracking Project will be repeated in 2024.

**Bailiffs**

Bailiff will continue to keep a visual lookout