



MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Banchory Lodge Hotel and by MS Teams
17:00, Wednesday 28th September 2022

Present:	Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman Paul Adderton, (PA) Victor Beamish, (VB) Shane Christie, (SC) – MS Teams Gavin Clark, (GC) Sam Fleming, (SF) – MS Teams Andy Ford, (AF) – MS Teams Martin Gardner, (MG) Edward Humphrey, (EH) Scott Rutherford, (SR) Craig Stewart, (CS) Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO) Mike Wilson, (MW) Iain Wood, (IW) – MS Teams Keith Young, (KY)
In attendance:	Lorraine Hawkins, (LH) Carol Mair, (CM) Edwin Third, (ET)
Apologies:	Tara Spiers, (TS)
Members of public:	Sandy Bremner, (SB)

The Board were reminded of their responsibilities to the Dee DSFB and to state whether they had any declarable interests in agenda items.

1. Apologies

As tabled above.

2. Chairman's introduction

LR welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially the new Board members Andrew, Martin and Paul.

Given that we have the AGM/APM starting at 19.00 we will aim to complete this meeting by 18.30.

I have a few comments by way of introduction - firstly on the matter of governance.

Please can the new Board Members confirm that they have read and understood the material given to them at the Triennial Meeting – Salmon Acts etc? Might I suggest that returning Board Members refresh their knowledge? Should anyone be in doubt as to their responsibilities they should seek the counsel of the Clerk. Also, I would like to stress that

while most of our business may be conducted in public there are times when confidential matters are discussed. On no account should such matters be relayed to or discussed with anyone who is not a Board Member.

In what has been another dire fishing season it is pleasing to see excellent catches in September which are well ahead of last year and the five year average. Let us hope that this leads to the river being well stocked at spawning time.

Finally, I want to emphasise that the Stocking Review which we are about to receive is a fact finding presentation. It is now up to the Board to consider the evidence and decide what if anything to do. We will not have much time to discuss it at this meeting. Accordingly, there will be an additional meeting called to do that so for now you should study the paper in preparation for that meeting and if possible submit comments in advance.

3. Minutes and Matters Arising from Meeting on 22nd June 2022

The minutes of the meeting 22nd June 2022 were approved.

Matters Arising

Covered under agenda items.

4. Finance

a. Financial update to 31 August 2022

The financial update had been issued to the Board members prior to the meeting.

LH informed the Board as follows;

Income is mostly on track – points of note

- The Don SLA will now be invoiced.
- The Garlogie figure under obstructions is a carried forward opening entry from monies received in a prior financial year.
- £20,000 received from Woodlands Trust. Project income is expected to be in excess of the budgeted figure due to increased grant monies.

Income received £319,325.

Expenditure

Policing and Predators expense is over that budgeted.

Expenditure to 31 August 2022, £231,596.

Capital expense of £9,408 is due to the sewage plant for the rental properties at Dinnet, planned from last year.

An amount of £402,882 was in the bank yesterday

b. Projects & Contracts

LH advised the Board members that we were successful in our application to NRF for the Clunie restoration project and awarded £210K. However, NRF would not fund the small enclosures we had proposed and so this was not the full amount. Fortunately, Flora & Steff have been able to find the £45K shortfall from other sources. Thank you to –

- CNPA - £21K
- Mossy Earth - £16.8K
- Cairngorms Trust's Nature Resilience Fund – £10K

This gives 140 enclosures fully funded, outside of NRF award.

We were invited to submit an application to the next NRF round – deadline less than 2 weeks away – for more than 200 LWS on the Geldie burn (Mar Lodge) and Girnock burn. This will be approximately £250K.

We were also invited to submit an application to this round of NRF for a restoration project on the Coy burn, similar to the Beltie restoration project. This one is being submitted with the Dee Catchment Partnership as the named lead, and they will deal with the financing. Project will also be approximately £250K.

CNPA are providing £10K for LWS on the Beltie burn. The money is passing through DCP accounts rather than the Fishery Board's, but the full amount is to be spent on contractors.

So, a very grateful acknowledgement to CNPA, who have been very supportive of the restoration work and have contributed significantly financially – this year they have already committed to £73K (£30K to support Sam; £12K to support Flora and Steff; £21K Clunie, £10K Beltie).

It is great to see all this funding available for restoration currently – government money given to tackle the biodiversity and climate crises. In the Programme for Government released at the beginning of this month, it confirmed that support for the NRF would be continuing. However, we are aware that the government is currently undergoing an Emergency Budget Review given the cost of living crisis. This is expected to stop funding of some of the things that government had planned to do, and we will just have to wait and see how this impacts on funding for biodiversity and climate change. An emergency budget is expected to be announced next week.

c. Assessment 2023

LR informed the Board members that the final decision on the assessment for 2023 will be taken by the Board in the early spring so at this stage he could only outline the thinking behind how the level of assessment may be set.

The assessment has in real terms been falling since 1990 and it is not expected that 2023 will see a reversal of that trend. However, we have been operating at a loss in recent years. The losses were deliberate – easing proprietors' pain during Covid - and funded by surplus assets. Now we need to return to a breakeven level.

The River Office operation is very lean so pruning costs can only take place by cutting out some fundamental activity. There is a possibility that we could get a little more cost recovery from services rendered in habitat work which together with a modest sub inflationary increase of say 5% in the assessment may get us to the desired operating breakeven level in cash terms at least.

The Board is charged with looking after the fish but if the assessment income were to fall the Board may need to abandon some of its work plan.

LR reminded the Board members that the revaluation of fishings is being undertaken by the Scottish Assessors Association to provide updated values to take effect from 1st April 2023.

5. Stocking Review

LH advised the Board members, as part of the 2016 Hatchery Appraisal, that the DSFB committed to keep under review the circumstances for and any new evidence of the use of hatcheries and stocking. We've now completed this exercise.

[internet link dropped – unable to reconnect to those who had joined by TEAMS]

Al Reeve, Trust Biologist, has been reviewing all available information on stocking. This has not only included scientific papers but also interviews with various hatchery managers. The outcome is a 40-page report, of which we have printed copies to be handing out tonight at the AGM and it will go onto our website tomorrow.

To summarise what we have done for the review:

Firstly, we invited the public to contribute any new evidence or suggestions for us to follow up. This public consultation lasted for 2 months – Mar/Apr.

Surprisingly, we only received 15 responses. Two provided evidence to follow up, which we have done. However, we have attempted to address all the wider points that were raised during the consultation and include it in the report.

Overall, the report takes a look at:

1. The West Coast River Carron (particular focus was their genetics report).
2. Girnock burn on the Dee – experimental stocking by MSS
3. Norwegian stocking – use of gene banks
4. Tommore burn stocking on the Spey
5. River Garry, Ness stocking
6. Use of stocking in Denmark

As part of the review, we considered not only the typical hatchery tool, but also considered fry redistribution, reconditioning kelts, smolt-adult supplementation, gene banking, and stocking done alongside ecosystem restoration. It looks at the Dee catchment and possible areas for focus. It also highlights Dee-specific issues that need to be addressed – habitat, water quality, predation. It summarises the genetic knowledge of Dee salmon. It provides a brief overview of stocking history on the Dee and it covers the licensing requirements for stocking on the Dee.

In addition, AI held interviews (standardised questions) with managers of current salmon hatcheries, on the River Cree, Helmsdale, Spey, Tay, Tyne - these interviews are included in full at the back of the report.

The overall message from this is that we must make sure we are doing more good than harm. The full report needs to be read to appreciate all the nuances of stocking. The report does not set out what to do next: that is for this Board to decide. A suggestion for what process should follow is:

Seek feedback:

1. Comments from Board members – next 3 weeks.
2. Proprietors – Board members to follow this up.
3. Public/proprietors - Online public consultation with specific questions, run for the first 3 weeks in October. We will summarise all responses and then share with Board members by email in the 4th week of October.

The Board could then reconvene and have a meeting focused on this sole issue of what to do next - suggest the week of 7th Nov.

6. FishDee/FishPal

EH updated the Board members regarding FishDee/FishPal.

Apologies were given for the weekly reports not going up in time. Unfortunately there were IT issues. Debbie has still not been given the ability to upload the reports herself, but this will be in place for next year.

This year, so far, there were 1,124 bookings giving £177,355. This was slightly short of last year's figures, possibly due to the poor spring and dry summer. There is very little left to book in the system so we might beat £180,000 by mid-October.

FishPal is merely a booking system but it is working for the Dee, bringing in anglers and money. Some beats use FishPal more than others.

LR asked EH to send an analysis of trends. He also asked if it would be useful to run an application session for ghillies. EH agreed.

7. River Report

The River Report had been issued to the Board members prior to the meeting. LH updated the position with predators.

Seals:

- We are putting a lot of effort into non-lethal control of seals. We're trialling a new scarer this year, loaned for free from SMRU. We have now acquired a rib (given for free, but probably limited use due to depth of river) and a jet ski

(purchased cheaply second-hand) and staff have undergone a training course. We are also trialling pyrotechnics. All are different tools done in response to a seal being spotted in the river, hopefully to reduce chance of habituation.

- There has been no response to the appeals lodged in the spring by DSFBs that had the seal licences rejected – (12 out of 13 applications were turned down). We also haven't heard anything back from Mairi Gougeon about our requests for support or the use of names on seal licence applications.
- We presume that the next licence application round will be in Jan/Feb 2023, with licences granted for May 2023 onwards.

Goosanders:

- The Fish Eating Bird Policy Review group was set up to progress a licensing review of goosanders as a priority, prior to the Wild Salmon Strategy Implementation Plan being published at the end of the year. The group met for a second time and we are now seeking a steer from Ministers about what they might consider before a proposal is developed.
- We have been chasing the bird diet report with Questions to Parliament – and it was published last week! – of the 4 rivers sampled, the Dee samples had the greatest proportion of salmon in their diet – accounting for 50% of goosander diet during the spring. The report acknowledged that predation impact might well be exacerbated if a prey population is declining for other reasons.
- Latest count: After last winter's and this spring's low bird counts, on which our licence application was made – we wonder if this was due to bird flu – we completed our September count and had record numbers of birds – 319. We wrote to the licensing team and asked if they would consider these current figures during the review of our application (which had already been submitted). We received the licence last week and it is based on this high September count, therefore it is the highest we have received – 45 goosanders and 24 cormorants. This is still following the formula of 15% of our count, though they were content to base it on a single count, rather than an average figure.

The Board members also raised concerns with water quality, namely pharmaceuticals entering the river system and asked what research was being done to study the possible effects.

LH confirmed we are in contact with the James Hutton Institute, who are undertaking this type of research, regarding their research programmes.

8. Fisheries Management Plan Update

For new board members, our FMP has 151 separate actions. Some have a completion date, some are open-ended (e.g. goosander counts to be done each winter). These are all listed and updated by staff on a large spreadsheet, which is shared with the Chair. This paper is the agreed reporting format for Board, every other meeting, although any suggestions on how to improve reporting are welcome. Agreed that the FMP spreadsheet would be shared with the Board as a shared file, to view only.

9. Ghillies Representative

None – SC had joined by TEAMS and link had been lost

10. AOB

A review of how much of the Board's funds could be placed into a term deposit, around £100,000.

Regarding communication. River Reports are issued but many people still ask, "What does the River Office do?" How else can we get the message across.

LR advised the new website will be available and has been created to be more accessible for all types of information.

Date of next Dee DSFB meeting will be 10:00 Wednesday 14th December 2022.



Signed.....

Lawrence Ross, Chairman

Date...14th December 2022.....