



MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Deeside Rugby Club Pavilion, Banchory and by MS Teams
10:00, Tuesday 27th June 2023

Present: Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman, by MS Teams
Paul Adderton, (PA)
Victor Beamish, (VB)
Sam Fleming, (SF), by MS Teams
Martin Gardner, (MG)
Edward Humphrey, (EH)
Isla Martin, (IM), by MS Teams
Tara Spiers, (TS)
Sean Stanton, (SS)
Craig Stewart, (CS), by MS Teams
Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO)
Mike Wilson, (MW), by MS Teams
Iain Wood, (IW), by MS Teams
Keith Young, (KY)

In attendance: Lorraine Hawkins, (LH)
Carol Mair, (CM)
Edwin Third, (ET)

Apologies: Andy Ford, (AF)
Scott Rutherford, (SR)

Members of public: Sandy Bremner, by MS Teams
Richard Gledson, by MS Teams
Robert Harper

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

If any matters discussed in the Board meeting were deemed to be confidential then the Members of the Public would be asked to leave.

1. Apologies

As tabled above.

2. Chairman's introduction

LR welcomed, to the Board meetings, Sean Stanton as the new ghillies representative and Isla Martin as the NatureScot representative.

In common with the rest of the country, catches have been dire. There are evidently less fish around and on top of that we have had adverse weather making fishing at times not sensible. There will be more on water temperature guidance under agenda item 6. It is pleasing to see the response from beats and anglers to our call to hold back on fishing in high temperatures. This is tough for all involved no more so than Debbie our Development & Promotions Officer (DPO) and the Trust which had to cancel FishDee24.

On the upside, despite the odd hiccup, habitat work has progressed apace. More on this later but the headline is that we have now planted 460,000 trees. There is further exciting news on work following the Stocking Review.

3. Minutes and Matters Arising from Meeting on 28th March 2023

The Minutes of the Meeting 28th March 2023 were approved.

Matters Arising

Matters arising are covered under the agenda.

4. Finance

a. Financial Update to 31st May 2023

The financial update had been issued prior to the meeting.

LH stated that as the update only covered to the end of May there was little to report.

Income

- Assessment notices had been issued around the 3rd week in May, so only a few had been paid by the end of the month. As at today's date a total of £71,000 had been collected.

LH asked the Board to consider agreeing the assessment budget for the future years at the meetings in September. This gave time for the notices to be prepared and issued for the start of the following financial year.

- The £3,000 shown under events had been carried forward from the previous financial year.

Total income £34,902.

Expenditure

- There is nothing needing highlighted in expenses and costs are on track.

Total expenditure £95,697.

As at yesterday's date the total in the bank was £171,402.

b. Projects & Contracts

Maps of habitat restoration work progress had been issued to the Board prior to the meeting. LH updated the Board –

- Cattie burn - An application to Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) for just under £250,000 was submitted in April, working with Ballogie Estates. We expect to hear in July if this has been successful.
- Glen Clunie Restoration Project and LWS Project on the Geldie, Girnock and upper Dee, both funded by NRF, are currently being delivered.
- Under agenda item 5 a big project application will be explained.

5. Stocking Review Follow Up Work

LH presented the following to the meeting:

Contract delivery by Forth Rivers Consulting is going well and they are due to report by end of July. We will share this report with the Board, which will be presented as a GIS Story Map based online.

As the full contract work we requested couldn't be delivered, we have been making progress on other aspects of the emergency work, in particular kelt reconditioning and Smolt to Adult Supplementation (SAS) which were briefly covered in the Stocking Review.

Thinking of how we bring in this emergency work and join it with our key works of habitat restoration and creating catchment resilience, we approached the Atlantic Salmon Trust (AST) to support us to develop an ambitious, longer-term programme of work. This developed into the document included as one of the meeting papers.

Our salmon stocks are facing a crisis, particularly our spring stocks, and there is no quick way to reverse their decline. The only solution is providing robust habitat that fish will thrive in under our changing climate regime - severe floods, drought conditions, temperatures that are too hot and lack of snow melt to move smolts. To meet this challenge we need to work at scale, so delivery is not possible within just a few years. Yet there is real risk we may lose some of our sub-populations of salmon within a short timescale, e.g. the Girnock Burn numbers.

Therefore, the programme of work we laid out will be looking at more novel methods for conservation of stocks in the short term, and these fit within the work sphere of conservation translocation. Conservation translocation is where species are released into the wild for conservation of that species, such as happening with the wild cats in the National Park. The emergency work we are developing is therefore being framed in such terms. These methods include kelt reconditioning and SAS.

We have laid out our approach in terms of a realistic 20-year timeframe, with habitat restoration throughout this period but based on a strategic, prioritised plan. Conservation translocation and work in the nearshore marine environment will be focused into the first ten years of the plan.

Really key parts of this programme of work are stakeholder engagement and the monitoring and reporting of results. Without stakeholder support – from government and its agencies, landowners and local communities - this cannot be delivered.

A key reason for our approach to AST was to help us bring together these stakeholders. We have had initial conversations with government, Marine Scotland Science (MSS), NatureScot, Port of Aberdeen, and some academic institutions who we would look to work with. All have been generally supportive of the approach.

The River Dee Trust was separately approached by a potential corporate funder, inviting us to develop a sizeable project to submit. The turnaround has needed to be very quick on this application - it needs to be submitted by the end of this week but we have written this programme of work so that phase 1 could potentially be covered by this funding. It is a competitive fund, so if we are unsuccessful, we will seek support elsewhere and AST will provide some assistance with this.

This document is marked confidential as we want to agree some governance issues relating to our joint working.

In terms of the conservation translocation, we are looking to pilot the method of kelt reconditioning this year, and SAS next year. We do need stakeholder support for this, we need MSS to authorise collection of kelts, we need to do a Habitat Regulations Appraisal (to the satisfaction of NatureScot) as the Dee is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Both methods focus on releasing adult fish into the wild to spawn naturally, rather than stripping and planting of eggs.

We have already been asked about the scale we will be working at with these methods, and whilst that detail is still to be determined, to be really clear the focus is saving the sub-stocks in our upland tributaries, therefore a pilot study might involve 1 or 2 tributaries this year, and the setting up of monitoring programmes, including genetic studies.

The Board members discussed and questioned on the presentation.

- How many fish would be required for this?

For one tributary it might be a dozen fish for kelt reconditioning. For SAS this hasn't been calculated yet, but the pilot study might be hundreds.

- Who else has done kelt reconditioning?

This is not happening in the UK insofar as the methods we are proposing. The fish will be allowed to spawn naturally then be captured and after 1-2 years released to spawn again naturally. This is different from the Tay's procedure where they catch the fish prior to spawning and strip them. Venues to be decided for this to be undertaken.

- Are we looking at equal numbers of males and females?

We will just be looking at females.

- Has the Board considered gene banking?

That is another option but hasn't been put forward as that doesn't solve the problem and won't be done in isolation. However, this is a fair point to bring into the bigger picture.

(MW joined the meeting at this point.)

- The recent weather conditions are causing real pressure to our younger fish. Are we concentrating too much on older fish? Should we be collecting fry to put back as smolts? If this isn't being considered we need to convey the message explaining why not. At what point might we do this? If the fish are already stressed would this add to the mortality?

This is not something we would look to do. We would need to bring in millions of fry and this would deprive the juveniles of life experience. This is why our habitat being resilient is vital.

- Comment was made that the Board needs to be blunt about short-term fixes, but need to communicate what can be done. Demonstrate why our habitat work is vital. The work over the previous decade is exactly what needed to be done and the Board should be supported on this.
- Comment was made that through science and evidence gathering the Board does not believe in hatcheries. Furthermore, hatcheries will not do what those asking for one will expect. Our communications have failed to get this message across and we need to revisit how to achieve understanding that hatcheries don't work. The communications must also make it clear and explain that translocation is not a hatchery.
- How detrimental is smolt supplementation?

This is a new technique carried out in Canada so we genuinely don't know. In Canada it is working (fish survive and spawn) but it is not self-sustaining due to the high marine mortality (99%) being the overriding problem. It may be useful where stock numbers are now very low. There will be genetic monitoring.

- Comment was made that the methodology must be made available in clear language, step by step, to communicate exactly what is going to happen. It is a priority that this is explained as the money needed to participate in this will be substantial and parties need to be fully aware of what we expect to get from this.

Kelt reconditioning	spawn in burn challenge to capture after spawning take to storage facility for reconditioning feed individually (prawns) by hand (method confirmed by the Tay) may be ready to spawn the following year – if so then taken back to spawn
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Smolt to Adult	spawned naturally take portion from smolt trap take to facility till reach the adult stage – about 2 years put back at the place from which they were taken
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- What is the mortality rate at the Tay, on kelt re-conditioning?

Our methodology wouldn't be the same as the Tay remove the fish before spawning, our method of capturing kelts would likely give a lower initial survival rate.

- Would the number of kelts removed each year increase?

During the pilot year we would investigate other tributaries. It would be dependent on monitoring and we would need to follow the 5-year cycle.

- Would this change multi sea winter fish?

This is unknown, there is evidence some of the Tay fish come back as grilse.

- If this is started this November what capacity is available at facilities to do this? Would the MSS facility at Torry be available.

We are looking into facilities. There would be a small capacity at Almondbank (Tay) and we are also in talks with a couple of universities. So far we have only discussed methods with MSS but if their facility was available this would solve the problem of taking the fish out of the catchment.

- What funding is available?

There is a potential funding opportunity under a biodiversity programme from an international fund. We don't know who the competition is but will find out in a couple of months if we have been successful. AST have offered to help.

LR thanked LH and asked the Board members to consider this after the meeting and come back with any further questions.

6. Conservation Code 2024

The Conservation Code Group met in May and agreed the Conservation Code for next year, which you have received as a draft. There are no changes other than weblinks. The Group did discuss two issues – spinning (point H), which was raised by a proprietor, and high water temperatures.

Firstly, the group acknowledged the merits of spinning. However, it was a unanimous decision not to change point H on the code as it was thought unnecessary and they concluded that the Code as written is accepted by nearly all beats and also that the wording is helpful to promote the river as a fly fishing destination. This latter point should be covered by a new working group we are putting together, a 'planning to succeed' group of mostly proprietors who will look at ways of increasing the customer base for the river.

In terms of temperature, the Group considered whether we should ask anglers to stop fishing at 20°C and above – a temperature the scientific literature shows relates to increased Catch & Release mortality. The Group decided on balance not to go with that proposal but to focus on good handling advice for 18°C and above – the temperature at which impacts on fish occur, such as disease, stress.

However, Scottish Government announced new advice yesterday, following on from work by the Science Advisory Board and the Delivery Group operating for the Wild Salmon Strategy. Their advice is simple – firstly, take extra care when fishing between 18-20°C (that fits with our new guidance). Secondly, avoid angling above 20°C. That goes beyond our current advice.

We think we must follow it. Therefore, we need to add a further point to the code along the lines of **“take extra care when river water temperatures increase above 18°C & avoid fishing altogether when temperatures exceed 20°C”**, along with a link to our website guidance, which will be updated to reflect no fishing above 20°C.

Points noted -

- The Board cannot impose the Conservation Code, it is up to individual beats.
- There is currently monitoring of temperatures in tributaries but this is not collected in real time.

- Real time temperature data is collected by ghillies from their beats.
- As temperatures vary along the river some beats might be able to continue fishing and others not.

The Board members considered the draft conservation code and the additional temperature wording and these were approved.

7. FishDee

EH updated on FishDee bookings -

- Up to mid-May, bookings had been good.
- People are still booking fishings, although currently it is quiet on the river but we need water to see how bookings will be affected.
- Bookings have been received for all months of the season.

8. River Report

Water scarcity - SEPA have asked all boards/trusts to report any evidence of water scarcity. We have made one report already on the River Clunie, where fish had become stranded and we carried out a fish rescue.

Large Woody Structures - Work on the Clunie starting week beginning 10th July. 400 trees will be going in.
- 160 LWS at Mar Lodge going in in 2024/25.

Garlogie - The engineer has granted permission for the contractor to be appointed. Timetabled for removal in late July/early August this year.

Bank resilience - Guidance will be put onto the website for bank management that benefits salmon production, including green engineering advice. ET will speak to ghillies to tap into their knowledge.

Q – Would gravel removal be allowed?

A – SEPA are the regulators for this. ET advised caution on this type of work as the river just fills in the pools with gravel again.

Goosanders Q – Can more be done on tributaries as more damage is done there by goosanders?
A – Jamie Urquhart is working with various upland estates and keepers to get count data. Scottish Government made clear to the 'fish eating bird advisory group' that there were not considering goosanders to be included on the general licence.

Seals Q – Has any river received a seal licence this year?
A – No news as yet.

9. Fisheries Management Plan Update

The Progress Report had been issued with the Board papers.

LR informed the Board members that we are just over halfway through the five years of the FMP, 75% of actions are either complete or in progress which is where one would expect to be.

The Board members asked if there was a long-term plan by Scottish Water and Scottish Government for the pressure on the river with water abstraction.

LH advised that she had had a direct conversation with Scottish Water and their current abstraction is not close to their licence allowance. SF expressed concern as this quote from Scottish Water might be misleading. She will look into this and get back to LH.

10. Ghillies Representative

SS confirmed that a lot of questions ghillies had raised in discussion with him had already been answered in the meeting.

Is a stronger smolt run due to more parr to smolts getting good feeding? Is there invertebrate monitoring? If smolts are changing in size, what does that mean?

LH had asked Al Reeve regarding the smolts but factors are unknown and open to speculation. There is no evidence of improved insect life. There are many factors such as does good end of year feeding improve numbers, were goosander numbers down, does a milder winter affect smolts.

LH will share Al's written response with Sean to pass onto ghillies.

11. AOB

LR reminded the board members that the paperwork issued prior to the meeting contained several letters, to be treated as confidential, four being official complaints. All of these have been/are being addressed. LR stated he would like to hear Board members views on the validity or otherwise of the comments.

The first response had been issued to the Board, to be treated as confidential, prior to the meeting and due to the similarity of the complaints could be considered as a template for the other responses. The Board were satisfied with the response letter.

Q Could the formal procedure be explained for the minutes?

A Stage 1 of a complaint is dealt with by the River Director and the Clerk to the Board.
Stage 2, if required, is responded to by the Board.
The Dee DSFB's complaints procedure can be found on the website.

Q As the complaints were all similar in nature should we add a FAQ section on the website?

A This was agreed by the Board and a section on the website will be created.

Q Would it be better to meet with the complainants face to face?

A We have already met with some of the complainants, some more than just once.

Q Should the Board look into legal advice on matters that might be classed as "vexatious", as other Boards have done and then amend the procedure accordingly.

A The Board will look into this.

The DSFIA has also received letters and their committee will be discussing them next week.

LR thanked the Board members for their comments.

The next meeting of the Dee DSFB will be on 28th September 2023 at 17:00, Banchory Lodge Hotel, followed by the AGM/APM at 19:00.



Signed.....

Lawrence Ross, Chairman

26/07/23

Date.....