



MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Deeside Rugby Pavilion and Teams, Banchory
10am, Thursday 12th December 2024

Present:

Qualified proprietors:

Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman
Paul Adderton, (PA)
Ian Taylor, (IT)
Jeremy Clayton, (JC)
Edward Humphrey, (EH)
Scott Rutherford, (SR)
Tara Spiers, (TS)
Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO), by Teams, left at 11:55am

Co-optee:

Martin Gardner, (MG), by Teams

Invitees:

Ali McEwan, (AM) – Ghillies Representative

In attendance:

Lorraine Hawkins, (LH)
Carol Mair, (CM)
Edwin Third, (ET)
Joe Whyte, (JAW)

Apologies:

Victor Beamish (VB)
Andy Ford, (AF) - CNPA
Isla Martin, (IM) – NatureScot
Craig Stewart, (CS) – Aberdeenshire Council
Mike Wilson, (MW)
John Wilson, (JW)

Members of public:

None

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 and Invitees would be asked to leave.

1. Apologies

Apologies as noted above.

2. Chair's Introduction

LR welcomed IT from the Port of Aberdeen to the meeting, who was mandated for JW.

Restoration activity has been full steam ahead in the autumn. The Cattie project is now complete, and we have been awarded grants for further works next year – we'll give more detail later. We have also successfully installed over one hundred LWS in the upper Dee as an NRF funded project.

Not everyone is a fan of LWS. Last weekend the environmental magazine 'The Conversation' published an article by Dr Chris Soulsby on possible detrimental effects of Large Woody Structures. The BBC got the story and approached the River Office (Trust) for comment. Lorraine (who was interviewed), Debbie and Sandy responded quickly. The story got limited coverage it was crowded out by bigger global events. Soulsby has been a regular critic of LWS but interestingly he now acknowledges that they have benefits, but he doesn't like fixed position ones. Last year, a scientific paper was published stating that mobile wood might be more beneficial. Our response to Soulsby's article was to acknowledge that it would be good to have more evidence on the whole subject but meantime, we have evidence that what we do is beneficial to fish and all our work is thoroughly scrutinised by the relevant authorities.

In the past few months, we have had several events for proprietor benefit starting with the AGM and followed by a joint tourism event with Visit Aberdeenshire and Visit Scotland and then a trip to Stirling University to discuss the StS work. Combined with weekly reports, the StS newsletter, a new monthly newsletter that is being introduced and our myriad of digital media posts, we are putting out plenty of information for anyone who wants to receive it.

Those of you who follow activities at FMS may have noticed that EH is joining that Board. LH has been on the Board for two terms and must now stand down. FMS was keen to have some Dee representation although this is not mandatory and was looking for a certain skill set – someone with experience of land and estate management which of course EH has. We wish him well in the role.

We are more than halfway through the closed season, so thoughts are turning to the Opening Ceremony on 1st February. We plan to repeat last year's lower key but no less successful format.

Finally, I want to report on my annual redd observation day. Conditions for seeing fish and redds were perfect unlike last year when there was a lot of water, so observation was tricky. Even adjusting for the different conditions, 2024 looks like a decent improvement in 2023 which itself was 'average plus'. I have heard others make similar comment.

3. Minutes and Matters Arising from meeting on 26th September 2024

Minutes of the meeting 26th September 2024

The minutes of the last meeting have been circulated, approved and published.

Matters Arising

MW was to produce a paper on the marine environment. He has begun this work but is away for this meeting, so it will be carried forward to the next one.

Action: MW

CM and LR have reviewed the Board's ability to put more money on deposit. Currently we have £6,000 on a three-month term. We feel we can up this to £50,000 which we will do in January. We will also open a general savings account which offers a smaller interest rate and instant access which gives us flexibility in managing working capital movements.

JC suggested to look at a company called Flagstone for the deposit. It's 4.5% on an instant withdrawal, can have up to £80,000 per account. The Board agreed to look into this.

Action: LR/CM

EH confirmed that Fishpal can do multiple bookings.

4. Finance

a. Financial update to 31st October 2024

Income

LH informed the Board that the contract income as shown in the budget is on track and will be received by the end of the year.

Total income as of 31st October was £643,321.

Expenditure

LH informed the Board we are over budget on the habitat restoration and maintenance work due to some large maintenance jobs including replacing fencing at the Clunie and a new water gate.

The vehicle leasing is finalised for January, the delay has caused our vehicle maintenance costs to be higher than expected, although this is more than offset by the lack of leasing costs.

Total expenditure as of 31st October was £541,836.

Cash in bank as of yesterday was £203,206.

In discussion, it was explained that infrastructure maintenance is not applicable for project funding. We do reclaim partial FGS management payments where we have an agreement with the landowner to deliver the maintenance.

CM Reminders for any outstanding assessments will be going out today.

The minimum wage increase next year will not impact on budget but the National Insurance rise will do.

Property maintenance work was done in late summer. Further maintenance is expected next year for the Charlton Crescent property.

EH raised at the last DSFIA meeting there was concern on the level of the assessment. JC was asked to draft a letter to LR so that it is continued to be talked about, as members have suggestions to put forward. One member wished to know what happens to the grant funding and whether the Board could do 90% of its work with half of the current assessment.

Action: JC

EH will chase Alan Wells regarding an FMS workstream looking at alternative funding methods to the assessment.

Action: EH

b. Projects & Contracts

There is extra restoration work at Glen Dye with Aviva, which requires ET to support. We will get recompense for this.

The Cattie project has been completed and the LWS work in the upper Dee is over half done this year, will be completed next year.

The Mar Lodge flood plain work is underway, the groundwork will begin next year.

We have received a grant from the Open Rivers Programme for 99,000 euros for creating the designs to remove the Culter dam. We will look to employ a Culter project officer if we can raise the funding.

5. Save the Spring

We have applied for £194,000 to deliver LiDAR surveys over the upper catchment to help with flow modelling and planning restoration works. The total cost is £380,000, CNPA has offered funding but we still need to raise £63,000. We have also applied for funding from the Bently Foundation.

The Dee Resilience Strategy, lead by CNPA, needs a project co-ordinator to take it forward. The Dee is one of two areas in Scotland selected for developing climate resilience strategies, this should help StS and the Resilience Strategy.

A management plan is in place, a steering committee has been made up with LR, Sandy Bremner, LH, Asghar Fazel and Mark Bilsby. A scientific advisory group is being set up to put Save the Spring on an international stage, this group currently consists of 8 international members, the first meeting of this group is set for the spring.

We had 23 people join our visit to Stirling, the trip was beneficial to those unsure about the work. 81 fish still remain in the programme and it's believed that some will be ready for spawning next year. They will be radio tracked to follow their movements.

There is an upcoming event at the Fife Arms in March for landowners and key funders to Save the Spring. This will be followed by another stakeholder event aimed at the public.

The Wild Salmon Connections conference will be in London next year. This will be a key opportunity to garner support for Save the Spring.

To measure the success of the project, DNA information will be collected so that we can identify offspring of released fish in the future. In the first year, we will determine with radio tracking whether fish remain in the River Muick after being released, or if they stray.

We do not know yet how many will mature in 2025; all matured fish will be released in order to replicate natural spawning. If they don't mature, they will be kept for another year. Genetic screening was done and we will be looking for evidence of genetics impacting age at maturity.

It was suggested to get in touch with the Fly-Fishing Club for possible funding. Funding is a significant challenge.

6. Fish Dee

FishDee has taken just over £187,000 in 2024 compared to £183,283 in 2023, with the total number of bookings for 2024 being 1005. So, despite catch levels, there are still anglers wanting to come to the Dee. 6-day parties are diminishing, so every beat has to look at how it can attract, and deal with, the 1, 2 and 3-day bookings. The market has changed.

Driving down the price does not help, anglers are actually put off by cheap deals.

Only 9 beats out of the 31 are currently showing availability for 2025, we must encourage more to do so before the Christmas break. February, March and April have seen an even number of bookings between them but also May, June and October.

We have an impasse currently with the weekly reports currently compiled by Debbie. Virtually no ghillies send or contact Debbie with information so she has to resort to looking at beats' own social media pages or rely on the very few who do send her information. The weekly report is the best method for us to reach our angling audience, so it makes no sense not to be utilising it.

EH and LH met with AM about this issue. There doesn't seem to be an easy answer but it was agreed that this issue needs a reset by all parties.

Agreed that EH, on behalf of DSFIA, would write to proprietors to encourage the ghillies to contribute. In the event that beats continued to not provide information then it was suggested that the 9 proprietors sitting on the Board each have 3-4 beats assigned to them to call the proprietor to request the message is enforced.

Action: EH

The Board agreed that the DSFB should provide pro-formas to all ghillies at the start of the season for them to fill in at their leisure prior to the fishing report information being required on the Monday morning. The proformas would be paper copies, the ghillies would take a photo of it after they fill it in and send the photo to Debbie.

Action: Debbie

7. River Report

The River Report was distributed to the Board members and invitees prior to the meeting.

ET informed the Board there are 11-12 projects coming next year. We have been fortunate this year as we have been 100% successful with all of our NRF funding requests, which is not an easy feat.

The Muick had its best year since the fish counter was placed in the river in 2018 with 65 salmon recorded. Last year there was only 11. Some were spotted using the LWS.

A report on water quality by the James Hutton Institute is expected once the work is done, they are looking for forever chemicals in salmon samples that we are providing.

We have got a platform with the Dee Resilience Group to raise issues on water quality, this group includes Scottish Water and SEPA.

AM had previously sent the River Office photos of a filamentous growth on the river substrate that was of concern. The photos were shared with an expert who formerly worked for SEPA. It was considered that it was most likely dead algae, but they have offered to look at samples if any are collected in the future. Discussed whether the DSFB could take samples if concerned about water quality in the future and it was accepted that an accredited lab would be required for SEPA to acknowledge the results.

The Board also discussed the sampling kits readily available from the Smart Rivers Programme, and how joining it may be a possibility to gain access to these kits, however, this is a costly programme but there is some sampling already underway by others on the Dee.

It was confirmed that we are building a seal ID database, SMRU have offered to share their database but have said it will take a while to provide.

There was discussion on the North Esk's use of an acoustic seal deterrent. There was concern it would only work for new seals to the river, not the repeat visitors, which is the issue the Dee has.

8. FMP Update

LH informed the Board we are 80% of the way through the plan, and it is going well. Most directional action is still ongoing, some moving slowly. Given where we are currently, the reality is there is a remote chance of low priority things getting completed.

It was suggested that application of fertilisers in low nutrient areas could be tried to improve the nutrient levels. ET highlighted that there was no observed increase in nutrient numbers when we placed deer legs into the river, and a full restoration plan is underway through Save the Spring. We need to address the source of the problem.

LH stated that we are currently at capacity and cannot take on another work stream, particularly one that is so experimental. It is still an option, but for now we have to work on what we know works.

9. Ghillies Representative

There was nothing else of note as AM's comments and questions had been covered in prior agenda items.

10. 2025 meeting dates

Dee DSFB Meeting Dates

20th March 2025

3rd July 2025

25th September 2025

11th December 2025

AGM/APM

29th October

Triennial

29th August

11. AOB

There was a question for the Board from Richard Holman Baird from Rickarton, regarding beavers, and how all the tree planting would be pointless if the beavers were to return. LH had previously requested that IM and AF respond to this question. Their written responses would be shared with the Board.

Action: LH

LH informed the Board that while we do need to prepare for native species returning to the river, currently the habitat is not fit for beavers.

There were more concerns about the Girnock fish trap. The evidence and data collected points to it being a barrier, with large differences in fish numbers when comparing below and above the trap. We presented this data to the Government, and they spent months only to end up rejecting our proposals, believing the trap serves national importance. We have yet another year of strong evidence collected, and only a single female returned to the Girnock Burn this season, so we will be going back to Scottish Government. All the evidence points to the trap being an obstacle. ET points out that the Girnock is not a reflection of fish numbers, just that the trap is having a negative impact.

The meeting concluded at 12:09pm

The next meeting is 20th March, venue to be decided.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L Ross', is positioned above the signature line.

Signed.....

Lawrence Ross, Chairman

Date 22.01.2025.....