



MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

Deeside Rugby Pavilion and Teams, Banchory

10am, Thursday 20th March 2025

Present:

Qualified proprietors: Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman
Paul Adderton, (PA)
Victor Beamish, (VB)
Jeremy Clayton, (JC)
Scott Rutherford, (SR)
Tara Spiers, (TS)
Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO), by Teams
Mike Wilson, (MW)

Co-optee: Martin Gardner, (MG)

Invitees: Robert Harper, (RG) – Ghillies Representative
Craig Stewart, (CS) – Aberdeenshire Council Representative

In attendance: Debbie Cooper (DC)
Lorraine Hawkins, (LH)
Carol Mair, (CM)
Edwin Third, (ET)
Joe Whyte, (JAW)

Apologies: Andy Ford, (AF) - CNPA
Edward Humphrey, (EH)
Isla Martin, (IM) – NatureScot
Ali McEwan, (AM) – Ghillies Representative
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. RG was mandated as Ghillies Representative in place of AM.

2. Chair's Introduction

We had a successful opening ceremony including a moving address from Robert Harper. Catches in February saw a welcome numerical improvement on last year, but this has not been sustained in March probably as a consequence of low water flows. We need some rain.

Talking of fish numbers leads me on to the recent publication of the analysis of the hatchery work undertaken by Bob Kindness on the River Carron. This produced some good pointers for best practice when using a hatchery, but it did not

give a green light to using hatcheries to enhance wild populations. Unfortunately, the press release, enthusing about returning fish, resulted in some people, understandably perhaps, reaching the erroneous conclusion that it was all go for hatcheries. However, if you read the report, it is clear that for rivers like the Dee with an existing albeit low wild population, hatcheries are likely to be damaging. This was said at the meeting. I was at the presentation in Edinburgh. Bob admitted that if he stopped stocking fish then numbers would fall so he has not fixed the fundamental problem which in the case of the Carron is, in Bob's view, consistent redd wash out most likely occasioned by climate change.

Again, on fish numbers, I would draw your attention to two recent RDT publications relating to data from 2024. The first concerns the fish counter on the Muick and the second the results of the juvenile surveys. The Muick report is very encouraging, it shows we are having an impact. The juvenile survey shows the usual bag of mixed results ranging from very good areas to very poor ones and what seems to me to be a recurring mystery of sometimes quite heavy losses from fry to parr, and the Dee is not alone in this. Understanding this issue might be very helpful to our habitat improvement works.

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

Minutes of the meeting 12th December 2024

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

Matters Arising

- MW has requested the Marine Environment paper be pushed forward to the next meeting.
- We will shortly move £63,000 to a Business Cash Management Account with Virgin Money. The interest rate is only 1.25%, but it affords maximum flexibility of cash movement. We researched other options as suggested at the last meeting, but they were unable to offer us anything as non-governmental statutory bodies are too challenging to open accounts for!
- Regarding the DSFIA's concern over assessment level, JC and LR have exchanged correspondence which covered the issue of the FMS workstream.
- EH and DC have enacted the suggestions to improve information gathering for the weekly fishing report.
- PA asked for an update on the release of James Hutton Institute's (JHI) report on chemical pollutants in the Dee and whether it could be expanded to all invertebrates. It was clarified that JHI provides us with an informal report/update on the results of the samples we provide, but the full reporting is part of their research programme.

4. Finance

a. Predicted Outturn to 31st March 2025

Income

- We budgeted for a loss of £8,000 but are predicted to reach a £55,000 surplus, an improvement of £63,000.
- The challenge was budgeting for project income. We budgeted cautiously as the money is competitively achieved.
- Our current budget has a surplus of £68,000 for projects, but since sending this out there is an extra £34,000 of project income that has been predicted, so the new budgeted surplus is £108,000. Added to this £40,000 improvement were savings on our staff costs of £8,000, property maintenance costs of £10,000, and a mix of other, smaller expenses totalling £5,000.

Expenditure

- The leasing costs include the deposits paid on the 2 vehicles which the accountant shall spread over the full five-year term of the lease.
- Overall, we ended close to expectations. Even in the leasing costs we end up where we expected once all the final calculations are done.
- Cash in bank as of yesterday was £178,055.

- The quote for 2 general-purpose vehicles including within the leasing plan had doubled since we last looked, so we have rejected it. We are looking at options, including electric vehicles.

b. Draft Budget 2025-26

- Leasing costs include the deposits for the three vehicles, this expenditure will become what we expect once the accountant spreads these costs out over the term of the lease.
- We are currently showing a deficit of £23,000. However, with the sales of our fleet, this deficit should be reduced to under £10,000.
- We were tasked with optimising our third-party funding to ease the pressure on the assessment. This budget shows we have succeeded in this. 45% of the staff costs here are covered by third-party funds we have received for that purpose.
- The funding for the Culter Restoration project comes from both the NRF funding and the Open Rivers Programme. Both projects begin on 1st April, and contractors are being met this week.
- Rent hasn't increased on Board properties due to the need to create new tenancy agreements. We are looking at increasing rent depending on Mackinnon's valuations, but this hasn't been budgeted for.
- It was suggested to accrue 15% of the rent income received and create a 'repair fund' so a year with high expenditure on property maintenance wouldn't affect the accounts. This would lower the profit received on the rent by approximately £3,500. CM is to check with the accountant to see if we can have accrued reserves for maintenance.

Action: CM

- It was asked if we could get further sponsorship for the river opening to try and break even. We only received £500 for this year, but it cost £3,000. Though the cost has come down in recent years, LH asked the Board to try and find someone who could help with sponsorship.

Action: LH, DC

- The costs for advertising in the newspaper for the AGM & APM has been removed entirely. We checked with Fish Legal, and we do not need to advertise in the newspaper, saving approximately £900.
- The budget was accepted unanimously.

c. Projects & Contracts

- Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful with our NRF application for £194,000 for the catchment audit. However, CNPA may be able to assist with finding government funding for this work. We are also looking at cheaper methods (than full-coverage LiDAR) to undertake the catchment audit.

5. Triennial Elections

- The Triennial this year shall take place on 29th August. The dates for the election creep forward, as the Triennial must be held before the end of the three years. The Board was asked to consider a shorter period for the next sitting Board so that the date gets pulled back towards the end of the calendar year in future.

The Board discussed the following.

- The Board agreed on keeping the same size for the new Board, 2 lower proprietors, 8 upper proprietors and 1 co-opted member.
- The nomination forms will be issued by email on 30th June, for return by 17:00 on 25th July. Forms received afterwards will not be counted.
- The voting forms will be issued by email on 31st July, for return by 17:00 on 28th August. Forms received afterwards will not be counted.
- As the votes will be counted on the day prior to the meeting, the Board were asked by the Clerk for approval to hold the meeting by Teams. This has the benefits of not needing to hire a room for a short meeting and save proprietors time travelling to just hear the results. This has also been checked with Fish Legal and the Marine Directorate, who had no problem with this option.
- Unfortunately, the Triennial, according to statute, must be advertised to "give notice at least once in each of two successive weeks by advertising in a newspaper circulating in the district of the date, time and place of the

meeting". In 2022, we used the Press & Journal, this cost £757.44. The Clerk asked the Board if they had any suggestions other than the P&J for a less costly yet still suitable newspaper. The Deeside Piper was suggested and while prior they were too costly, they are now under new management. DC is to put CM in contact with the Deeside Piper.

Action: DC, CM

The Board unanimously approved the above.

6. Save the Spring

LH presented updates on the seven work packages that make up StS.

WP1 – Habitat Restoration

We have the catchment audit planned, and in addition, practical works in preparation:

- 70 LWS to install along the Muick.
- Working with Abergeldie Estate to repair the Ey Gorge.
- The Muick catchment work (when confirmed with funding).
- Reconnecting the Mar Flood Plain.

WP2 – Conservation Translocation

- We still have 80 fish, no more have been lost in the last few months, the biggest weighing 3lb. A good proportion of these fish will be ready for release this year – around August, we will be opening the Mill Lade on the Muick for this and have ordered radio tagging equipment to track them.
- Ultrasounds will be carried out, as well as genetic tests, on the fish to check whether they are ready for spawning.
- We are aiming to do the same this year and collect 100 smolts from the Muick. We have signed a new agreement with the University of Stirling (UoS) for this second batch of fish. We cannot exceed the 100 smolts as we haven't got a licence for it, and we are being cautious as per government advice whilst we await their stocking policy.
- UoS has constructed two new tanks for the second batch of fish.
- The Board discussed where we would like to take the smolts from after the Muick, as we must find a new location after 3 years. The Girnock was mentioned as a tributary in need of critical help.
- It was agreed that to lower risk to the released fish, no social media posts will be made initially after release.

WP3 – Marine Transition

This work is to identify the pressures facing salmon in the transition zones at sea. We will shortly be advertising for a contractor to carry out a 3-month research study to identify help understand impacts in this zone and develop ideas for further research.

WP4 – Monitoring

Nothing to report – in progress.

WP5 – Communications

- We have a monthly newsletter that had taken a break in January and February, however the March one is due to release next week.
- A leaflet summarising StS progress has been created and will feature at the Fife Arms event tonight.
- StS was also presented at the Wild Salmon Connections conference and will also be shown at the River Restoration Centre conference coming up soon. The BBC are also coming up to cover some of the work that has been done.
- Communications this year will target politicians and key policy makers.

WP6 – Stakeholder Engagement

- There is an event at Milton of Crathes on the 12th /13th April, we have been invited to participate. We have accepted and will have stand/activities.
- The Scientific Advisory Group will be having its first meeting in April by Teams, and an in person meeting later this year.
- We are developing a series of community events to increase our engagement with local communities, inspired by the Findhorn Watershed Initiative.

- The Fife Arms event tonight is aimed at engaging landowners and potential fundraisers to get them on board with Save the Spring.

WP7 – Fundraising

- We received £200,000 from the Bently Foundation, ringfenced for the habitat restoration work, with an offer to apply for more.
- AST are developing a fundraising strategy, but in the meantime we are still looking at grants to apply for. There is an ongoing requirement to raise funds.
- JC asked LR for an update of the StS brochure he was working on. It is still being worked on, everything it needs is present, it just needs to be written correctly. The composition of the funding wording is to be determined.
- It was suggested to address some of the brochures and leaflets to the Salmon Club.

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

- The Memorandum of Understanding between AST, RDT and DDSFB was distributed prior to the meeting. JC had suggested some minor amendments to the draft such that all parties should give one year's notice (rather than six months) for withdrawal, and not before the third anniversary of signature. The Board agreed with this amendment and authorised LR to sign the MoU..

7. FishDee

EH was not present to provide an update in this meeting.

8. River Report

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

- ET informed the Board of the Culter drop-in event on 17th February. Local residents had concerns regarding flooding, which ET explained would not be affected by the removal of the dam. Removing the dam would also remove the possibility of the dam collapsing, which otherwise would be catastrophic, and we will be evaluating the impact of sediment redistribution. This is all part of a feasibility study which will determine if dam removal should be carried out.
- Since this event, ET has seen a couple of the more concerned individuals in 1-to-1 meetings.
- We have recently received all the permissions we require from NatureScot to reopen the Ey. It is a low-cost job that would open up 6km of the river.
- Fish handling by anglers is still an issue. An email had been sent out to both proprietors and ghillies sharing FMS' advice on the matter. The biggest issue seems to be the more experienced anglers who are not hearing or taking onboard the advice.

RH informed the Board that at a multi-agency meeting last year, which RH, LH and LR attended, there was supposed to be a plan put in place to deal with the seal problem in the river. All agencies present - FMS, NatureScot, the Marine Directorate and Marine Scotland Science - were asked to come up with plans before October 2024, and none did. He asked the Board what the plan was going forward, has there been any communications?

- LR raised this issue again at the 'big four' meeting, but no one wants to pick up the responsibilities that come with trying to deal with this. LR is considering going back to Mairi Gougeon before she leaves to ask her for funding if she wishes to do something, a portcullis, for example, as we have a unique situation with a very narrow exit.
- The Scottish Gamekeepers Association (SGA) asked to meet with Mairi Gougeon with the Marine Directorate to discuss the seal problem. The SGA had repeated to them what they were told a year ago, late minutes were acknowledged. The Board shouldn't accept this, we are being strung along as government are closing doors.
- RH was informed at the Pitlochry meeting that lethal control was not off the table. LR is to meet with LH and RH to discuss this further.

Action: LR, LH, RH

The Board discussed the ways to stop seals entering the river. The idea of a portcullis was brought up again, as was use of a net.

- RH explained that we have a common seal in the river that has been a regular for over 10 years and another for over 15 years. It's the same 6-7 seals. Common seal numbers are low on the east coast, but not on the west coast, the restrictions on seals don't make sense.
- ET added that in the past a seal was moved up to Orkney but within a fortnight it was back.
- When it comes to advocating for seal control, we have spent millions doing all of this habitat restoration work to protect salmon, but it doesn't take long for the seals to destroy our efforts.

9. Ghillies Representative

RH had spoken about seals under that section of the River Report, and no prior comments had been passed to him for the meeting.

10. AOB

RH asked we don't discard the idea of stocking, and we keep it in mind if the tributaries could benefit from it. There were parallels drawn to the conservation translocation work we are doing with StS. ET suggests we target removing instability in the river and tackle the core problems to fix things long term. LR raised that the Spey have said stocking doesn't help the situation at all.

The meeting concluded at 11:53am.

The next meeting will be 10:00am on 3rd July, at the Banchory Rugby Club.



Signed.....
Lawrence Ross, Chairman

Date 06/05/2025.....