



MEETING OF THE DEE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
Deeside Rugby Pavilion and Teams, Banchory
10am, Thursday 11th December 2025

Present:

Qualified proprietors: Lawrence Ross, (LR) Chairman
Victor Beamish, (VB)
Jeremy Clayton, (JC)
William Foster, (WF)
Edward Humphrey, (EH)
Scott Rutherford, (SR)
Bob Sanguinetti, (BS)
Andrew Walker-Okeover, (AWO)

Co-optee: Martin Gardner, (MG)

Invitees: Ali McEwan, (AM) – Gillies Representative

In attendance: Lorraine Hawkins, (LH)
Debbie Cooper, (DC)
Carol Mair, (CM), Clerk to the Board
Edwin Third, (ET)
Joe Whyte, (JW)

Apologies: Paul Adderton, (PA)
Andy Ford, (AF) - CNPA
Isla Martin, (IM) – NatureScot

Members of public: None.

The Board were reminded of their responsibilities to the Dee DSFB and to state whether they had any declarable interest 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

Since our last meeting, Lorraine & I met with the DSFIA Standing Committee to give more detail in response to the exchange of correspondence discussed at the last meeting.

The AGM/APM was held on 29th October. The meeting was well attended. As ever, questions were dominated by the issue of combating seal predation. Detail on current progress with this issue will be discussed at item 7 on the agenda.

Fisheries Management Scotland (FMS) held its AGM on 19th November. Lorraine and I attended virtually. If anyone wants to know more about what FMS does then just tell Lorraine and she will get you signed up to the newsletters. The FMS Governance Framework has now been published. You will be sent a copy after this meeting.

Lorraine and I also met recently with the other Big Rivers. These sessions have no formal business and are designed to raise awareness and understanding of common issues and avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. We are aligned in our frustration at the slow progress concerning the implementation of the Wild Salmon Strategy. We know that FMS understands this concern but as our primary conduit with Government it does need to be constantly reminded of this. The message has been delivered.

The Dee Resilience Strategy Group met on Monday of this week. Lorraine, Sandy and I were there representing the Board and Trust. This grouping, led by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA), consists of organisations – private and public (including Scottish Water) - that have an interest in addressing the valley's water scarcity problem. There is unanimous agreement on the problem and the need to do something about it. The group's task is to see that things get done and the participants all pull in the same direction. The work that we, Board and Trust, are carrying out routinely along with the Save the Spring programme is an important part of the whole challenge.

The Fisheries Management Plan process is running a little behind time but we hope to have the big picture and the questionnaire for Proprietors issued before Christmas.

3. Minutes and Matters Arising from meeting on 25th September 2025

Minutes of the meeting 25th September 2025

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

Matters Arising

There was one action noted which was JC had asked LH to calculate the effect of a smaller fish size on the number of eggs introduced into the river. LH explained that the typical fish weighs around 4lbs, which is double ours. There are an estimated 60,000 eggs that were introduced to the river from the returned fish, so if our fish were of the typical weight, this would double to 120,000 eggs. The diet will be altered for the next cohort of fish to see if it affects maturation and the weight of the fish.

4. Finance

a. Financial Update to 31st October 2025

Income

- Project funding is on track with grant claims still to be made to offset the expenses.
- 23 Charlton Crescent's rent is lower than expected due to the tenants moving out.
- £25,000 of the £63,000 of Contract income is at risk unless StS funds are raised this year. The restrictions placed on the funding so far received for StS means that certain work packages are not yet funded.
- The assessment income is on track to be received by the end of the financial year. Some payments appear to be outstanding but this is due to some proprietors agreeing to pay it off monthly.
- Total income to 31st October is £610,342.
- A suggestion was made to have a flyer created and placed in all of the fishing huts, asking anglers to each donate £5 to help raise StS funds. A QR code is set up on brochures that DC had already distributed to all beats' fishing huts.

Action: DC

Expenditure

- Staff costs are lower than predicted due to Jamie leaving, followed by a gap before the Fisheries Manager started.
- Policing costs are also lower due to FMS providing the policing team with equipment consisting of a new drone and night vision gear.
- Due to the delay in receiving the new leased vehicles (hence leasing costs are much lower), vehicle maintenance costs have increased.

- The remainder of the expenditure is on track.
- Total expenditure to 31st October is £604,932.

Cash in bank as of yesterday was £144,587 in the current account and £100,260 in the cash management account.

Due to the nature of the Board – a Non-governmental Statutory Body – there are difficulties with opening bank accounts, so the cash management account was opened to gain interest and keep instant access to our money.

b. Projects & Contracts

- The catchment audit will commence for StS through the Trust using the CNPA funding of £145,000. NatureScot will also be giving a further £10,000 to the Trust support the audit.
- The Nature Restoration Fund (NRF) and Open Rivers Programme are funding the Culter Development projects.
- Over 3 summers the habitat team have worked on, and recently completed, the Upper Dee LWS project - also NRF funded. More funding from NRF has been applied for to fund a smaller Muick restoration project.
- With grant funded projects, the Board pay the costs up front and then claim the money back at the end of each 3-month period. If the cost of an invoice for this work is over £15,000, it requires the approval of both the Chairman and a Board member, which is why the Board occasionally receives emails from LH asking for approval for a payment. If there are ever any questions regarding the work when these emails are received, Board members are encouraged to ask them.
- Bank statements go to PA at the beginning of each month. If he has any questions he can revert to the River Office for explanation.
- The Dee is expected to do better acquiring government funding due to the river being one of the priority catchments ('pioneers') designated by the government, along with the South Esk, for agencies working collaboratively.

5. Save the Spring (StS)

Conservation Translocation

- 75 fish have been returned to the Muick. This will introduce an estimated 60,000 eggs to the river. It is thought these fish matured later in the season than the spawning wild fish as they appeared lighter in colour.
- 48 of these fish were radio tagged and 47 of them were successfully tracked. Of these 47, 2 dropped into the main stem of the river while another 2 returned to the Muick. Some were seen at spawning gravels and around wild fish, but this is all still anecdotal evidence. 1 female kelt was found dead in a tributary and 1 was killed by an otter. It is unknown if the lighter colour of the fish made it more vulnerable to predation. Autopsies will be done over the winter. This first year of the programme has addressed a lot of questions, but a lot more remain to be answered to understand whether this is an appropriate tool for restoring populations.
- Funding for genetic sampling the fry next year is being looked at, or alternatively, waiting 2.5 years to sample kelts.
- Another 100 fish were taken to Machrihanish this year. 2 of these 100 have eye issues and are being treated. These fish will have a different diet to the previous batch (relating to lipid content to influence maturation rate), as suggested by Campbell Pert at the AGM in October.
- 4 fish from the initial batch hadn't matured and were held back, though they were placed into a separate tank from the new batch.
- It was asked if there was anything to learn from the size of the fish being smaller. The Lochy had released 6lb fish that were kept for 2 years so they matured slower. The Lochy has apparently been releasing a lot more fish. LH explained that as the Lochy isn't an SAC river, they are not regulated by NatureScot like the Dee is, so their Fishery Board determines what is done. We can collect a maximum of 100 smolts per year. The Lochy also hasn't shared results nor provided genetic evidence of whether their programme is working. The Dee will be the first to actually verify its impact with genetic testing. Assuming our work is successful, then we will want to expand its application, however, the evidence isn't there yet to support this.
- Genetic sampling of fry next summer would give us an earlier indication of spawning success, but this requires money to do so, around £30 per fish.
- To reach a wider audience, DC will have an editorial piece put into Trout and Salmon magazine.

Action: DC

- It was suggested that a smaller fish is held back to check the egg numbers, to see if the smaller fish are producing considerably less eggs per pound. In theory this is possible, however, the project team agreed it was not justifiable to kill healthy fish and we also have to work within the university's fish welfare regulations. Though the viability of stripping a fish and placing it back in captivity for another year is also possible, this defeats the purpose of the programme and the conservation translocation approach.

Habitat Restoration

- The catchment audit and restoration plan is currently with contractors and good progress has been made.
- The draft plan is expected by end of February. Once completed, it will be taken to stakeholders and landowners for their suggestions.
- AWO raised that conservation credits, both perceived and actual biodiversity net gain, that landowners would benefit from by supporting our habitat restoration plan would make them more willing to participate. However, projects like fencing could conflict with those who deal in deer welfare and management by hindering free movement. Hopefully the benefits will outweigh the potential downsides, and the plan can be sold to landowners.

Communications

- LH is focused on political engagement to provide incentives for StS support other than just goodwill.
- True North have helped with political lobbying and awareness raising.
- LH met with Gillian Martin, MSP. We discussed the conflicting advice being given out by different government agencies on a range of issues. She was enthusiastic and invited us to request a formal meeting with her; this has been done.
- We also met with Tim Eagle MSP who was enthusiastic about our work and asked to be kept up to date. We will also be meeting Alexander Burnett MSP.
- We hope to hold a stand at Holyrood next year, with the backing of an MSP.

Fundraising

- The shortfall of funds is £136,000 for the end of the financial year, big grant-giving Trusts are being looked at for this.
- SR suggested at £30 per fish for the genetic sampling, anglers could be targeted if there was a set total to aim for.
- The 'Sponsor a smolt' programme next year will target a higher amount of smaller donations
- Our biggest concern is getting buy-in and support from landowners. Some estates are more interested than others, some just wish to carry on as normal. One major estate said they are waiting for the completion of the catchment audit first.

6. FishDee

- DC is working on populating FishDee for the coming year. Beats are encouraged to update their information and add video to their pages. DC can also support beats with their social media presence if they require it.
- There has been 868 bookings this year, compared to the 979 of last year, and 1,614 rod bookings, compared to the previous year's 1,814. Conditions of the river this year definitely had an impact on bookings.
- A new app is also being created with an updated accommodation feature. This will allow individual fish reporting as well, the catch info will be able to be sent directly to us and the Marine Directorate.

7. River Report

- The River Report was taken as read.
- ET noted quick successes from habitat restoration work on the Muick: A side channel in the Muick was re-opened in September, and by November fish were spotted spawning there. Additionally, an opened side channel from 4 years ago was recently augmented with 40 tonnes of gravel. The gravel was distributed around by the recent flooding and now has fish spawning there too. Electrofishing will be done next year at these sites to see if any of the young survived.

- CBEC Eco Engineering was consulted when opening these side channels and the work was done following topographic designs so that these channels won't dry out in low flow.
- There are many more side channels still to be re-opened, these can be identified from looking at old maps. The biggest challenge is to get support from farmers and landowners.
- There is no estimate for when the Seal Marksman course will be held and this will affect the ability to execute the licence.
- LH shared preliminary results from the Seal Mammal Research Unit's (SMRU) second year of 'detect & deter' trial on the North Esk. The full report is awaiting publication and is currently being reviewed by Government. It showed a 92% reduction in seal incursions during the night and an 89% reduction in the day. SMRU will be up next week with the 2 sonar systems to begin the Dee trials.
- Assuming the 'detect' trial goes well, the 'deter' part of the programme will take place next year (likely Autumn to Winter). Funding is needed for this. SMRU received £160,000 for the current detect trial – approx. a third of this was for equipment and the rest for staff time. Due to the importance of SMRU continuing this work without a hiatus, if finances become a pinch point then beat-owners will be contacted to see if financial support can be raised.
- There was discussion on the efficacy of seal patrols by the bailiffs during this period before the deter system is in place. Ultimately, while seal patrols are a focus for the bailiffs now that other tasks are completed, this is not effective in deterring seals, they only move a small distance, and most incursions occur at night when no one is there.
- LH will send out the publication of the first trial on the North Esk, which will highlight the width of the river section in question as well as success rate of the deter system.

Action: LH

8. Opening Ceremony

- The opening ceremony this year will take place on 2nd February at Milton of Crathes.
- Email invites will be sent out in early January.
- There were a low number of entries for the youth competitions, though this is expected due to the lower fishing effort this year and the prolonged period of low water and high heat. DC will be looking through previous fishing reports to see if any further entries can be found. If the Board know of any potential entries, please let DC know.

9. Ghillies Representative

AM requested to be appointed as a voting Board member. This was not allowed under the statute as Board members consist of Qualified Proprietors, or their mandatory, voted to the Board at each Triennial. They can choose to co-opt an Angling Representative and/or a Tenant netsman onto the Board. However, the statute does not allow for any other Board members.

10. 2026 Meeting Dates

- The meeting dates for 2026 are as follows;
 - Thursday 26th March
 - Thursday 9th July
 - Thursday 24th September
 - Thursday 10th December
- The AGM & APM will be on Tuesday 27th October.

11. AOB

- Quotes have been received for improvements that could be made to 23 Charlton Crescent if the Board wishes to rent it out again. It would be approximately £15,000 to upgrade the property, and rent would be priced at £800 per month. This would generate £9,600 per year, 9.5% of the capital employed.
- If the Board were to sell, the price of sale would be £180,000, so approximately £175,000 would be received. The Board is not short of cash but will need capital on hand.

- After discussion, it was agreed that LR will send out the information to the Board members to consider their decision, which will include the Board member not present at the meeting. All Board members were requested to return their vote by Friday 19th December.

Action LR

- The creation of new websites for the Board and Trust are underway.
- There was further discussion on predation – it was suggested that seals be tagged and taken to Moray Coast. However, other places have tried this and it isn't effective. The Government has already ruled it out too, due to the work required to capture and transport the seal and the stress it causes to the animal, all for them to just swim back.
- It was raised that executing the seal licence would be 'shooting ourselves in the foot' when the Board are so invested in SMRU's detect and deter system. The negative PR and potential funding loss would be harmful to the Board and Dee fishing.

The meeting concluded at 12:33pm.

The next Board meeting will be at 10:00am on 26th March.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'L Ross', is placed over a faint rectangular stamp.

Signed.....
Lawrence Ross, Chairman

30/01/2026
Date.....