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**Climate change: Spey Fishery Board calls for water in Spey tributaries to be restored as the impacts of hydro-electricity water diversions are made clear.**

The River Spey is a designated Special Area of Conservation for a range of species, including Scotland’s iconic wild Atlantic salmon – a species under threat. The Spey Fishery Board (SFB), which manages the wild salmon and sea trout fishery in the Spey catchment, is calling for a reduction in the volumes of water artificially diverted from the river’s catchment to generate hydro-electricity and the re-watering of some of the Spey’s tributaries. This follows the publication today of an independent report, produced for the SFB by EnviroCentre Ltd, on the extent of water abstractions and transfers from the Spey and their impact on the groundwater stored within the riverbed. This report confirms that the Spey is one of the most heavily-abstracted major rivers in Scotland.

The Report shows that of all the water permitted to be abstracted or diverted out of the catchment, over 90% of it is taken from the top 13% of the Spey catchment, then diverted either to Fort William, or to the Tay to generate hydro-electricity. In place since the 1940’s, these schemes can reduce the natural flow in the Spey by up to 24% at Boat o’ Brig, near Fochabers, and by up to a massive 61% at Kingussie.

Crucially, the Report highlights that the Spey valley has extensive sand and gravel deposits that now store far less water than would naturally be expected, due to the lower river levels as a result of these diversions. This loss of water storage capacity is exacerbated by historic land use practices and reduced snow melt in the spring. The net result of this reduction in natural flow is that it has reduced the resilience of the river to cope with the low flow conditions and higher water temperatures we are experiencing more and more as a result of climate change. Many people on Speyside will recall the dramatic drop in water levels in Loch Vaa near Aviemore, which is fed by groundwater, during the exceptionally dry summer of 2018. This is an excellent demonstration of the reduced resilience the River Spey now has to the dramatic fluctuations in climate.

Roger Knight, Director of the SFB, commented: “This report makes sobering reading. It is now abundantly clear that the scale of water transferred out of the Spey valley to generate hydro-electricity is having a devastating impact on the river. It has denuded the groundwater storage supplies and has drastically reduced the Spey’s ability to cope with hotter, drier summers which are predicted to occur more frequently under climate change. This situation is not sustainable. It is crucial that licensed abstraction from our upper tributaries is re-appraised and appropriately regulated to give this iconic river the sustainability it deserves as the reality of the climate emergency becomes apparent.”

“In the 1940’s, hydro-electricity was considered to be cutting-edge technology and a crucial source of power, particularly in rural parts of the Scottish Highlands. That technology, though, is 80 years old and such impoundments and abstractions would not be permitted under present-day environmental standards. Scotland also now has a much wider portfolio of low-carbon energy sources, including onshore and offshore wind, solar and marine energy.”

The Spey Fishery Board is working to redress this by promoting a programme of ecosystem restoration. For example, if the flow was reinstated to the Allt Sluie near the top of the Spey catchment at Dalwhinnie, this would off-set the amount of water abstracted at the Dipple wellfield on the lower Spey near Fochabers. Crucially, though, it would provide benefits downstream throughout the entire river. Other opportunities include: the restoration of the River Mashie near Laggan, most of the flow from which is diverted to Fort William; and the re-instatement of flows down the Allt Bhran and down the River Cuaich, both of which are currently diverted into the Tay system.

Mr Knight added, “We need the Scottish Government and Scottish Environment Protection Agency to support and encourage these river restoration opportunities. These would provide nature-based solutions to increase groundwater storage, which in turn will help top-up the river during periods of drought. In so doing, it will help make the Spey more resilient to the huge challenges we all face now and in the future with regard to the climate emergency.”

Whilst the report the SFB has commissioned is focussed solely on the Spey catchment, it believes that there would be great value in the Scottish Government commissioning a similar analysis for the rest of Scotland. In the light of the wild salmon crisis, it is vital that more is done to protect Scotland’s precious wild salmon. The SFB is working with Fisheries Management Scotland and the wider Missing Salmon Alliance to do everything possible to conserve and protect Scotland’s iconic wild Atlantic salmon populations.

For further information contact Roger Knight, Director of the Spey Fishery Board, on 01340 810841 or 07919 284482 or email: director@speyfisheryboard.com

Notes for editors:

1. The Spey Fishery Board is the statutory body responsible for the protection, preservation and development of salmon and sea trout fisheries within the Spey district, including the associated coastline. It is empowered to take such acts as it considers expedient for the conservation, protection and enhancement of Atlantic salmon and sea trout stocks and their fisheries.
2. A pdf of the EnviroCentre report “River Spey Abstractions 2021: Water Resource Management Now and Implications for the Future” is available from the Board’s website at <https://www.speyfisheryboard.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Envirocentre-Spey-Abstractions-2021-Report.pdf>
3. Angling on the River Spey generates in excess of £12 million per annum for the local economy and sustains 367 full-time-equivalent jobs (Scottish Executive-sponsored Economic Survey 2003).

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