

MINUTE OF MEETING OF THE SPEY
DISTRICT FISHERY BOARD IN OPEN
SESSION held via video conference session
commencing at 9.30 a. m. on Friday 4th
September, 2020

Present: -

| | | |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Chairman | Dr Alexander Scott | Craigellachie Fishings |
| Proprietors | Angus Gordon Lennox David Greer Peter Graham William Mountain Callum Robertson Oliver Russell Dr CMH Wills | Brae Water Trust Seafield Estates Rothes & Aikenway Delfur Fishings Easter Elchies Ballindalloch Knockando |

Co-Optees

| | | |
|----------------------|---|--|
| In Attendance | Roger Knight Brian Shaw Richard Fyfe William Cowie Jennifer Heatley | Director Senior Biologist SEPA Clerk SNH |
|----------------------|---|--|

Public Attendees None due to restrictions imposed by Covid19 pandemic which had necessitated the meeting being held by video conference call rather than in person.

1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everybody to the meeting and noted apologies had been received from John Trodden and Grant Mortimer. It was noted that Toby Metcalfe was not in attendance. The Chairman invited anyone who may have a conflict of interest to declare it. None were noted.

2. MINUTES OF OPEN MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY 22nd MAY, 2020

There were no other comments as to accuracy, but Peter Graham enquired whether the Board had offered an opportunity to the public to make the meeting fully open. The Director reported that Marine Scotland understood the difficulties with public Zoom meetings and a note had been included in the Minute of the last meeting regarding public attendees and this had been understood and accepted by Marine Scotland. A notice would

go on the website for the next meeting. Peter Graham then proposed the Minute and Angus Gordon Lennox seconded it.

3. ACTIONS POINTS AND MATTERS ARISING

3.1 Action Points

It was noted that following the request at the February meeting for SEPA to liaise with the Director over the categorisation of pollution incidents, this was ongoing and would be reported further by the Director.

4. DIRECTOR'S REPORT

4.1 February to June 2020 Catch Statistics

The Director presented slides showing the salmon and grilse numbers from February to June at 1,531, which was midway between the figures for the last 2 preceding years. As far as the Conservation Policy was concerned, 98% of fish were returned.

As far as sea trout were concerned, the numbers to June were 356, which was well below the 5-year average of 841, but of those 92% had been released.

The Chairman noted that during the period of Covid up until June there had been drastically reduced numbers fishing. He did raise the question of how riparian owners wished to record numbers, but Board Members felt this was for the riparian owners to determine.

Peter Graham advised that he had suggested to the Assessor that the Assessor should completely ignore this year's figures in arriving at rateable values and this appeared to other Board Members to be a sensible proposition.

In terms of reporting figures, Dr Catherine Wills noted that some parts of the river had done better than usual, given that lockdown coincided with the optimum fishing time for some beats, but coincided with the worst time for fishing on other beats.

Callum Robertson suggested that when reporting figures, a 5-year average should be used and, although some Board Members supported this, they felt that the 5-year average should ignore the current year. David Greer suggested that if that was the case, the 5-year average should be spread over 6 years and then the current year's catches ignored. Board Members supported this approach.

4.2 Conservation

4.2.1 Spey Dam and GFG alliance

The Director reported that not much had happened during the Covid period, but matters were more fully reported in the Director's Report which had been circulated.

He advised that snorkelling would be undertaken in mid-September and if successful, again in mid-October. There had been considerable debate about smolt migration, but it had been left for GFG to draw up proposals for smolt monitoring. He then invited Richard Fyfe to add anything.

Richard Fyfe reported that the meeting with GFG and SEPA and other representatives had been very positive and GFG had been forthcoming in their resolve to move matters forward. He then directed a question to Brian Shaw on whether a suitable protocol for snorkelling was available?

Brian Shaw responded that it was and that, up to date, there had been no evidence of numbers in the pool below the dam which was thought by some in GFG to be full of fish, but snorkelling would help to identify this. It was also noted that the current fish counter was not working well due to issues with the supplier, but generally Brian felt that there had been positive moves from GFG and there was evidence that they were willing to collaborate.

Peter Graham noted that there would be further opportunities for tracking and tracing smolt migration via PIT-tagging and he felt that it was vital for this to be built into the design of the fish passes.

Richard Fyfe did not see that as a major design issue and confirmed that it could be incorporated into the design at the fish pass.

The Chairman suggested to the Director that it may now be a good time to start writing-up a plan for Spey Dam and it be added as an action point.

ACTION: Director to liaise with Richard Fyfe (SEPA) regarding production of a written plan for Spey Dam projects and works.

Richard Fyfe also noted some discussion had taken place about sediment management and SIMEC were looking at possible sediment reintroduction to create spawning grounds downstream of the dam, which was another positive step.

Angus Gordon Lennox was concerned that the impact was potentially in the reservoir above the dam and the next step would be to look at whether flow in the reservoir could be measured.

The Director indicated that SEPA had done some work on this already, which showed that it was complicated and additionally impacted by the inflow from the River Markie, but no-one was aware of any studies elsewhere where flow in the reservoir above a dam had been monitored.

Richard Fyfe thought that the bigger issue was the ability of smolts to find their way downstream and out through the fish pass, rather than the upstream migration of adult fish.

4.3 Predator Control

Angus Gordon Lennox enquired when the next sawbill count was taking place as there had been significant numbers noted anecdotally. It was reported that this was likely to take place at the beginning of October, but could be brought forward if necessary.

4.4 Enhancement

River Calder

The positive programme at the River Calder was applauded by Board Members and it was noted by all that this had been an extremely positive body of work. It represented a huge step forward with a substantial habitat restoration and was regarded as a model for other Boards nationally.

4.5 Ghillies Committee Meeting

The Director reported a very positive Ghillies Committee meeting held at Tulchan.

5. SPEY SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE REPORT

5.1 Stocking Monitoring

Peter Graham reported that GPS recording of stocking sites was continuing along with the electro-fishing monitoring, but some disappointment had been expressed at the numbers of fry found. There were still lessons to be learnt from stocking ova and unfed fry, rather than fed fry as before. Next year would be more important for any conclusions to be reached on eyed ova/unfed fry versus fed fry, as parr numbers would be apparent. The rest of the electro-fishing showed fewer parr in the lower river, but good fry numbers. It was possible that the temperature difference and timing of the electro fishing had had an impact on the numbers.

The Committee undertook to have a further look at temperatures in the Fiddich in particular, but generally electro fishing showed reasonable numbers on the rest of the river.

5.2 AST Tracking Project

There was discussion about the AST tracking project and good discussion took place on the final report. It was recommended to distribute this as widely as possible and ask Ballindalloch if they would be prepared to be involved again. It

was also hoped that we would be able to tender once again for a contract from the Scottish Government which would use smaller tags to monitor smolt migration and provide an indication of predation.

Brian Shaw noted that the project must be re-tendered to the Scottish Government, but if successful it was a very good potential project for the Board to follow, particularly as the smaller tags would give a comparison of tag burden.

Oliver Russell confirmed that Ballindalloch would be happy to support the continuation of the project.

5.3 Predation

Peter Graham noted that the other big debate at the Scientific Committee was what else could potentially be eating descending smolts when Sawbills were not present in great numbers. The possibility of trout being involved in predation was considered and he asked for Board approval to involve some beats in investigating this next year, albeit to a limited extent initially. This was approved.

5.4 Invertebrates

The Committee recommended that Board members read a recent report on invertebrate numbers in the Spey. This showed that generally numbers had been through a dip, although in most cases these had subsequently recovered. Those susceptible to sediment were still in decline, but otherwise numbers were good.

The Committee had asked Brian to continue this work by creating a longer-term data set for invertebrates, but it was recognised the publication of the report with invertebrate numbers would require sensitive handling.

Brian Shaw was of the opinion that there had been a decline in the early 2000's in invertebrate numbers, but these seemed to have recovered to numbers seen in the early 1980's. There could be a number of reasons for this.

5.5 Scientific Strategic Review

The Committee had not had time to go through the strategic review in detail, but this would be looked-at in more detail at a separate meeting later in the month.

5.6 SEPA Data Sets

Brian Shaw expressed disappointment that the full SEPA data set was restricted to only one site at Fochabers and a number of sites had ceased being actively monitored since 2016. The Board would like these data sets and questioned whether the collection of them could be re-established, or the Board could undertake to do it.

Richard Fyfe had not had a chance to review the report yet, but would raise the issue with his colleagues. Questions were then invited: -

Q. Angus Gordon Lennox enquired why only the Tweed, Spey, Deveron, Dee and not the Tay had been invited in the Marine Scotland small tracking scheme.

A. Brian Shaw did not know the reason, but this was how the tender had been issued.

Q. Angus Gordon Lennox asked whether the 5mm tag was covered with an enzyme which would dissolve to indicate that the smolt had been predated.

A. Brian Shaw confirmed this was correct.

Richard Fyfe indicated it would be a good plan to have a temperature monitor in the tag, as this would make it possible to identify whether predation had been by a “warm body” predator or “cold body” predator and this was agreed.

The Chairman indicated that as far as the Invertebrate Report was concerned, he was quite happy to sit with the biologist and with Ian Gordon and other representatives to talk through the invertebrate numbers and to determine how best to release the information. The biologist had also indicated that he had asked Marine Scotland whether the invertebrate numbers as shown on the Spey reflected other rivers, but was advised that there were no national data sets kept.

6. QUESTIONS ON THE BIOLOGIST’S REPORT

The Biologist’s Report had been circulated to Board Members prior to the meeting and questions were invited.

To begin with, Brian reported that the Spey retained its Category 1 status overall, but had dropped from Category 1 to Category 2 for fry.

He would like to produce a formal response to the consultation for adult fish which had just been published and the Board agreed that he should do so.

ACTION: Formal response to be submitted to consultation on Scottish Government draft 2021 Conservation Regulations.

Q. Angus Gordon Lennox enquired whether he was aware how close to the edge of Category 1 the Spey currently was.

A. In response, the biologist indicated that he was not sure, but he was aware that the measurement of the “wetted” areas was an area for concern and this would be in the Consultation response.

As far as electro-fishing was concerned, the biologist reported that most of the river was in good condition, but high energy upland tributary rivers were particularly

susceptible to damage from the increased number of spates. This could be the result of climate change in his view and was a cause for concern.

Finally, the biologist reported that the Marine Scotland National Electro-fishing Programme Scotland (NEPS) had been cancelled this year, but he hoped it would resume next year and said it would be a useful tool in the future.

7. GHILLIES COMMITTEE UPDATE

This had been previously reported.

8. AOCB

There were no matter arising and Richard Fyfe expressed thanks to everyone and confirmed that he would respond in terms of the invertebrates in due course.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

This was fixed for Friday 20th November 2020 and it was hoped that this would be a face-to-face meeting, possibly at Gordon Castle, but events would dictate where this would be held.

The meeting then closed at 10.45 a.m.