

**THE CONON DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD  
T/A CROMARTY FIRTH FISHERY BOARD  
ANNUAL MEETING 2020**

**Thursday 22nd October 2020  
Video Conference, 11:25am**

<b>Present</b>		<b>In Attendance</b>	
Col Alastair Campbell (Chairman & Fairburn Fishing syndicate)	AC	Ross Glover (Fisheries Manager)	RG
Ronald Munro Ferguson (Vice Chairman & Novar Estate)	RMF	Ben Seaman (Fishery Biologist)	BS
Troels Bavnhoj (Kirkbi Estates)	TB	Edward Rush (Head Bailiff)	ER
The Earl of Aylesford (Scatwell Estate)	EA	Piers Cumberlege (Allt Graad)	PC
Keith Beaton (SEPA)	KB	Andrew Easton (Alness Angling Club)	AE
Ian Duncan (Kildermorie Estate)	ID	Charlotte Hingston (Fairburn Estate)	CH
Peter Graham (Conon Fishing Syndicate)	PG	Claire Macdonald (Galbraith)	CM
Okain McLennan (Loch Achonachie Angling Club)	OM	Andrew Matheson (Brahan Estate)	AM
William Paterson (Netsman)	WP	Rachel Urquhart (Galbraith)	RU
Christina Pirie (Alness Angling Club)	CP		
Dave Smith (Evanton Angling Club)	DS		
Dr. Alastair Stephen (SSE)	AS		
Neil Wright (Clerk)	NW		

<b>1</b>	<b>APOLOGIES/ WELCOME</b>	<b>Action</b>
	<p>No apologies noted.</p> <p>AC welcomed the new Board and wished to thank ID for his 6 years of service and stewardship.</p>	
<b>2</b>	<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS</b>	
	<p>AC enquired if there were any new conflicts of interest for board members to note. NW advised that new conflict of interest forms would be circulated to the new Board members.</p> <p>AC highlighted that the interests of the Board may not always be in a Board members personal interest and this needed to be borne in mind, the Board has a statutory duty to perform.</p>	
<b>3</b>	<b>WELCOME TO DR. ROSS GLOVER &amp; BEN SEAMAN</b>	
	<p>AC welcomed Ross Glover as Fisheries Manager and Ben Seaman as Fisheries Biologist, it was noted that the term Director is no longer being used and Fisheries Manager was seen to be more of an accurate term.</p> <p>RG highlighted that he had worked for Marine Scotland Science for the last 12 years managing their adult and smolt traps, and he is excited to take on this</p>	

	<p>new role and appreciates the work being done.</p> <p>AC commented that both RG and BS have hit the ground running.</p>	
<b>4</b>	<b>MINUTES OF THE MEETING, 25<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2019</b>	
	<p>There were no amendments to the minutes and they were proposed by RMF and seconded by OM.</p>	
<b>5</b>	<b>MATTERS ARISING</b>	
	<p>To be dealt with during the meeting.</p>	
<b>6</b>	<b>FINANCE UPDATE</b>	
	<p>NW ran through the latest monthly accounts and noted that the Board was doing better than expected but this was mainly due to timing of works and the delay of some items as a result of COVID. Some projects may have to be pushed into 2021 and this meant that with some careful management the Board could purchase a new 4x4 pickup truck. This will be possible due to saving mentioned but there has also been more contract work undertaken than had been budgeted.</p> <p>ID ran over the year-end financial statement to the end of March 2020, the main difference in the budget was the over spend on management costs as a result of Tony's death, but the accounts had been managed well and in cash flow terms the Board had a small surplus.</p> <p>AS noted that SSE was working on the legal agreement for the Boards contract work and he hopes to have this issued soon. ID responded to say that it might be worth the Board formulating a proposal for the agreement and agree important points, which could be reviewed annually.</p>	
<b>7</b>	<b>FISHERIES MANAGER UPDATE</b>	
	<p>RG wished to thank TB for his help with the trapping and trucking of smolts from the River Meig. RG further observed that the smolt numbers trapped were up on both the Bran and Meig and this may have been due to lower water and so the efficiencies of the traps were increased.</p> <p>Further to the meeting report previously circulated with the meeting papers RG commented that electrofishing surveys continued during the summer and a new program of sites was established. The NEPS work was not undertaken this year due to COVID but the new survey sites have been based on the NEPS principals and will help analyse the juvenile populations in the system.</p> <p>Further work to be looked at will include the proposed stocking of eggs on the Orrin and undertaking a new egg count of the Blackwater.</p> <p>RG explained that diseased fish had been found again in the River Alness, around 130 fish were removed from the lower river, these fish died from secondary infection. There is presently no known cause for the disease and one of the Alness fish was analysed by Marine Scotland Science, with samples being sent to Norway. The Alness was the only river affected in the area and the disease seemed to affect more fish than in 2019.</p>	

<b>8</b>	<b>HYDRO REPORT</b>	
	<p>AS noted that a report has already been circulated but it was worth highlighting a few points. The Mark 12 fish counters are still not working as well as would be expected and they appear to be undercounting by about 25%. The problem is being discussed.</p> <p>There was a general discussion on the operation of the Conon hydro and the balance between wind energy and hydro. Further areas of discussion included the proposals for a demountable wolf trap on the Meig with this project having been delayed due to COVID. It is not likely that work will start on site until the earliest 2021 and it may not be operational until 2022.</p> <p>AS commented that the Orrin remains a key area for improvement and again this project was delayed due to COVID. The proposal would be to create a number of spawning fords between the falls and the Orrin dam. At present this area does not have any natural spawning beds. The water flows are controlled and artificial spawning fords should do well. It is hoped that gravel for these beds could be won on site or from the bottom of the River Orrin. The spawning beds would need to be kick started with eggs from the Contin hatchery.</p> <p>AC wished to thank TB for his work with transporting smolts and for his assistance with wolf trap proposals.</p> <p>OM enquired if the wetter springs would have an impact on the efficiency of the wolf trap, AS responded that the last three springs had been dry and the trap is being designed to be in the river for a very short period of time and not the whole year. RG added that the wolf trap would catch the majority of smolts and would be more efficient than a rotary screw trap.</p> <p>TB enquired about the fish counters and whether tried and tested counters could be used instead. AS responded that the counters themselves work but the new software isn't working as well as they had hoped.</p> <p>AC queried flows and water storage and whether AS is consulted. AS responded that he does consult on the water storage and flows, with the latter being an import aspect for the smolt run.</p>	
<b>9</b>	<b>TRUST REPORT</b>	
	<p>OM noted that the Trust report had previously been circulated. The Trust has agreed to transfer money received from Marine Scotland Science to the Board for work undertaken on their behalf. This was not Trust money but MSS funds to be passed over.</p> <p>The Trust had £419,000 in holding in 2019 and has £413,000 in October 2020 which shows the investments have remained steady and the Fund Manager should be congratulated considering the past years events.</p> <p>OM commented that a Trustees meeting would be convened shortly and they would discuss the Meig wolf trap proposals and funding for junior angling.</p> <p>PG enquired about the Trust investments and whether they could be used for larger projects that would use up capital, PG used the example of the Dalmore weir which the Trust was not involved in but AS commented that in theory the Trust could invest capital and that would be the proposal for the wolf trap.</p>	

	ID ran over the Trust investments in more detail.	
<b>10</b>	<b>CONSERVATION POLICY FOR 2021</b>	
	<p>NW noted that the draft policies for 2021 has been circulated and there was no change to last year, as before there are two policies within the Cromarty catchment and the estuary remains category 3 as a result of it being classed as a mixed fishery and the Balnagown being a category 3.</p> <p>OM noted that he would take the policy under advisement but the policy would be recommended.</p> <p>NW commented that there would not likely be a change to the categorisations for 2021.</p>	
<b>11</b>	<b>NETTING</b>	
	<p>WP noted that rod catches are down and wondered what might be happening to the fish. RG responded that the marine survival is very poor at the moment, this may be due to poor feeding as a result of food moving north. Salmon scales can identify feeding patterns. However the problem is at sea and not in the river.</p> <p>ID noted that there can be poor survival for smolts in the river as they migrate out to sea and improving that survival can increase numbers returning.</p> <p>AS commented that predation from trout and birds is having an impact on smolt migration and in 2021 it is hoped that the smolts trapped and trucked from the Meig will be released 50/50 during the day and night to see if there is an increase in survival for one of the sample groups.</p> <p>RG noted that the predator management group have agreed to look at trout predation in rivers.</p> <p>PG commented that the Ghillies on the Spey will be catching brown trout during the smolt run to see what the diet of the brown trout is during that time. AC asked if PG could keep the Board informed on the progress of the Spey research.</p> <p>AM enquired about pike predation. RG responded that pike have been found in riffles in the river where juvenile salmon should be which is worrying.</p> <p>OM noted that there are large numbers of perch in some of the hydro reservoirs. AC suggested that more work should be done on predation under the water going forward.</p>	
<b>12</b>	<b>INSHORE FISHERIES CAMPAIGN</b>	
	A paper on the inshore fisheries campaign had been circulated to the Board prior to the meeting. The members were asked to support the campaign and the Board agreed. Individuals were also encouraged to support it.	

<b>13</b>	<b>EVANTON ANGLING CLUB PAPER</b>	
	<p>DS noted that the angling clubs paper on stocking had been circulated to the Board and it would be best to discuss the proposal outside of the meeting. RG responded that he had noted the discussion paper and looked at it in detail but it would unlikely garner support with the various statutory bodies.</p> <p>The Board had a wide discussion on the use of hatcheries and the science behind their use, generally they are not supported unless they show short term use to kick start a run of fish. Stocking above impassable falls is not generally permitted unless for scientific purposes. All members agreed that any proposals for a hatchery should be driven by science. The Contin hatchery was a unique mitigation hatchery and the only one known of in Scotland.</p> <p>AC noted that a full consultation would be provided for the proposal and RG would discuss the proposal further with the club.</p> <p>RMF enquired what the juvenile stock looked like. RG explained that the data shows that there is about 100% fry numbers and around 200% parr numbers, on the face of it the river looks healthy.</p>	
<b>14</b>	<b>AOCB</b>	
	<p>CP noted concerns over the diseased fish on the River Alness and that dead fish were left on the river bank which caused issues. RG responded that the fish disease and the number of dead fish was a perfect storm, the number of dead fish couldn't be predicted and there was nowhere for them to go. Once it was identified that there was an issue a solution was found very quickly and RMF kindly allowed the fish to bury on his land, NW sought guidance and approval from SEPA and the Highland Council for this to proceed. Without that it would have likely meant commercial disposal of the dead fish at a cost to the owners of the river.</p> <p>NW asked that everyone return a set of their catch returns.</p>	
<b>15</b>	<b>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</b>	
	Provisionally set for the 12 <sup>th</sup> of March 2021 but to be confirmed at a later date.	