

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

**Thursday 30th March 2023
Coul House, Contin, 11:30am**

Present		In Attendance	
Col Alastair Campbell (Chairman & Fairburn Fishing syndicate)	AC	Sunny Bradbury (Fisheries Manager)	SB
Ronald Munro Ferguson (Vice Chairman & Novar Estate)	RMF	Edward Rush (Operations Manager)	ER
Troels Bavnhoej (Kirkbi Estates)	TB	Chris Blake (Alness Angling Club)	CB
Stephen Dowds (Loch Achonachie Angling Club)	SD	Jimmy Ruggles Bryce	RB
William Paterson (Netsman)	WP	Councillor Sean Kennedy	SK
Christina Pirie (Alness Angling Club)	CP	Liam Much (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	LM
Dave Smith (Evanton Angling Club)	DS	Callum Paterson (Balnagown Estate)	CP
Alistair Stephen (Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust)	AS		
John Urquhart (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	JU		
Neil Wright (Galbraith Clerk)	NW		

1	APOLOGIES/ WELCOME	Action
	<p>The following apologies were made:</p> <p>The Earl of Aylesford (Scatwell Estate) Keith Beaton (SEPA) Lucy Campbell (Upper Fairburn Fishings) Piers Cumberlage (Allt Graad) Ian Duncan (Kildermorie Estate) Andrew Easton (Alness Angling Club) Linda Fitzer (Fairburn Estate) David Flux (Coul) Peter Graham (Conon Fishing Syndicate) Charlotte Hingston (Fairburn Estate) Robert Whitson (Fairburn Estate)</p>	
2	CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS	
	AC requested that any new conflicts of interest be declared which may have arisen since the last meeting. No interests were declared by the members.	

3	MINUTES OF THE MEETING, 20th OCTOBER 2022	
	The minutes of the last meeting were proposed by RMF and seconded by TB.	
4	MATTERS ARISING	
	<p>AC noted that under item three of the minutes, the SSE liaison meeting was held in January 2023 with the minutes included in the papers provided today.</p> <p>SD noted under item seven that the undercutting of the riverbank had not been noted in the minutes. NW responded that he had phoned Ross Glover after the last Board meeting to raise the matter with him again and he was to call SD direct. SD confirmed SSE had not made contact. NW responded that he would follow this up and ask Ross to make contact.</p>	
5	FINANCE UPDATE	
	<p>Year to date</p> <p>NW ran over the finance's to date, noting that the Board was in a good position. Income was ahead of budget and this was in part due to the SSE contract work being higher than budgeted. General contract work was also likely to be slightly ahead of budget.</p> <p>Expenditure has seen the greatest variance, with two large projects not being completed in this financial year but they will be moved into the next budget. These two items are the bothy repair budgeted at £10,000 and the Voluntary Registration of the Boards titles, which has been started but not ready to be fee'd. Fuel costs are also under budget, but insurance is slightly over budget. It is expected that there will be a surplus of between £30,000 and £35,000, which will be deal with in the coming budget explanation.</p> <p>Budget and assessment</p> <p>NW explained that the budget explanation sheet had previously been circulated with the papers and he would only cover the main elements but would be happy to answer any questions. Looking at income the SSE contract work is now almost worth £200,000 due to recent inflation. £45,000 has been budgeted for contract work for SISI, but this is not all income as a large proportion of this is a recharge from Naturescot for a full-time project officer - dealing with invasive species between various catchments.</p> <p>The assessment amount has been lowered from 0.75p to 0.65p in the pound for 2023. However, NW highlighted that although the assessment has been reduced, this year is a reassessment year, and the District Valuer will be setting new rates; depending on those new rates the assessment may change for 2024. The Board's position remains the same and it tries to keep the assessment rate as flat as possible without too many fluctuations, the assessment rate is considerably lower than it was 4 years ago at £1.10.</p> <p>NW ran over expenditure for the budget, explaining that salaries had increased to take account of the Board now having a full team of five, insurance has increased, something that all sectors are experiencing. As mentioned in the year to date above, property repairs for Loch na Croic bothy and the Voluntary</p>	

	<p>Registration fees have been pushed into the 2023 budget. £49,000 has been budgeted for new vehicles, this includes the normally budgeted cost for one new vehicle - the Board has a rolling programme of replacing a vehicle each year over a four year term. A second 4x4 vehicle has been budgeted to assist with contract work and electrofishing surveys within the catchment, this extra vehicle is expected to pay for itself over its lifetime. The surplus from 2022 will be used to fund the second 4x4.</p> <p>Questions and answers were accepted.</p>	
6	FISHERIES BIOLOGISTS UPDATE	
	<p>SB ran over his report which had been circulated prior to the meeting. 462 fish were caught in the adult trap at Loch na Croic for 2022, this being the lowest record of fish caught in the trap since the 1950s. However, the egg count for the Blackwater was reached with over 800,000 eggs laid down in the hatchery.</p> <p>Fish have been reported leaping at Silverbridge on the Blackwater, this has shown that the adult trap is in need of maintenance to prevent fish passage through the trap and upstream, as a result of the escaped fish it is difficult to determine how many fish might have actually been caught over and above the 462.</p> <p>SSE funded several biodegradable boxes for putting eggs out into the Blackwater to create artificial redds. This allowed for more even distribution of eggs within the river system, this is required as a result of poor habitat.</p> <p>The Rotary screw traps on the Meig River have now been deployed, ready to be operational for the 1st of April. The Wolftrap at Achanalt will be operational for Monday The 3rd of April. SB further noted that they would be continuing again with the day and night release of smolts and 50% of all smolts would be used for the night release project.</p> <p>Looking at electrofishing surveys, it is a priority to look at maximising stocking and restoration work within the catchment and new design and models for electrofishing are proposed for this coming season.</p> <p>AS noted, that as a result of the good smolt numbers in 2020 it is likely that there may be a bumper adult fish return as a result in 2023.</p> <p>LM enquired about fish going through the heck and whether this resulted in the Board struggling to meet its quota, and therefore not having enough eggs to restock the Blackwater. LM further suggested anglers could catch broodstock for the hatchery. SB responded taking fish from rod and line lower down the river system may result in eggs being robbed from areas of the river that would naturally have allowed these fish to spawn, there would be no way of knowing those fish would have made their way up to the heck. AC further noted the egg count for the Blackwater was met, although the fish counts were low. AS commented that the heck needed to be repaired to resolve the issue.</p> <p>JU enquired about eyed ova and why they were released into the Blackwater and not fry. SB responded that survival would be very poor for fry. JU asked if eyed ova would not have the same mortality as fry. AS noted the conditions need to be perfect for the fry as they won't survive easily due to them not being used to the environment. SB noted the closer you can get to the early life of a species the greater the survival it will have in the wild from captive</p>	

	<p>breeding.</p> <p>AS noted that bringing on fry from eyed ova is a backstop option, this may happen in years where weather and water conditions do not allow for the eyed ova to be planted into the river. This would result in the eggs hatching and having to be brought on in the fry tanks in the hatchery.</p> <p>JU enquired about egg planting and where they were planted and why smolts were released in the same location. SB responded that fish have a factory setting and it is important the eyed ova are put into the river they intend to return to. In terms of Smolt trapping and trucking, it is important that the smolts were only trucked a short distance as possible. AS noted that a previous experiment, which released parr near the mouth of the Conon, resulted in a very poor return rate, showing that those parr were unable to imprint the river and use their factory settings to return. That is one of the reasons the smolts are released below Tor Achilty and not further downstream. Eggs are planted out in the Blackwater to maximise habitat and stocking density. When stocks allow the eggs are used elsewhere in the system where a justified need is found.</p> <p>LM enquired about predation and what was being done about the birds on the river. SB responded that the Board applies for a licence every year to shoot fish eating birds. NW noted the number of birds allowed to be shot is very low and is unlikely to change, but the licences is done in conjunction with a larger group of fishery Boards to ensure the most successful approach. Regular bird counts are carried out throughout the catchment for the purposes of the licence, but research suggests these birds may not have as big an impact as had previously been thought.</p> <p>AS noted night release will overcome a number of predation issues as birds don't fish at night. The night release may increase Survival rates by 30%.</p> <p>LM enquired about the counters on the Meig not working. AS noted that the counters were working but the pit decoders were not. NW further clarified that the physical counter wheel on top of Tor Achilty dam had been disconnected in previous years and it will not necessarily show that the counter is working. AS responded AI counters were going to be fitted to the dams and the pit decoders were being replaced or overhauled.</p> <p>TB noted frustration that the counters had not been working and this has been an ongoing issue for at least eight years. There is a desire to ensure that this is remedied so that data can be collected for management purposes. AS responded that SSE had spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on trying to improve or repair the counters, but due to a number of issues they are still not fully operational.</p> <p>TB noted that the Loch na Croic trap was not working and it was allowing fish to escape. In order to kick start the Orrin project and others in the catchment it is vital that the hatchery can produce enough eggs to restock the sites, SSE need to be pushed to resolve the issues. AC commented that the team have identified the adult trap is not holding fish properly and they are pursuing SSE to correct the matter prior to the adult trapping this year. The Board will continue to push SSE on the fish counters, and it is right the proprietors raise the subject.</p>	
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	<p>WP noted that in the past a bus trip had been organised around the Conon catchment to see the issues first hand. The obvious next logical step would be to restore the upper Orrin, as it had worked for the Bran system. AC responded that those were good points and something to explore with a trip around the catchment.</p> <p>SB noted the original habitat above the Orrin reservoir is very good and could potentially produce reasonable numbers of smolts.</p> <p>TB noted that his client wished to do as much as possible for the upper Meig and the Orrin. Strathconon Estate would help with a boat/Argo and staff requirements.</p>	
7	HYDRO REPORT	
	<p>AC acknowledged Ross Glover had produced a hydro report, and that most items had already been covered in the above biologists' section.</p> <p>JU enquired how to report issues to SSE now that they no longer attend meetings. NW responded that Ross Glover can be contacted directly but it would also be beneficial to let NW know so it can be raised from the Board to SSE at the liaison meetings if no response is received.</p> <p>TB enquired what progress was being made on the gravel re-introduction project on the lower Orrin. SB noted the 2/3 metre sections of gravel spawning beds had been identified. The present plan would be to try and create a croy in the river to hold the gravel and to cut into the bank to release gravel more naturally. SB further explained that SEPA are still considering the proposal and whether rock armour would be required. AC enquired about the time frame. SB responded ideally it would be done by August 2023 but there was still some work to do before then and a SEPA licence to obtain.</p> <p>JU enquired if the gravel reintroduction must happen every year. SB responded that SSE would commit to an annual plan as has been done elsewhere in Scotland. JU noted that the lifts within Orrin dam would need to be working to allow fish to migrate upstream. NW noted that there is an adult trap below Orrin dam to capture adults but at present there are no smolts above the dam and so no returning salmon to be captured, as a result the lifts are redundant until smolts can exit the reservoir. The lower Orrin project would not involve the dam and that would be a second phase, which is more complex. The next step would be to identify how to get smolts out of the reservoir so that they can return naturally.</p> <p>The Board had a general discussion on Orrin dam and the issues of smolts getting out of the reservoir, and how to re-stock the upper reaches if a suitable method can be identified to get the smolts out. AS noted that a previous smolt project had been trialed in the upper Orrin and 14,000 smolts had been caught going out, but the project ultimately failed to consistently get smolts safely out of the reservoir.</p> <p>TB enquired whether the fish caught in the lower Orrin adult trap could be stripped in the hatchery. SB responded the fish returning from the lower Orrin would likely not reach the adult trap, they would find an area below to naturally spawn, however due to the poor habitat the recruitment rate may be poor. AS commented that the best approach in terms of eggs would be to</p>	

	<p>ensure the heck at Loch na Croic is working properly and that gravel re-introduction is done by August 2023, for returning adults.</p> <p>General discussion regarding egg planting in the lower Orrin, which was carried out in 2021 and 2022, but not in 2023 due to a lack of eggs.</p>	
8	TRUST REPORT	
	<p>AS ran over the Trust report which had previously been circulated. Investments were down from the previous year due to the turmoil in the markets but the Trusts professional advisors we're looking at the investment structure.</p> <p>AS commented that the Trust wished to re-engage more with the Board and it was suggested that the management committee of the Board would be invited back to Trust meetings, with Trust meetings generally being held immediately after a Board meeting. The Board welcomed this approach and would be happy to work with the Trust to develop any suitable projects.</p> <p>SB ran over the proposed Meig genetics project. The project would determine the number of adults within a section of river and how healthy that section of river was. It would show the number of parents within the system from the number of smolts genetically analysed. The labour requirements from the Board are minimal as fin clips would be taken from smolts when they are captured on the Meig or Achanalt traps, the fin clips would then be passed to UHI for sequencing. The project would help create a baseline for the river and over a period it would be possible to see trends within the system. SB further noted that the work could look at eggs versus returning fish, and look at mitigation above hydro dams which are not as productive as they might necessarily be.</p>	
9	NETTING	
	<p>WP noted that there was no netting at present, there may be concerns of illegal netting on the coast but it's difficult to police and spot.</p> <p>There was netting carried out in 2022 for a film based on netting traditions but the fish were not tagged. WP commented that netting could be useful if used for scientific purposes. SB responded that pink salmon netting might be a solution to mitigate against this invasive species and it would be investigated further.</p> <p>AS comment on the Channery Point project which used netting to tag adult salmon, in order to see where those salmon ended up. Most tagged fish ended up in a variety rivers up the East Coast rather than just in the River Ness. The project was also able to show that very few fish were predated on by seals. The Cromarty lighthouse research station also tagged several adult seals and that project showed that most seals didn't predate on salmon. It was only a very small number of seals that specialised in eating salmon within a river. If those specialised seals are removed it has a positive impact on salmon migration. The seals that can be seen resting on sandbanks in the Firth generally have returned from the sea after feeding on the seabed and are not a threat to salmon. SB further noted that a seal licence has been granted in the past but has now ended. Studies showed that shooting seals didn't have much of an impact on the salmon population.</p>	

	<p>LM commented that many small items add up to a bigger numbers. SB noted that there had been no real change in the predation, but what had changed was the returning salmon numbers have diminished as are result of marine mortality. AS responded that marine survival at one time was 25% it is now down to around 5%.</p>	
10	HYDROGEN PRODUCTION PROPOSAL (ALNESS CATCHMENT)	
	<p>CB ran over the hydrogen proposal being put forward by Storegga. The company wishes to build a hydrogen production plant at Beinn Tharsuinn wind farm. The hydrogen plant would take advantage of cheaper electricity before it reaches the grid from the wind farm. There are concerns over water extraction which they propose to be 1.5 million litres of water a day. Scottish Water Horizons which is the commercial wing of Scottish Water, identified Loch Morie and Loch Glass as being of suitable size for water extraction. However, they only looked at the size of the loch and not the flow rates going in and out.</p> <p>Loch Glass appears to be their favoured choice with Loch Morie being their second, Loch Glass already has water extraction for drinking water purposes and a number of hydro schemes.</p> <p>CB highlighted that the River Alness is a spate river and there is a worry around low flows in summer conditions and their extraction proposals. CB further noted that Storegga’s approach and attitude had been disappointing to date.</p> <p>Various members of the Board discussed discrepancies in the information that Storegga had provided on their website and in meetings.</p> <p>RF noted that over 1.5 million litres of water sounds like a large amount but it is in fact relatively small in terms of flow. RMF has identified a potential alternative burn for the hydrogen plant that might provide sufficient water which would not affect the Alness or Allt Graad catchments.</p> <p>NW commented that the River Brora is going through a similar process with SSE and a response has been put forward from the River Board to SSE, which has covered aspects such as water abstraction, water quality after hydrogen production, proposals to release water back into the catchment as only 50% of the water extracted will be used for hydrogen production, rate of release and water temperature. NW further noted that the Board is a statutory consultee for planning conditions relating to migratory fish and the Board will be consulted on any planning or abstraction matters. However, it would be worthwhile for the Board to pulling together concerns that it has over the use of the water which may allow the developer to come back with more informed responses.</p> <p>RF agreed to drive the Boards response to the developer.</p>	
11	AOCB	
	<p>DS noted that a battery storage proposal had been proposed at Swordale. The clubs concern had originally been around fire protection around the batteries as the developer had intended to flood the batteries with water should there be a fire, this water would have ultimately reached the river. Their intention now appears to be to use inert gas should there be any fire, the developer is</p>	

	<p>called fig power. Proposal to be followed.</p> <p>TB wished to make the Board aware that Strathconon Estate is working on riparian woodland planting schemes and planting will start next spring.</p> <p>NW asked that should any proprietor wish to make a rating appeal to the District Valuer that they do it soonest to allow the for a quick appeal process. Assessments will be issued once we know how many proprietors are to appeal and whether we can delay issuing the assessment until the appeals are complete. If it is not possible to delay the assessment, any successful appeal will be taken into account for 2024 and backdated.</p> <p>SB noted that any sightings of pink salmon should be notified to one of the team so that they can keep a record of them.</p>	
12	DATE OF NEXT MEETING	
	26 th October 2023	