

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

**Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023  
Coul House, Contin, 11:45am**

<b>Present</b>		<b>In Attendance</b>	
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	Ross Glover (SSE)	RG
Keith Beaton (SEPA)	KB	Christine Pirie (Alness Angling Club)	CP
Stephen Dowds (Loch Achonachie Angling Club)	SD	George Pirie (Alness Angling Club)	GP
Ian Duncan (Kildermorie)	ID		
Andrew Easton (Alness Angling Club)	AE		
Peter Graham (Conon Fishing Syndicate)	PG		
William Paterson (Netsman)	WP		
Glyn Robson (Lochluichart)	GR		
Dave Smith (Evanton Angling Club)	DS		
Alistair Stephen (Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust)	AS		
John Urquhart (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	JU		
Neil Wright (Galbraith Clerk)	NW		

<b>1</b>	<b>APOLOGIES/ WELCOME</b>	<b>Action</b>
	The following apologies were made:  The Earl of Aylesford (Scatwell Estate) Linda Fitzer (Fairburn Estate) David Flux (Coul) Councillor Sean Kennedy Andrew Matheson (Brahan) Callum Macdonald (Church of Scotland) Robert Whitson (Fairburn Estate)	
<b>2</b>	<b>CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATIONS</b>	
	AC requested that any new conflicts of interest be declared which may have arisen since the last meeting. PG noted a conflict of interest for the hydrogen proposal on the Struie hill as he is working with the landowner on negotiations.	

<b>3</b>	<b>MINUTES OF THE MEETING, 20th March 2023</b>	
	<p>SB clarified that under Section 7 of the previous minutes this section should have stated 14,000 smolts was an estimate for the lower Orrin and not the upper Orrin.</p> <p>Subject to the change above the minutes were approved as being an accurate representation of the previous meeting.</p>	
<b>4</b>	<b>MATTERS ARISING</b>	
	<p>AC noted that matters arising to be dealt with throughout the meeting.</p> <p>ID commented on the tax position and suggested that the Board should attempt to produce a neutral balance at the yearend, HMRC will allow the Board to make small profits but not sustained profits but there is no real guidance from HMRC. NW explained that the hope was not to make a profit going forward and there were circumstances surrounding last year's good performance.</p>	
<b>5</b>	<b>FINANCE UPDATE</b>	
	<p>NW ran over the year-to-date finances, noting that there was a bank balance of £188,724.44 as at the date of the meeting. Income of £294,016.99 has been received against expenditure of £195,060.44 year to date. There is in the region of £50,000 to collect for the budget which includes contract work for National Electro Fishing Programme, SISI contract work and Scottish Water electrofishing work. Please note that the National Electrofishing Programme had not originally been budgeted as this contract work had not been confirmed at the time of the budget being set.</p> <p>Further variances with the budget and year to date - originally budgeted was the sale of a van, however this was kept for the SISI project officer, and the cost of the van is being recharged to NatureScot.</p> <p>Financial statement 2023 The financial statement has been circulated to the Board and the headlines for this statement show the assessment was lowered from the previous year and £85,000 was collected. The SSE contract work increased by inflation in the previous year which is helping to reduce assessment costs. Contract work was higher than budgeted which has led to a surplus of funds. Total profit for the year was £33,886 with cash in the bank at the yearend being £120,000. It is proposed that the surplus from the previous year is used to buy a new Toyota Hilux to assist with contract work.</p>	
<b>6</b>	<b>FISHERIES BIOLOGISTS UPDATE</b>	
	<p>SB ran over the biologist's report which had been circulated to the Board previously. SB further commented that fish passage continues to be a main objective for the Board which includes the Orrin and the Meig dams, along with fish passage at Muir of Ord.</p> <p>The lower Orrin Gravel introduction project is due to take place in 2024 with returning fish due in autumn 2024, both SSE and the Board with the consent of Fairburn Estate are managing this project.</p> <p>High catches of smolts have been recorded on the River Meig with over 6000</p>	

	<p>smolts being captured. Further increased efficiency of the rotary screw trap may be possible in 2024 and this is being investigated.</p> <p>The adult fish trapping at Loch na Croic is due to open at the start of November.</p> <p>AC commented on Achanalt smolt numbers being down, SB responded that stocking had stopped a number of years ago and the Bran system is almost reliant on stocking, Smolt numbers are now down to around 1000. Electro fishing has been carried out on the Bran system and there are significant issues with Pike.</p> <p>AC wished to thank Sunny, Edward and the team for their hard work over the course of the year.</p> <p>ID enquired if Storm Babet did anything to change their planning. SB responded it was not an ideal timing for tree planting but the Conon system in particular managed to avoid the worst of it. It is now more important than ever to undertake tree planting to help with future storm events.</p> <p>PG observed that the Meig smolt numbers increased and whether the increase in numbers is down to low water and a more efficient trap. SB responded that low water was not good for trapping, but numbers are likely increasing due to good spawning from two years ago.</p> <p>PG enquired if there was a calculation for smolt output without the hydro dams on the Conon system. AS noted, that data had been produced in previous years on hypothetical smolt output for the system. SB responded that previous datasets are good, but it is important to also look at invertebrates and nutrients and it is essential to look at the river holistically and not in isolation.</p> <p>PG asked that the Board review the situation with the hydro dams and smolt output, and whether SSE should be asked what it can do to achieve as natural a run of fish as possible. PG suggested looking at similar rivers for crossover data may be possible and it might be advisable to get a team to look at this, and survey the system to calculate the smolt output.</p> <p>The Board discussed the merits of the hydro dam’s fish counters and rod catches and the importance of concentrating on a management plan which deals with areas of concern, in particular catchment wide initiatives such as tree planting and improved fish passage. The Board members debated the role of the Fishery Board in holding SSE to account and the importance of improving habitat and fish passage.</p> <p>AC highlighted that the Board would always look to hold SSE to account, but it would also look to work with the hydro operator for the benefit of migrating fish.</p> <p>ID noted that he attended the North West Deer Management Group at which SB attended and presented. ID noted that SB brought about a better understanding of how the Board and owners can work together.</p>	
<b>7</b>	<b>HYDRO REPORT</b>	
	<p>RG ran briefly over highlights of the hydro report and noted fish counters are now being upgraded on the Conon system. SSE have discovered that the</p>	

	<p>previous counters may have been undercounting by as much as 40%. The indication would suggest that Torr Achilty counted around 645 for the season but this could have been closer to 840. The new AI counters should be more accurate than the previous resistivity counters. The PIT decoders will also be upgraded at Torr Achilty in the winter.</p> <p>Day versus night smolt release showed a 46% increase in survival of night released smolts. SB further commented that they are looking at the efficiency of the rotary screw traps to try and improve efficiency by a further 10% to increase smolt capture. This is seen to be an important factor in improving smolt output.</p> <p>RG and SB ran over proposals for Whoosh innovations who are looking at innovative smolt capture. This project could be trialled in spring 2024 and if successful could be rolled out to other sites. Discussions are still ongoing.</p> <p>PG noted 840 fish going up Torr Achilty dam but how many would you need to restock the system entirely. RG responded that that would be a very difficult calculation to make, and you would need to consider recruitment curves, the sex split, altitude, nutrients and other factors. The Board discussed the above generally and the stocking capacity of the system.</p> <p>AC summarised the capacity of the system could potentially be higher, and the team will do what it can to better understand this. PG suggested setting up a subcommittee to look at the hydro and what can be done to improve fish passage.</p>	
<b>8</b>	<b>TRUST REPORT</b>	
	<p>AS noted, investments have reduced as a result of the market, but Brewin Dolphin continued to advise on investment strategy.</p> <p>£20,000 has been budgeted for genetic work and this will help review the population densities of the upper Meig. Genetic sampling will have to be taken from juveniles which can be carried out during electric fishing work.</p> <p>Looking to the future, the Board has a limited remit with limited resource and the Trust is looking to change its outlook and how it operates. The Trust is looking to work in parallel with the Board and fund projects which will help with long term management, and catchment objectives, including tree planting and providing a centre for education.</p> <p>The management structure of the Trust still needs to be considered along with the funding structure for long term security of the Trust.</p> <p>ID agrees with the thinking of the change and the suggestion of looking at other sources of funding. ID further noted employment of employees is not necessarily required if the Trust contracts the Board or others to undertake its work, but the Boards role is limited in its current capacity. The Trust appears to have fared better than most with its investments and it would be worthwhile reviewing the profile of shares.</p> <p>The Board discussed the merits of potentially undertaking Trust work without employing somebody specifically and whether agencies and advisors could fill this role. The Spey Initiative was suggested as a possible model for the Trust.</p>	

	AC summarised that this was work in progress and he looked forward to hearing more from the trustees in due course.	
<b>9</b>	<b>NETTING</b>	
	WP noted that he did not net this year and there was no update on netting.	
<b>10</b>	<b>CONSERVATION POLICY</b>	
	<p>AC noted in a recent discussion with angling clubs the Board had inadvertently caused issues with part way through the year policy updates. AC apologised for this and noted the changes had been made to clarify the fish handling. The Board will look to consult prior to making changes in the future. AC asked that everyone please urge fishermen to handle fish correctly and not to remove fish from the water.</p> <p>PG suggested a maximum of two fish to be killed. AC noted there is sufficient wording in the policy to return fish but there needs to be an incentive for angling clubs and their members.</p> <p>SD responded that he was happy with the policy. ID also confirmed that he requires 100% of fish to be released unless it is someone's first fish.</p> <p>RMF observed that it was important to empower fishermen, so they feel good about returning a fish.</p> <p>The Board had a general discussion on the conservation policy and agreed the new policy for 2024.</p>	
<b>11</b>	<b>AOCB</b>	
	<p>CP enquired about access to meetings, NW responded that meetings were open to all members of the public regardless of whether someone was an elected board member or not.</p> <p>AE update the Board on the Alness weir and debris removal, Dalmore Distillery will undertake the removal of the debris.</p> <p>SD enquired if the Board will be keeping an eye on the hydrogen project. The Board discussed the hydrogen project and the lack of detail that was available for it to date. RMF was to undertake any Boards response.</p> <p>JU noted that there was lots of gravel movement on the lower Conon and the club may approach SEPA once the water level has reduced.</p> <p>TB updated the Board on Strathconon' s activities and noted the estate is looking to undertake significant riparian woodland schemes. The estate is also working with SSE to find a solution to the Orrin migration issues.</p> <p>RMF explained that Novar lost three bridges due to the latest storms and they would be looking to replace all three structures as pedestrian bridges. KB offered advice and assistance from SEPA.</p> <p>GP noted that hot water was being released into the River Alness, KB responded that this was allowed under their CAR licence and the temperature was assessed at the weir.</p>	

	GP asked if this temperature change would affect fish. AE suggested this could cause a barrier for fish movement. PG suggested a discussion with the Spey Board would be valuable as they've carried out research on distillery discharge. SB responded that the Board has temperature loggers, and these could be used if required in the Alness, along with an electric fishing programme.	
<b>12</b>	<b>DATE OF NEXT MEETING</b>	
	19 <sup>th</sup> March 2024	