

Monthly Report – January 2024

Contin hatchery and egg stocking

Throughout January, the team worked in the Contin hatchery to ensure that flows remained adequate and that any dead eggs were picked out to avoid contamination. As a result, hatchery mortality remains below 1%.

The first eggs put down in the hatchery are now approaching 280-degree days and have developed strong eyes, accordingly, we will shortly begin the ‘shocking’ process. This process involves giving the eggs a mild mechanical shock to remove any unfertilised, or ‘blind’, eggs prior to planting out in the river. This ensures that we have accurate estimates not just for mortality, but also for the density of stocking for all areas of the Blackwater.

Preparations for smolt trapping

Whilst our main focus is currently on the stocking of the Blackwater, we have also been looking ahead to the start of the smolt run. 2024 will see us continue with the day versus night release study whereby we tag smolts and release 50% during the day and the other 50% over night using an automated release cage. Preliminary results have indicated that smolts released at night have a 46% greater likelihood of reaching the estuarine environment. If the initial results are replicated over the study period, the board will move towards 100% night release protocol.

The successful downstream migration of smolts is severely impacted by the prevalence of impounded water bodies within the catchment. Smolts struggle to navigate their way through large reservoirs and are subject to higher mortality. Working with SSE, the board will also trial a novel smolt guidance system developed by Whoosh Innovations (Seattle) on the Meig reservoir. The system will guide the smolts to the loch exit via an electrical barrier and it is hoped that smolts will be able to navigate through the loch quickly and with lower mortality than has been historically observed.

Staff will also be attempting to improve the efficiency of our rotary screw traps through several novel approaches. The principal aim being to maintain efficiency during times of low flow, when the traps can slow or even cease turning entirely. As ever the Board wish to extend thanks to Strathconon Estate for continued assistance with installation and storage of rotary screw traps.

Riverwoods – storm repairs and non-native regen clearance

In the latter part of January, the team started a program of tree maintenance and conifer clearance on the Rannoch burn. The Rannoch burn is a tributary of the Blackwater and an important juvenile habitat. The board completed an extensive riparian planting scheme 8+ years ago and many of these trees are now over 3m tall. However, a considerable number of tree tubes and support stakes had blown over during recent

storms and so these are being shored up and refastened to ensure these native trees continue to establish on this previously deforested burn.

The riparian strip sits alongside extensive Sitka spruce and Lodgepole pine plantations and these trees have self-seeded throughout the regeneration site. Some of which are now mature trees. The team have already felled a number of larger trees, hinging some into the burn to provide further instream cover and habitat, and will continue to work their way downstream ensuring only native tree species remain.



Bailiffing

After sitting the IFM Water Bailiffing exam in December, Sunny Bradbury is now a warranted water bailiff. This now means that every Cromarty Firth Fishery Board employee holds an active warrant card. As ever, patrols are carried out throughout the district year-round. We urge anyone who witnesses any illegal or suspicious activity to get in touch with the team.