

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

**Tuesday 19th March 2024
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	John MacAskill	JM
Troels Bavnhoj (Kirkbi Estates)	TB	Liam Much	LM
Stephen Dowds (Loch Achonachie Angling Club)	SD	Ryan Rutherford	RR
Andrew Easton (Alness Angling Club)	AE	John Wood	JW
William Paterson (Netsman)	WP		
Dave Smith (Evanton Angling Club)	DS		
Alistair Stephen (Cromarty Firth Fisheries Trust)	AS		
John Urquhart (Dingwall & District Angling Club)	JU		
Peter Graham (Conon Fishing Syndicate)	PG		
Glyn Robson (Lochluichart Estate)	GR		
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) Piers Cumberlage (Allt Graad) Ian Duncan (Kildermorie Estate) David Flux (Coul) Andrew Matheson (Brahan Estate) Charlotte Hingston (Fairburn Estate) Ben Leyshon (Naturescot)</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, 26th OCTOBER 2023	

	The minutes of the last meeting were proposed by RMF and seconded by TB.	
4	MATTERS ARISING	
	AC noted that any matters arising would be dealt with during the meeting.	
5	FINANCE UPDATE	
	<p>Year to date NW ran over the finances 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>The account is sitting at around £80,000 at the yearend with around £32,000 still due from SSE, this mainly relates to the WHOOSH project on the Meig reservoir.</p> <p>The Board had not budgeted the NEPS programme of electrofishing due to uncertainties, but this did go ahead and this amounted to a further £17,000.</p> <p>Expenditure was lower than budgeted in certain areas, such as building repairs, although a further 4x4 pick up was purchased using the extra contract work funds.</p> <p>The Board might achieve around £5,000 surplus for the year.</p> <p>Budget and assessment 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.</p> <p>The assessment amount has been set at 0.65p in the pound again for 2023/24. However, NW highlighted that although the assessment has been kept the same as last year the Board would be collecting less money due to successful ratings appeals. 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 5 years ago at £1.10.</p> <p>Other income streams for the Board remain the SSE contract work worth £208,500 for the year, with further contract work from the SISI project and small amounts of contract electrofishing.</p> <p>NW ran over expenditure for the budget, wages remain the largest expenditure of the Board with a full compliment of 5 staff and a SISI project officer. Other expenditure remains relatively similar to last year with the rolling programme of replacing 1 vehicle each year.</p> <p>The Board agreed to spend up to £2,000 on riverbank work in order to allow projects to be completed, or kickstarted where other funding wasn't available. This will allow the Fishery Manager discretion to complete these projects.</p> <p>Questions and answers were accepted.</p> <p>The Board approved the budget for 2024/25</p>	

	<p>PG enquired about project expenditure as there did not seem to be a great deal budgeted. SB responded that the majority of projects for 2024 were privately funded and they would not be budgeted though the Boards finances.</p> <p>WP enquired about investing in the hatchery to maximise output. SB noted that some work was ongoing to repair pipes and make the hatchery more efficient. AS responded that the hatchery is ultimately SSE’s responsibility.</p>	
6	FISHERIES BIOLOGISTS UPDATE	
	<p>SB ran over the biologist report which had been circulated prior to the meeting.</p> <p>Loch na Croic had a better year with 896 fish being caught in the trap, there were low mortality rates with less than two dozen fish lost. SB wished to thank the team for their work over the season, which included the ghillies on the Conon.</p> <p>SB noted that there is a lack of surplus eggs for other projects within the catchment but there is sufficient eggs to restock the Blackwater fully. SB noted that he wished to look at the Bran system to better understands the issues there, which appear to be predation, the Meig appears to be in very good order.</p> <p>Work is ongoing to release gravel into the Orrin below the dam, with contractors due to be on site this summer with gravel reintroduction happening in advance of any returning fish from sea. The Orrin project is a priority for the Board and SSE, significant traction is being made on plans for the upper Orrin.</p> <p>SB ran over a catchment audit and noted that juvenile parr looked good overall but some upstream tributaries had low densities of juveniles, likely due to altitude and lack of nutrients. It is recognised that the upper reaches lack nutrients and suffer from higher water temperatures. It would be an aspiration to look at planting these reaches. The Board will also continue to trap and truck as a priority for mitigation of hydro dams, which SSE continues to support.</p> <p>AC enquired about WHOOSH and the proposed project on the Meig reservoir. SB ran over WHOOSH and noted that they had invented the salmon canon, and they wish to look at the Orrin for a guidance system to assist with the smolt exit. SSE engaged with WHOOSH and they have been over to looked at the Orrin and the Meig, they have offered to equip a project on the Meig and support a guidance system which has been made available at the last minute. SB noted that the Board team would set up a robust study to look at the efficiency of the WHOOSH design, if the system worked efficiently it could be rolled out onto the Orin.</p> <p>PG enquired about the infrastructure that was going to be used for the study. SB noted that it will be tension cables laid across the front of the dam, with anodes hanging down into the water which produce a low current which help guide fish. The barrier would be switched on and off to determine effectiveness and the fish would be pit tagged.</p> <p>SD thanked SB for involving the Club in the project and they were very happy to help.</p>	

	<p>AC thanked SD for his Clubs offer of help. SD enquired if the anode curtain was turned on would it signal to larger fish to swoop in and eat the smolts. SB responded that he thought it would be a deterrent instead. AS noted low current doesn't affect Small fish but large fish get more of a shock.</p> <p>PG enquired about the fish trap on the Orrin. SB noted best practice would be to trap returning fish in the trap and then strip the eggs, which could be more successful than allowing the fish to make their own way up through the reservoir on their own, it could provide better survival rates and better stocking densities.</p> <p>The Board discussed in general the Orrin and the feasibility of trapping and trucking from the headwater, and whether alternatives could be looked at such as WHOOSH.</p> <p>RMF enquired about temperature rises and nutrients in the river. SB responded nutrient experiments have been trialled in the system previously and it seemed to work with juveniles becoming bigger, although densities didn't change. SB suggested introducing woody structures and rough objects that could encourage invertebrates and so providing a sustainable food source. The previous project within the catchment looked at fish pellets to mimic the nutrients from wild salmon, and studies on other rivers have looked at deer by products. For long-term planning repairing woodland is likely the best outcome.</p> <p>AS commented further on the nutrient study and the use of pellets in the river, there was a worry from SEPA that too many nutrients may be added to the river and this element of the study was never completed.</p> <p>JU enquired about taking eggs from the Blackwater main stem to supplement other parts of the catchment. SB responded that this was a frequent asked question, but it cannot be justified taking healthy fish from one part of a catchment and putting them into another tributary.</p> <p>PG enquired about using eggs from the Blackwater elsewhere and not fully stocking the upper Blackwater. SB noted that diminishing returns would mean that would be detrimental to the Blackwater and it would not be advisable, it is highly unlikely that SSE would agree to it.</p> <p>PG suggested taking only a small number to keep other runs going.</p> <p>AS commented on the gravel on the Orrin, and whether this could be done sooner. SB suggested this would likely be completed during the summer.</p>	
7	HYDRO REPORT	
	<p>SB Stood in for Ross Glover of SSE.</p> <p>The long-awaited fish counter upgrade is being carried out this week, Mark 14 resistivity counters and pit decoders to be installed. All counters to follow.</p> <p>SSE will continue to support the day and night release of Smolts from Achanalt and the Meig.</p> <p>Planned outages of Luichart dam for maintenance will require a 17 week outage, this will mean checking water levels and fish rescues maybe required</p>	

	<p>during the summer.</p> <p>The water pipe to the hatchery is due to be replaced. There is a delay with Naturescot and the Highland Council, until this is resolved the pipe cannot be installed.</p>	
8	TRUST REPORT	
	<p>AS ran briefly over the Trust report, commenting that the Trust solicitors are in the process of changing the Trust name and setting up a new SCIO. The trustees are working hard looking at other organisations and how they are structured.</p> <p>A business plan is being produced which will allow the Trust to move forward.</p>	
9	NETTING	
	<p>WP noted no changes to netting. Due to no netting taking place along the coast it is difficult to know when there is a run of fish coming into the river, and it's not possible to know what damage the seals may be having to these runs of fish.</p>	
10	INFORMATION SHARING	
	<p>AC informed the Board that a separate meeting had been held with some of the Angling club representatives which highlighted the need for more information sharing. This led to the decision to renew the Board website and look at ways of pushing information out via the website and social media. Some responsibility will lie with Board members and owner/ club representatives wishing to seek the information and sharing it. AS noted Highland Environment Forum are good at sharing information and they may have a good database to share.</p>	
11	AOCB	
	<p>AC wished to issue a reminder that no treble hooks should be used and best practice for fish handling should be adhered to. AC asked members not to take fish out of the water and to ensure all their members/ guests are made aware.</p> <p>JU enquired about pink salmon as no significant numbers have been seen. SB responded that no reports had been filed for last year and no major numbers seen.</p> <p>TB wish to thank Ross Glover of SSE and SB for working on the Orrin project. Strathconon Estate are moving to a more nature conservation focus, with fishing lets been stopped and the estate will be looking at riparian woodland planting along the river.</p> <p>SD and TB discussed fishing and the cessation of letting on Strathconon as it was going to affect the Loch Achonachie Angling club. SD wished to persuade the owner to look at alternatives as it was a real concern of the Club.</p> <p>PG enquired if shooting to scare Goosesanders was permitted. SB explained that it is not permitted, and you can only shoot to kill and not just shoot to scare. PG offered the help of the Brahan syndicate ghillies, with bird counts and shooting. SB welcomed the assistance of the ghillies and he would liaise directly with them to set up information sharing meetings. SB offered to sit down with the ghillies to work out a solution for the three birds that were allowed to be controlled on the Conon, but everybody would have to adhere to the license strictly.</p>	

12	DATE OF NEXT MEETING	
	22 nd October 2024i	