

MINUTES OF ANNUAL PROPRIETORS & WRASFB BOARD MEETING

By Conference Call	PRESENT: Stephen Bate (SB) Rosie Nicoll (RN) Philippa Cliff (Pippa)
DATE: 21 November 2023	
OPENED AT:10.40 CLOSED AT:12.35	APOLOGIES Stuart Allison (SA) Gordon Crawford (GC) Donald Rice (DR) Andrew D Barclay (ADB)
IN ATTENDANCE: Peter Jarosz (PJ) Peter Cunningham (PC) Sue Ward (SW) Finlay Owen (FO) Charlotte Middleton (CM)	

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Gordon Crawford, Donald Rice, Stuart Alison and Andrew Barclay.

2. Approval of the minutes of the 17th November 2022 Meeting

The minutes had been previously approved by email - they were proposed by RN and seconded by GC.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising that hadn't previously been dealt with by email. There has been some dialogue with Sea Change over work in Loch Ewe. PJ will check the current situation then add a short paragraph about the Sea Change work into the report, including noting that WRASFB provided some funding.¹

4. The WRASFB Accounts 2022-23 and financial report for the year to date

RN reported that she has looked over the accounts which were discussed in detail via email with PJ and SB and confirms that everything is up to date and clear, and the figures are correct. PJ will arrange for the Treasurer to sign, then send back to Graham Bell or Ed Claxton at Oakbridge to get the document formally signed off. Also need to make sure that Oakbridge use this updated template with corrected information for next year.

PJ confirmed that no comments have been received from Proprietors regarding the annual report and accounts, and no Proprietors attended this meeting though FO was in attendance representing the Gairloch Estate.

5. Update on Aquaculture Events Since Last Meeting

SB introduced the major events since the last meeting, details of which are in the 2022-23 annual report. These include approval of Torridon EMPs, the Corry application in relation to modified nets and, the Ardmair consent and EMP.

PJ added that Wester Ross Fisheries Ltd now have a planning (not just scoping) application for approval of an automatic feed machine at Corry Farm, Loch Broom. The board have objected to this on the basis that it is a new application and therefore needs an EMP, on which we should be consulted.

With regard to Torridon, now that the EMP's are formalised there needs to be discussions with the aquaculture companies about future monitoring and EMP issues. Discussions should involve all farm owners and interested parties to ensure a harmonised approach. PJ has had indications via Stephen Macintyre at MOWI that WRFT would be considered as a potential body to help monitor the system next year. FMS (CM) would be happy to support such a meeting and suggests the timing should be

after the current year monitoring report performed by APEM is available to use as a base. Agreed that the meeting should take place ASAP.

The meeting discussed whether Marine Directorate (formerly Marine Scotland) should also be involved and their data from Loch Torridon requested. There were mixed opinions on the value of this and likelihood of their data sharing. PC asked if the Marine Directorate report of sea trout monitoring in Shieldaig from two production cycle years had been published yet, as this would help inform for Torridon. CM did not know timescales and suggests it should not hold up Torridon discussions.

PC suggested a sea lice review meeting by FMS for the whole Wester Ross area, with Marine Directorate invited to share knowledge, plus the aquaculture companies, and the new player of SEPA, so everyone could review their data and trends. Could this be run in parallel with EMP meeting? CM has experience of previous meetings like this and could investigate.

The meeting agreed that an initial meeting with the aquaculture companies should initially just be focused on the Torridon EMPs, to get a firm monitoring proposal for 2024 and onwards. Future meetings could include wider issues and additional participants at a later date.

ACTION PJ – the Board will write to Michael Hill (Bakkafrost) and Stephen Macintyre (MOWI) to propose a meeting once they have the APEM 2023 results to hand, to discuss the EMPs and the monitoring going forward. WRFT biologist should be included in the meeting, along with FMS to ensure harmonisation of approaches to monitoring. PJ reported that the Scottish Government has now officially abandoned a proposal to create Highly Protected Marine Areas (HPMAs).

6. SEPA's new regulatory regime for the control of sea lice from aquaculture

CM advises that SEPA have not yet finalised an approach to wild fish monitoring for next year. They are keen on sentinel cages and are looking at a unified standard for sentinel cages across the West Coast to support monitoring work. They don't know how existing monitoring using sweep nets and coastal fyke nets is going to feed in just yet. They are keen to use Fisheries Trust expertise. An update will follow once FMS know more, but unlikely to be this year.

See annual report for more details on developments for the regulatory regime.

7. WRFT Biologist's report

PC shared his screen with the meeting to go through a presentation showing the work that WRFT had performed in the last year.

PC put key questions to the Board to ask for support 'in principle' for projects, to enable WRFT to target grant funding this winter. Details were in the presentation slide PDF, circulated by email. The projects in brief are:

- Sea trout in the sea project. Meetings with anglers to inform the legal status and set up a permit and recording system.
- Feeding hungry juvenile salmon. Following observations of very small juvenile salmon in some Wester Ross rivers.
- Bruachaig wild salmon restoration project. Re-stocking and monitoring.
- Wester Ross riparian tree restoration. Enclosures for tree planting
- Sea bed habitats – issues with filamentous algae on Maerl beds.

As there were only a few Board members present at the meeting, there was no firm discussion on project steering. Comments to PC are welcomed.

8. SSPO Funding for WRFT

PJ informed the Board that the WRFT had sought and received a grant from Funding Scotland of SSPO monies for a preliminary project on the Rhidorroch river to look at the causes of significant river bank erosion due to sediment being brought down from the upper reaches of the river system by huge spates. The administration of the grant funding was entirely down to Funding Scotland and that initial work has now been done. SSPO have now moved the administration of this funding away from Funding Scotland into the hands of Jon Gibb of Lochaber Salmon Fishery Board and the trustees of the WRFT are now reluctant to submit funding applications, for the continuation of this Rhidorroch project or indeed any other project, to the SSPO fund via Jon Gibb. The WRFT is now seeking the WRASFB's view on this funding source. The Board Members agreed unanimously that they did not approve of WRFT seeking funding of SSPO monies via Jon Gibb.

9. AOCB

a. Catch returns

Proprietors will be asked to send in their catch returns by PJ.

b. Office rent

Gairloch Estate have now requested an annual rent of £5,500 for the Harbour Centre office, which to date has been occupied rent-free. This is a sizeable amount for WRFT as a charity, due to the majority of income being for specific grants, from which rent cannot be paid. The office is also used for WRASFB business.

PJ had requested a meeting with Duncan Mackenzie of Gairloch Estate to discuss, which has not been granted. The Trust has yet to see or sign a lease document. WRFT is requesting WRASFB to contribute towards the rent, to the tune of 1/3 of the annual rent.

SB advised that once WRFT have decided what to do about occupancy of the premises, they formally approach the Board to request a contribution. If the WRASFB agree to contribute for their occupation they may need to be on the lease documents.

ACTION – WRFT to finalise rent agreement (which was to commence on 28th November 2023).

c. Riparian woodland article

This article from the River Dee was circulated with the meeting minutes of the previous meeting. A similar article now exists for the river Laxford, with a plan to plant 1 million trees along riverbanks. These studies add to evidence that riparian woodland is a recognised conservation technique for the preservation of wild fish stocks. Riparian woodlands are linked to fish and water health through effects on water temperature and food supply.

SB asked PJ, PC and WRFT to put together a framework for decision making for such issues in the board area to enable the board/trust to support such initiatives effectively. PC pointed out that conditions are site-specific, and success requires active input by Proprietors and Ghillies.

ACTION WRFT to put together a framework for riparian work on specific rivers to aid decision-making on these projects.

d. Semi-closed containment

CM reported on the proposal by Loch Long Salmon to bring semi-closed containment to Scotland. The original proposal for Loch Long was rejected and is now under appeal.

They are about to put in a 2nd proposal for Loch Linnie and are looking at a 3rd site at Loch Carron. Semi-closed containment is closed containment in water with an impermeable barrier around pens which should prevent interaction with wild salmon and prevent sea lice and escapes. This should be better than open net pens if treated as replacements rather than additional farms, but the issues are complex. The technology has (so the board was informed by CM) been used successfully in other locations including Norway and Canada. However, it is new to Scotland and the proposed number of fish in the pens is huge, at 8,000 tonnes. This is more than twice the size of the current largest in Scotland and potential effects could be catastrophic to the wild fish population. FMS are currently discussing how to respond to such applications. Loch Long Salmon have asked FMS to put them in touch with local stakeholders for the Loch Carron area, which is slightly south of the Wester Ross board area and covered by the Skye and Lochalsh Rivers Trust but FMS are looking at WRASFB to be involved as the most relevant nearby Fisheries Board. FMS is looking to arrange an introductory meeting of Loch Long Salmon with Skye and Lochalsh Rivers Trust and WRASFB to explain their technology and proposals. PC queried whether Loch Carron was actually part of the Skye and Lochalsh Rivers Trust area and not WRFT as WRFT have done some electrofishing on the river Carron this year.

Action: CM to check this. Whatever the answer, PC has a stakeholder interest in his role of providing advice to the WRASFB.

PJ asked CM if Loch Long Salmon were aware of any waves larger than 2m in Loch Long. Waves are a known issue for closed containment pens. CM does not know, but advised that locations of proposed containment pens would need to take this into account. PC asked for information on how waste would be recovered, given the large number of fish per pen proposed. CM thinks the technology aims to recover 85% of the waste, and will try to find this out and confirm, but it would form part of the initial meeting discussions.

SB advised that WRASFB should not step outside the formal planning process for sharing information and responding to proposals. However, PC as WRFT biologist should be given the opportunity to learn about and understand the technology, so that he can inform the Board accordingly. CM responded that FMS is pushing for pre-application discussions for such proposals, and considers them valuable for understanding applications more fully and raising initial questions and issues upfront before planning applications are submitted. Loch Long Salmon also favour this route as a way of gaining support for better wild fish protection through this new technology. SB's suggestion is still that PC meets and speaks to Loch Long Salmon on a scientific basis, and then informs and advises the Board. PC happy to attend such discussions with FMS, and suggests meetings with other fishery Trusts to share knowledge to gain a better understanding of the wider regional picture.

SB still uncomfortable about dealing with details before the application has been submitted. Fine for PC to discuss the science and meet as a fact-finding exercise, but the Board should not respond until the application is formally submitted. PJ and RN agree. PJ gave an example of a previous application post discussion that contained a statement that we had endorsed the application. CM stated she has had meetings with other area Boards and has not come across this situation. Part of Loch Carron is about potential locations and this would benefit everyone if informed and discussed early. CM appreciates the Board's position. She will include us in any proposed meeting so we can choose to. PC requested that any meeting should be a technical one with FMS and a range of biologists who can ask questions and discuss together afterwards to gain a common understanding. CM advises there is a biologists' meeting next week to discuss this and other matters.

ACTION POINT: SB would like the views of all other Board members who were not present at this current meeting. It needs to be clear what the Board is actually being asked to do.

PJ asked CM if the Loch Carron application goes ahead, would Highland Council approach WRASFB for formal consultation. CM didn't know, but advises there is a need for wild fish representation and will sort out by whom once it is submitted. SB asked CM would FMS provide help to allow WRASFB to make representations on Loch Carron, if Highland Council don't directly invite comment. CM does not see an issue with this. CM will be leaving FMS at end of January to move abroad. Loch Long Salmon remains her priority until she leaves. The Board thanked Charlotte for her help over the years and wished her well for the future.

e. Bruachaig Restocking

Donald Macleod (Kinlochewe Estate) approached PC about getting a stocking project and hatchery going on the river Bruachaig. PC has drafted a document for this. The site is affected by Hydro schemes, with some fish above the falls and some good habitat. The project affects the whole of the River Ewe system, and therefore a number of Proprietors.

RN would like to seek approval from the Board for this project, in principle. More work needs to be done, and advice will come from PC. Funding will likely be by Kinlochewe Estate. The Bruachaig river is a category 2 river, so can take fish out.

SB said that we are not able to deal with this at this meeting and asked RN to put the information into a short document and circulate. **ACTION RN**

d. Any other issues.

Pippa advised that the Torridon Landscape partnership now has a full time Project Development Officer, Joan Cunningham. If PC has any queries about riparian woodland in Coulin, please get in touch with Joan.

Pippa also advised that as of 1st December 2023, she will be working for the Bulmers and wanted to let the Board know in case of any conflict of Interest.

PC wanted to let the meeting know that Frank Buckley, a former Ghillie on Loch Maree for many years, died earlier this year.

10. Date of Next Meeting

The date of our next meeting will be arranged by DoodlePoll.

¹ Addendum: In October 2023 the Board made a donation of £150.00 to Sea Change towards a project in Loch Ewe named Loch Ewe Maerl Transect. PJ had a very recent conversation with Sara Nason who informed him that to date the project had not taken place due mainly to inclement weather at the back end of 2023 and early 2024. That said, Sea Change have teamed up with a newly formed group (Sea Bed and Sea Shore Loch Ewe) and the project is scheduled to be completed in May 2024.

Sea Bed and Sea Shore Loch Ewe has all the underwater equipment as well as a number of divers on its books.

These minutes were proposed by RN and seconded by PC.

Signed:

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4/3/2024