

MINUTES OF WRASFB BOARD MEETING

By Conference Call	PRESENT:	
DATE: 17 April 2024	Stephen Bate (SB) Pippa Cliff (Pippa)	Rosie Nicoll (RN) Donald Rice (DR)
OPENED AT: 10.30 CLOSED AT: 12.30	APOLOGIES	
IN ATTENDANCE: Peter Jarosz (PJ) Peter Cunningham (PC) Sue Ward (SW) Michael Aitchison (MA) Kevin Ginty (KG)	Stuart Allison (SA) Andrew D Barclay (ADB)	Gordon Crawford (GC)

1. Apologies

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

2. Approval of the minutes of the 21st November 2023 Meeting

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

3. Matters Arising

The following items from the November 2023 minutes were brought to the attention of the Board by PJ and were discussed:

Item 6, SEPA regulations. To date no update has been received from FMS but the Board did receive useful on-line link from Helen Feenan (FMS) to SEPA's FAQs. See FMS annual report also.

Item 9, Office rent. WRFT were to finalise agreement. MA has written to Estate to ask for agreement and contract but to date nothing received from Gairloch Estate.

Item AOCB c, Riparian woodlands. WRFT to make action plan. PC to report.

Item AOCB d, Semi-closed containment issue, Loch Long. FMS were to arrange introductory meeting of all parties to explain. Any report yet?

Item AOCB e, the Board approved the re-stocking project for the River Bruachaig.

4. Draft Budget 2024-25 and Levy Setting

PJ had previously circulated Payments Cash Book for the full year 2023-24 to the Board. Amendment – Under "receipts" P3 additions of mid column did not include last few items so total should be £22,695 which is a sound position and this excludes some £455 of levies outstanding.

PJ presented a budget for 2024-25. Based on level set at 55p that will raise circa £23K. This shows our £10K (Contingency Fund) as well as £15K surplus. 55p was agreed by the board members.

The budget also includes an FMS donation of £1K (second year of three) towards the employment of a PhD student for research into Saprolegnia.

5. Update on Aquaculture Events Since Last Meeting including EMPs and wild-fish monitoring

PJ confirmed that there had been no aquaculture planning applications since our last meeting. There was the ongoing application for approval of an automatic feed machine at Corry Farm, Loch Broom. This was raised at Ardmair EMP meeting with Stephen MacIntyre (SM) (Mowi) with a request that the Ardmair EMP includes this farm as well. There has been no further news regarding this application.

Discussions with the relevant aquaculture companies took place on 14th February 2024 (Ardmair and Torridon EMPs) and on 23rd February 2024 (Loch Ainort, Caol Mor EMP) and the minutes of those meetings had previously been circulated to board members.

RN asked about the review of Torridon aquaculture production cycles – are they both going to stock with fish and harvest in 18 months time? Bakka Frost are proposing to do so, Mowi as yet have not confirmed.

PC said the proposed revised (shorter) production cycle for all the Torridon sites will be beneficial, especially as there will be a window of lice free water when salmon smolts go to sea (similarly with Caol Mor). Need to check co-ordination for Torridon between all companies if the shorter production period is to reduce sea lice.

PC explained why the shorter production period potentially mitigated on-farm sea lice abundance. A longer fallow period and shorter period of production means a shorter life cycle for lice, and the lice population will drop down when there is a fallow period. (He pointed out that it is commercially advantageous to stock with larger fish.)

RN asked can anyone speak to SEPA or others informing them of this evidence. PC has evidence from the monitoring at the Applecross river (WRFT report) and WRFT are doing more monitoring this year. Data from 2024 monitoring will be publicly available.

SB noted that there was a suggestion in the Caol Mor minutes that Mowi will continue their support for monitoring if Mowi's position is accepted that there is no significant proof of lice from their Loch Ainort farms as being the source of severe sea lice infection found by PC in the May 2023 monitoring of the Applecross river. SB queried whether this had been accepted and assumed that it had not been. PC said the Applecross monitoring started because the area was considered a sea lice hot-spot from modelling that had been submitted with the Mowi planning application for their Caol Mor fish farm. The WRASFB in their response to that application considered that monitoring of the Applecross river was therefore a necessary part of wild fish monitoring for that fish farm. Although PC found a heavy lice load on wild fish from the May 2023 monitoring, there are many farms likely all contributing to a complex situation of sea lice infestation in that area.

SB stated that for Torridon the Board had asked that WRFT is involved due to concerns of small amount of wild fish caught last year by APEM. SB pleased that WRFT are invited to do the monitoring in full in 2024. This is currently being finalised.

RN queried about making data public, in that ours can be, but the information on lice from fish farms may be commercially sensitive? PC replied that fish farm lice data is public, but fish stock numbers are not, so it is near impossible to extrapolate a meaningful lice load. To date WRFT has not been able to publish its data, but now it

can, which is an improvement. Can the Board ask SEPA, or others, to get farms to publish stocking information also?

SB said that it is so important to keep positive discussions so far as possible and a working relationship with Mowi and others. We now have opportunities of dialogue through EMPs, e.g. the recent constructive discussions on production cycles where peak production might be capable of being timed so as not to coincide with smolt migration windows. PC agreed - progress made with Applecross harvesting out before smolt migration window, but need to keep an eye on Torridon and others also for the future. RN agreed.

From the Caol Mor meeting minutes, SB understands Skye & Lochalsh Rivers Trust (S&LRT) is continuing to do monitoring in the Loch Ainort area is that the case? PC understands this to be so, but asks if S&LRT is also going to put data up publicly like WRFT will do? PC could mention to Helen of FMS when she attends the WRFT meeting next week.

SB said that from the precis notes regarding the SEPA's new proposed monitoring regime (link to earlier discussion of SEPA information (item 3)), it would appear that included in the most at risk category is Mowi's Torridon farm. Can PC find out which farms are most at risk? PJ will ask SEPA. PJ also asked will the Board continue to be statutory consultee, as it is not mentioned in FAQs? SB suggested PJ to ask SEPA those 2 queries.

ACTION – PJ to ask SEPA 2 questions. Which farms in our area are in the "Most at Risk" category and whether Board will continue to be a statutory consultee.

6. Should there be a 'small rivers' levy exemption?

PJ. This was triggered in the process of a levy reminder. Query from one proprietor as the Lael doesn't have any/many fish, so why should they pay levy on that river? Can there be an exemption? PJ has discussed with Robert Shepherd (Valuation assessor) who says once an entry is taken off the register it is difficult to get it back on. PC observed that there are some salmon in the Lael. PJ had corresponded with the Argyll board, which does operate such an exemption. So should proprietors of small rivers with no/ no significant fish population be granted a levy exemption?

DR was not in favour and did not think anyone should have an exemption. As to the Lael, some salmon will still likely be there and the river will still have capital value, unless it is biologically dead. The board levy is more than a fishing fee. A lot of work goes on because of the levy money and this is important work for all rivers. RN agreed with DR; any exemption raises questions of how many years of no fish and how to police and agree this exemption would be many hours invested. So everyone should pay something. Pippa agreed. PC confirmed that, from his electro-fishing of the Lael, there are salmon in that river. SB confirmed that there was no support for a levy exemption.

7. WRFT Biologist's report

Report from Peter C, information on report. He had three points to raise:

Riparian woodland - will be looking for funding from appropriate funders. Would like to arrange a meeting with the Gruinard river for fish habitat improvement. WRFT has bid

for a nutrient enhancement project, so would Coulin like to be part of this and riparian woodlands. Pippa asked if contact with Joan C yet – yes, should be coming to workshop next week.

Bruachaig - There is a meeting on Monday next to discuss restocking and hatchery.

E-fishing - No funding from NEPS in 2024. Peter will be doing rivers not done last year using funding provided by the Board.

Workshop next week, no specific funding so Board core funding will contribute, thanks.

SB. For riparian schemes, it would be useful for Estate owners/proprietors, to know of potential ways of funding. PC suggests Riverwoods may be useful to help there, in partnership with FMS? They may provide guidance on funding etc. PC will follow up and send link on Riverwoods. Meetings with Proprietors would be the best way forward. SB said that the Board could let proprietors know via a briefing note? MA agreed that WRFT is keen to meet with land owners/proprietors to get projects.

Action. PC to do a briefing note draft.

8. Angler's Representatives' Report

Apologies Dave B absence. Dave B will be standing down as Anglers Rep. Will MA replace? SB welcomed close work with WRFT, and MA to attend but suggests we also have an Anglers Rep. MA agreed. It was better for MA to attend as Chair of Trust than Anglers Rep. PJ will explore getting an Anglers Rep.

9. AOCB

a. River Lael levy invoice

Already discussed: see 6 above.

SB also raised the position of Netting rights. He understood that the rights were not exercised, the Board has not been charging and has been content to exercise its discretion not to charge. PJ confirmed that this was the case.

b. Office rent

Discussed. SB, Board should make provision for the rent proportion. MA rent should have been from Oct 2023 on quarterly basis, but no response from Estate. Rateable value £5.5K. Discussed at last meeting that Board would contribute around £1,500.

c. Clerk to the Board

Kevin Ginty presented to the meeting as next Clerk to the Board, from 1st May 2024. Practically due to leave, PJ will stay around until end of July for handovers. PJ request for proposals to accept. Proposal accepted. References to be taken up.

SB thanked and welcomed KG.

d. Bruachaig Restocking

RN requested that it be minuted that the Board has given permission. They have now identified a site and are putting in a road for new hatchery and starting to implement plans.

10. Date of Next Meeting

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

These minutes were proposed by Rosie Nicoll and seconded by Philippa Cliff.

Signed: [electronic]