

Meetings of the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board

November 4th, 2024 at 10:00, 10:15 and 10:30 hrs.

By Zoom/in person at The Harbour Centre, Gairloch

Minutes of the Annual Public, Proprietors' and Board

Meetings

Present:-

online: Stephen Bate, Rosie Nicoll, Peter Jarosz, Pippa Cliff, Donald Rice.

in person: Michael Aitchison (WRFT), Peter Cunningham, Gordon Crawford, Stuart Allison, Sue Ward (WRFT), Kevin Ginty (Clerk)

Annual Public Meeting

Welcome and introductions.

The Clerk informed those present that the meeting had been duly advertised in local papers and online. No members of the public were in attendance.

KG reported no additional agenda items had been raised.

Only matters for consideration are the draft report and accounts, which had been placed on the Board's website in advance of the meeting. As no members of the public had attended, SB proposed to defer consideration of those documents to the Proprietors'/ Board meeting. All agreed.

Meeting closed at 10:10.

Proprietors' Meeting (10:15)

Welcome. KG reported that no new agenda items were received, and that the meeting was duly advertised in the media. No proprietors were present.

As no proprietors had attended, SB proposed that consideration of the annual report and accounts be deferred to the Board meeting. All agreed.

Meeting closed at 10:20

Board Meeting

1. Apologies

None

2. Matters Arising from the last minutes including finalisation of the Annual Report.

The minutes of the meeting on 17 April 2024 had been signed off shortly after that meeting.

SB raised the briefing note anticipated in relation to the riparian woodland scheme. Peter Cunningham reported that he was now preparing that. KG will circulate with a view to a briefing note being sent to proprietors.

Annual report: The report in its draft form had been previously circulated to Board Members and there were no comments. In view of PC's biologist's report which was now to hand, SB proposed that there be added a short paragraph which refers to Peter's work this summer (as set out in the biologist's report), saying that a range of electrofishing and other work had been completed and that details are on the WRFT website. PC said that nearly all the sea lice monitoring data is available on the downloads page now, along with a newsletter that was added a month previously.

SB will provide an additional paragraph for the annual report to be circulated before the final report is signed off.

3. The WRASFB Accounts 2023-24 and financial report for the year to date.

SB queried position as to rent provision. MA reported that Duncan Mackenzie (DM) emailed last October stating that an annual rent of £5,500 was planned. MA stated that he had informed DM that rent would be paid and requesting a formal tenancy agreement with the Board also being on the tenancy agreement. No response received as yet. There was some question regarding the EPC certificate required to rent the premises.

Pippa Cliff said that we would not be able to be forced to pay back rent without a contract, so there was no need to pursue currently. GC said that we should wait and see.

Pippa Cliff asked who paid rates, and Peter Cunningham said that WRFT gets a waiver because it is a charity. PJ said that every three years a renewed claim for a waiver is made. Pippa Cliff said that the rateable value usually equals the market rent

SB queried that Neil Wright resigned in 2022 and should therefore not be listed in the accounts. Pippa Cliff is sole mandatory for Philip Smith, who is also identified as a committee member in the annual report.

4. Current financial position

KG reported the current account balance and outstanding items.

Four items shown in yellow on the accounts from last year have since been paid. They were shown in yellow as they came in after April 2023. KG to check over outstanding items from this year and circulate a list of outstanding levies to the Board showing which payments are outstanding for 2023 and 2024.

The Accounts were approved by the Board.

5. Aquaculture events 2024 (as dealt with in the Annual Report, any further queries)

SB reported that the minutes of EMP meetings relating to Torridon, Ardmair and Caol Mor were circulated at the time. The EMPs envisaged meetings between the Trust, the Board and the operators regarding the monitoring of sea lice in particular.

RN asked about the Board not being consulted on the EMP for Ardmair. PC reported that monitoring had been carried out during the summer.

SB: There are a number of action points regarding mitigation of sea lice. KG to follow up synchronisation arrangements with operators, mitigation of production numbers at times of the smolt run,. We were to give a picture of smolt run window for the local rivers by the Ardmair site so that MOWI can mitigate impacts from sea lice in that period in particular.

For 2024, a new regime is in place for the consenting of farms and management of lice operated by SEPA. SB reported that he attended a meeting on 31st Oct 2024, where it was confirmed that existing operators would be subject to a licence regime from March 2025, consisting of a permit regime regarding the control of lice. SB said those areas which had been designated in the modelling as high risk will be subject to lice limits on a particular farm, and there will be opportunities for companies to remedy, in addition to potential enforcement. The areas in the Torridon loch system and East Skye appeared to fall into this category.

KG reported that he had contacted Helen Feenan at FMS requesting more information.

SB said that peak biomass often arises at the smolt window. Some operators have shown apparent willingness to integrate a downward adjustment of biomass into their production schedule where commercially practicable.

MA asked re the monitoring of sea lice. SB reported that at the stakeholder meeting, SEPA stated that it would be taking over responsibility for that, but they will be contracting that out. SB stated that it would be worthwhile for the Trust to get in touch with SEPA's procurement section regarding monitoring work.

MA said that he had hoped FMS would be linking up the Trust and SEPA, however it would be worthwhile for the Trust to take the initiative.

SB said that there was discussion at the meeting of means to obtain robust data, including sentinel cages. PC said that was a good method, and that a combination of sweep netting and sentinel cages was probably best.

SB said it appeared that the licensing would relate to sea trout as well, though differently. SEPA will use the reporting requirements from on-farm sea lice and wild fish monitoring to report on numbers of sea lice and get an overall picture of the problem.

PJ suggested that monitoring data should be sent to NatureScot, keeping them involved as they would otherwise not be connected with the end of EMP protocol.

6. WRFT Biologist's Report

PC's biologist report was circulated in advance of the meeting. PC reported that

the main work was netting sea trout, for the EMPs. He has spent more time this year on that. Ardmair, and Gruinard Bay, and Kanaird were studied. High numbers of lice were found on sea trout there. Subsequent to the fallow periods, lice levels were lower.

PC said Gruinard was interesting. It is important to continue to monitor wild fish, and not just to rely on sentinel cages.

PC recommended the Torridon site for future investigation. Lice levels are generally a concern. Area between Applecross and East of Skye showed high levels of lice.

WRFT publish data on sea lice and encourage others to do so. Funding was available from the Scottish Government for sweep netting. Loch Ewe is important. More successful site at Flowerdale.

Juvenile fish surveys - electrofishing sites showed wild salmon data Torridon and Balgy had gaps in fry distribution, Applecross less so. Kaniard levels were better. Previously, WRFT surveyed all the rivers in the area every two years with government funding. Board funding was traditionally allocated to the electrofishing survey in the summer months.

The Bruachaig river at the top of the river Ewe system was surveyed. The new landowner there is interested in fish populations. Given enough water, the salmon would have no trouble getting up to the headwaters, where there is plenty of suitable environment. The main issue is the extraction of water into Loch Fannich as part of 1950's hydro scheme, restricting access to adult salmon.

Stream nutrition project - to replace marine nutrients adult salmon carcasses would have added to the rivers in the past. Runs of adult salmon would have been a factor in the food supply for the juvenile fish. Piloting methods from river Conon system, using salmon carcass pellets, which rot and feed insects, thus providing food for the juvenile salmon.

RN asked PC to confirm that there are no fish farm carcasses into the pellets. PC said pellets were from Inverkerry fish farm, made from fish meal from sand eels, herring and sprats, commercial farmed salmon feed. Starter feed for salmon smolts used in farms.

GC asked about deer carcasses and whether it wouldn't be simpler to allow a few carcasses to enter the river for almost no cost, and that it would serve the same purpose, putting in the non- saleable parts - legs and bones etc..

PC said some research was available into the nutrient loss from removing deer from the Highlands. Taking a deer off the hill removes 3kg of calcium and phosphate with each carcass.

SB asked how a positive effect could be reliably demonstrated from the salmon nutrition project? PC said that the size of fish would be the primary measure that would be used before and after to demonstrate efficacy. Invertebrate data could also be used to show productivity.

There was some discussion on potential linking up forming a joint fisheries/deer management group. PC referred to a 'Feed the Land' presentation of a study showing mineral loss from the land, and the impact on invertebrate populations and therefore fish sizes. PC to circulate research paper after the meeting.

PC reported that a Seagrass restoration project in Loch Ewe is being planned.

There is an Ecology workshop on 26th Nov 24 at Kinlochewe, linking it to an online course for wildlife enthusiasts interested in salmon lifecycle.

Two salmon smolt farms at Loch Damph reported an algal bloom. In the Balgy river salmon grow fast, possibly from escaped farmed fish. They may be a mix of escaped and wild salmon in the Balgy. The fry that are in the river grow so quickly that they go to sea after just one year, instead of two or three.

MA said that the salmon stream nutrition project only 50% funded - and asked if any additional support might be available.

7. AOCB

An Atlantic salmon talk will be on Friday 15th Nov 24 in the evening at Gairloch museum.

SB reported that guidelines were available for photography of wild fish where photographs showed fish handled appropriately i.e. not out of the water. The Spey Board has a one-page pdf on how to treat fish appropriately. SB to send to KG to send out to Board members with a view to the guidance being sent to proprietors. KG to approach Spey Board for consent to use their guidance. PC said it would be good to send out the guidance to proprietors at the start of every season.

Biosecurity - PC reminded people to ensure that kit is dry and clean if it has been used elsewhere.

Mink - PC reported that mink have been caught by Scottish Invasive Species Officer.

SA - asked if a water temperature alert - 18 degrees Centigrade - a sensible limit for electro fishing could be included along with the Spey guidelines.

8. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be the triennial elections, most likely on 5th December 2024. KG will follow up with Bob Younger a question re the quorum, and re attendance by prospective Board members.