

# **Meeting of the Wester Ross Area Salmon Fishery Board**

**April 24<sup>th</sup> 2025 1000hrs**

**Gairloch Office and by Zoom**

## **Minutes**

Present:-

in person: Richard Munday, Michael Aitchison, Peter Cunningham,  
Kevin Ginty (Clerk)

online: Stephen Bate (Convener), Rosie Nicoll, Donald Rice

1. Apologies received from Gordon Crawford.

SB welcomed all participants.

2. Matters arising from the approved minutes of the 4th November 2024 Meeting that have already been circulated.

Aquaculture matters to be dealt with later. There were no other matters arising.

3. WRFT updates and review of funding (MA)

Michael Aitchison presented a proposal for additional funding for the Trust.

MA previously circulated a proposal, and also referred to the regular sweep netting and reporting work on the WRFT website. The Trust agreed with MOWI and Bakka Frost last year that they would send the data a week in advance of website publication. Most of the Trust's funding comes from the aquaculture industry. SEPA now taking on the sweep netting role, and WRFT is part of the tender for that work. From 2026 WRFT will stop receiving funding from the aquaculture industry substantially. Trust raised 130k for a project to replant a seagrass bed in Loch Ewe. A seagrass project officer has now been appointed. She is a PhD student living locally and is also employed for a day a week to support PC. The salmon carcass project is ongoing, adding pellets to the upper reaches of streams to promote insect life and smolts development. The Trust is also putting in place interpretation panels and dealing with the Tournai trap repairs. A full programme of sweep netting planned, none of which is funded from the Scottish Government this year.

SB asked for questions. RN said all were valid relevant projects, but that it was a lot of money to find. There was some discussion on past levels of funding for the WRFT from the Board, previously to COVID a higher level of core funding came from the Board. RM raised a query on electrofishing in the Shieldaig river. There are 25 years' data from past work, and it would be valuable to continue that in the light of the recent work on woodland cover. It would be valuable if the WRFT could electrofish the river for sea trout.

PC said Trust's main priority is distribution of salmon. Small rivers are a good barometer for levels in bigger rivers.

RM reported Edinburgh University is linked with work with the Kinloch Woodland.

PC said it would be good for the Board to meet with the Marine Directorate to review the findings of the 25 year study.

SB said that he noticed the Board's contribution was to the general overhead to the WRFT. The WRFT's non-restricted funding was 12.5k, 10 of which is from the Board. The Board might prefer to be funding specific projects rather than general overhead. What other funding is available for the WRFT to bid for? Existing overhead is funded by the Board, some of which is wider work. PC said that the picture was complex. About half of the 10k goes to electrofishing surveys, and other fieldwork where there is a gap between funding externally and the actual cost of the work undertaken. Partial external funding of some work is made up by the Board. WRFT puts a considerable amount of work into grant applications, and this work is funded from the core funding from the Board.

SB asked in practical terms, if there were a partial contribution from the Board, would that be feasible. PC said Board has specific priorities, and the electrofishing survey of juvenile salmon was most important. SB asked about the nutrition project with a shortfall of 6k. If the Board were to contribute, say, half of it, what would be the impact? PC said that WRFT would continue with it, and run down their own reserves and also seek individual contribution from relevant proprietors.

PC said knowing distribution of juvenile salmon is key to having a proper picture of local conditions.

MA said some areas where there was relatively little sweep netting where SEPA want to increase it, and others where there isn't. The SEPA situation is unclear at the moment. Regarding the nutrition project, WRFT applied for 12k and received 6k on the basis that the proprietors in the relevant areas should make up the rest. MA accepted that reserves would have to be used to make up the funding. MA offered to provide a detailed project breakdown for the 10k should that be required. SB said that would be helpful.

MA added that WRFT had been seeking stable core funding, but had not been successful. Monies had already been allocated from funders. Trust is on the lookout for new potential sources. Most costs have increased, and NI costs have gone up.

SB added that proprietors similarly had faced increased costs, and additional regulation with lettings and related activities.

#### 4. Draft 2025-26 Budget and Levy Setting

KG presented the draft budget for 2025-26 including various options for additional funding for the Trust.

All was approved, pending the levy discussion to be had later in the meeting.

SB proposed to have a discussion and take views from Gordon and Pippa (who were unable to attend) on the minutes post the meeting.

DR asked generally how typical problems are across Scotland. The ten year plus picture is that we are asked to do more and more, and that the Board is mostly volunteers. Funding projects like the nutrients in rivers – should that be funded from government sources. The challenges here to stay. RN said that the situation is only going to get worse. Fish farms won't agree to full containment because of the costs. RN said lack of lets due to lack of fish is causing a financial impact on the proprietors. A substantial body of scientific evidence exists. Do we need yet more?

DR referred to the Atlantic salmon situation, and rivers in the South of the UK are seeing problems and it is a national story not restricted to Scotland.

SB reported GC's position was that he was beset by mounting costs to a degree that it was becoming difficult to sustain these fishings with the cumulative effects across the board of compliance and NI costs. SB said that he believed GC's concerns must be relevant to other proprietors.

SB said that some recognition ought to be given to that picture when considering the levy setting. A balance needs to be struck. There was some discussion on potentially funding the salmon electrofishing and sea lice monitoring, and half of the salmon monitoring. Taking account of the substantially increased costs and declining catches, RN felt that an additional part contribution of maybe half could be appropriate.

SB said we should be not a general funder, but providing funds to the Trust for specific projects.

RN said she would be happy to add on 10k. DR said that he would be happy with that. The Board regard ecology as key to their operation and supporting local marine groups. DR was sympathetic to GC's position.

RM said that he had sympathy with MA's view that the WRFT needed more stable core funding, so that the volunteers can concentrate on the work in hand rather than seeking funding. A compromise solution of 10k was attractive.

RM added that there was a strategic question of significance of sea trout as well as salmon. RM would be unhappy if the sea trout research work was lost. When we are looking at restoration of environment, there is an advantage with sea trout. Some fish will stay in fresh water as brown trout, others go to sea. Once salmon smolts go to sea, we have little influence over them.

RM said that government have not been good at leading in these areas. It is probably unwise to expect much from them.

RM said that we should concentrate on things we have influence over, such as improving the habitat in the local areas, like the nutrient enhancement project.

SB suggested 10k additional, plus another contribution of 2.5k from the contingency fund to the nutrient restoration project specifically. DR and RN were in agreement. DR said projects with clear, measurable outcomes and benefits for our area are the things to prioritise. RM agreed.

The budget proposal to be ratified via email outside of the meeting was that an increase of 10k to the WRFT, to be allocated between the salmon survey, status and sea trout monitoring as the Trust sees fit. A further 2.5k is to be specifically towards the nutrient restoration project. SB said WRFT to apportion across salmon and sea trout monitoring.

RM said that funding should be made available, with list of Board's priorities, and then up to the Trust how to address that. RN, SB agreed that would support the most efficient allocation of the funds.

KG to send an email voting request around all Board Members, with the proposal for 10k to top three priorities funded from the levy, and an additional 2.5k for the nutrient restoration project funded from the Board's contingency reserve.

#### 5. Revaluation request for 2026

A request from Highland Council has been received regarding a possible revaluation for the Board's area for 2026.

SB reported that the rating authority has asked the Board if they wished to have a revaluation. The Board has taken advice taken from Fish Legal, which states that it isn't necessary. Distorting effects of COVID were an issue. In the past, a similar situation arose back in 2022. SB suggested that we defer. KG to look into the circumstances of the last revaluation with Bob Younger and check that there are no negative connotations for the Board.

#### 6. Office accommodation provision

KG reported that there was no material change in the office accommodation situation and that the landlord had yet to advise the Trust as to the way forward.

MA said he had emailed Mr Mackenzie saying that we were grateful for the office provision, and that we would like a tenancy agreement. No response was received, and the factor at the time has since left.

#### 7. Outstanding invoices

KG reported the outstanding invoices.

SB said remind outstanding with next levy reminding outstanding. Duncan Mackenzie had leased the hotel and maybe paid it when the hotel was out of action. PC said he can find out details of the new proprietor and report back.

#### 8. Update on aquaculture events since the last meeting including EMPs and wild-fish monitoring.

Arrangements made with MOWI and Bakkafrøst in relation to specific areas. PC and RM both attended the EMP meeting yesterday. Lice levels were around the Code of Good Practice levels, under control with treatments. Monitoring – PC did the first sweep of the season. This work was now part of the fish management group. Any rod fishermen on the Balgy, please take photos of fish caught, as part of evidence gathering. The Ardmail farm has an EMP in place. Loch Broom lice levels are reportedly not too high, but to be surveyed soon. Regarding the Applecross survey with MOWI. MOWI was saying that Ardmail wasn't close enough to be impacted by the Scalpay farm. PC links lice from the nearby farms to the levels seen. Some electrofishing is paid for by the fish farmers and is a planning requirement of the EMP.

PC said that Code of Good Practice is not good enough when there is a high biomass. He said the producers have appealed the SEPA framework because there is no incentive for them to improve their practices. They also feel that they are at the limit of what is biologically feasible.

RM reported from EMP that shorter production cycles would reduce lice levels, and that there was a case for an even broader dialog on smolt production. The new facility in Kishorn should mean there was no need to raise smolts in fresh water lochs.

SB said that we should ask FMS how to build into the discussion how to integrate smolt rearing.

KG reported that both Bakkafrøst and MOWI were already engaging with the smolt run timing consideration. SB asked KG follow up specifics of smolt run timing integration operationally.

#### 9. WRFT Biologist – Peter Cunningham

Dealt with in the points above.

#### 10.AOCB

Email received from Sara Nason re Maerl and MOWI.

SB was happy to attend a meeting with Sara, KG and some members of the Trust. RN said the Maerl situation was quite bad. DR said that NatureScot (formerly SNH) are reluctant to step outside of any official position.

KG reply to Sarah to say that SB asked to reply on behalf of the Board, thank her for email and propose a meeting to discuss the issues raised. KG and RN, DR.

#### 11.Date of Next Meeting - to be decided.

Minutes proposed: Rosie Nicoll seconded: Donald Rice