

COMMENTS

THE ISSUE
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Tags for Scotland

SCOTLAND'S DISTRICT salmon fishery boards have applied to the Scottish Government for a mandatory, uniquely numbered and traceable scheme for all wild net-caught salmon and sea-trout offered for sale – similar to the scheme already in operation in England and Wales.

An analysis of the Environment Agency (EA) scheme south of the border showed that it has been a major success; netsmen were able to sell fish to a premium market where the buyer can be confident about the source of the fish – with the tags viewed as a sign of quality. The introduction of a numbered carcass-tagging scheme in Scotland, combined with the ban on the sale of rod-caught fish, would mean that all untagged UK wild salmon and sea-trout would be unsaleable.

The EA supports the boards' application, not least because the present lack of compliance in Scotland is a significant loophole that is encouraging salmon "trafficking" – fish illegally caught in England, Wales and elsewhere are reaching markets masquerading as Scottish produce.

Dr Alan Wells, policy and planning director of the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards (ASFB), said: "Critically, carcass-tagging is important in reducing the number of illegally caught fish reaching markets or dealers. There is a continuing, significant problem with the illegal taking of salmon at sea and within rivers and estuaries. During 2010, bailiffs employed by district salmon fishery boards across Scotland seized 166 illegal nets which are used for what is nothing short of a wildlife crime. Illegally caught fish represent a significant threat to the conservation and management of Atlantic salmon and sea-trout."

Dr Wells continued: "In 2010 the report of the Scottish Mixed Stock Fisheries Working Group was unequivocal in recommending that a carcass-tagging scheme for all wild net-caught salmon offered for sale should be introduced. The report also recommended that the Scottish Government should urgently work with all stakeholders to develop such a scheme."

In England and Wales netsmen have adapted to the new scheme. In fact, official figures for the total net catch for 2010 showed that 22,634 salmon were tagged and recorded. Compare that with the 2009 declared net catch in Scotland of 12,855 (the latest year for which figures are available). If netsmen south of the border can successfully record nearly twice that number of fish, just why can't their Scottish counterparts? Answers on a postcard...