

SFCC Management Committee Meeting



15th May 2024

10:00 – 12:00

In Attendance

Marcus Walters (Deveron, Bogie & Isla Rivers Charitable Trust) – Chair
Amy Fergusson (Forth Rivers Trust)
Antje Branding (Marine Directorate)
Alan Wells (Fisheries Management Scotland)
Rowan McCleary (Galloway Fisheries Trust)
John Armstrong (Marine Directorate Science)
Kjersti Birkeland (Scottish Environment Protection Agency)

Apologies

James Hunt (The Tweed Foundation)
Graeme Anderson (Argyll Fisheries Trust)

1. Welcome and apologies for absence

Apologies have been received from James Hunt and Graeme Anderson. Welcome to our new committee members, Amy Fergusson from the Forth Rivers Trust, and Graeme Anderson from the Argyll Fisheries Trust.

2. Minutes of previous meeting, review of action points and matters arising

2.1. Management Committee 13th December 2023

3. Staff Report from Sean

3.1. December – May Update

Sean presented an update on key activities since December. Afterwards, some discussion was then had around these topics.

In regard to revising the SFCC habitat Protocol, some questions were raised around BNG in Scotland and whether there is a move to River MoRPh. At the moment SFCC and FMS are feeding into relevant consultations on BNG to ensure that any elements which address rivers and the water environment are appropriate for salmon and sea trout. Any updates to the protocol should also be back-compatible with historic data which has been collected. At the Biologists Conference it was mentioned that there used to be more work days on topics, and it was agreed that holding a workshop on this would be the best way to decide a path forward.

ACTION: SR to organise SFCC workshop on habitat surveying.

There was some additional discussion about electrofishing training, as Bob Laughton will be running the refresher training for the last time this year. At a meeting of the electrofishing trainers the previous week some options were discussed in regard to keeping the pool of electrofishing trainers

at 5 people in order to provide resilience. It was agreed that the best approach would be to have one of the experienced trainers take over the refresher course from Bob and have a new trainer come in to help deliver the introduction to electrofishing training. Towards the end of the season EF trainers can get together to help standardise the teaching as the course is no longer SVQ accredited. An open call can be sent out across the membership to recruit a new trainer to be involved with the introductory courses.

ACTION: SR to put an open call across SFCC members to recruit a new trainer at the end of July.

ACTION: SR to organise meeting of EF trainers in September towards the end of the season.

4. Financial matters

4.1. Cashflow report

Cashflow report was circulated on Monday. Agenda item later on about SFCC budget. No comments on the cashflow report to year end or the April 2024 report.

5. Marine Fund Scotland Projects

This year SFCC is pursuing two Marine Fund Scotland projects, both in relation to fish counters. As shown at the SFCC conference, there is a wealth of data being produced but processing time is a barrier, especially for small organisations which are involved in managing the counters. Artificial Intelligence/machine learning has been shown to be a viable way to cut down processing time.

It was agreed that SFCC is the right vehicle to deliver this work. Fish counters are potentially of use to many different SFCC members, and taking a coordinated approach from the outset will ensure that software which is developed will be fit for purpose and accessible to all members. Additionally, Sean has experience processing data from the resistivity counter on the River Shin, so has a good understanding of the process and what is required. This work also aligns with SFCC's long-term strategy to investigate the use of AI for fisheries management.

Another application being led by FMS is to commission signage and equipment relating to aquatic biosecurity and invasive species. This will include riverbank signage to raise awareness of the importance of aquatic biosecurity and Pink salmon, supplies of disinfectant for routine use by FMS members during core work and also for local angling access points, and sprayers for application of disinfectant where required.

5.1. Sonar Fish Counting software using AI

Two Sonar counters are in operation in Scotland, on the Deveron and Laxford. Another application to MFS has been submitted for counters on the North and South Esk. In partnership with the local trusts, Marine Directorate and Atlantic Salmon Trust we have submitted an application to develop AI software to process the sonar data. The aim is to have a standalone piece of software that is offline and can be installed on a PC or laptop and run without internet connection. We would be able to make this software available to other members who install ARIS cameras. This project is taking a long-term view to the software development thereby hoping to ease the process of installing more of these counters in future. A steering group of stakeholders will be set up to inform the project.

5.2. Updating AVIMS to process resistivity counter video

Taking a slightly different approach for a similar problem, we are also looking to develop software to process video feeds from a resistivity counter, focusing on the one on the river Ayr at Nethermills.

This counter is unique as it has three different viewpoints, and a mix of normal video and infrared, therefore representing all the different viewpoints that other counters of this type will have, and a good basis to train something that will be useable in other areas. Instead of developing a completely new piece of software, the most efficient route seems to be to develop AVIMS (Automated Video Identification of Marine Species), software owned by the Marine Directorate. AVIMS was developed to process video from Marine trawls and can recognise smolts and sea pens, as well as other species. It has also been trained on fish counter footage. In order to be applicable for this use-case, it needs to have object tracking added so it can detect whether fish are moving upstream or downstream, and then give a cumulative number of fish upstream of the counter. A similar steering group will also be set up.

6. Riverwoods Partnership

FMS' partnership with Scottish Wildlife Trust on the Riverwoods project has been evolving, and there are many different areas of collaboration. Of relevance to SFCC is the development of the digital centre for excellence, and SFCC will lead this project alongside SWT's Knowledge & Evidence officer. SWT have produced a legal agreement for the partnership, and we are in the process of reviewing this with input from Fish Legal, and our new Wild Salmon Conservation Officer, Chloe Grant, who used to work on the Riverwoods Project.

There have been some recent academic publications which mention Riverwoods in the context of re-wilding, and it was felt that there may be confusion between the SWT Riverwoods project and other projects which also bear the Riverwoods name, such as Scotland the Big Picture's "Riverwoods" film. It was felt that a topic sheet could be produced to give greater clarity on the project partnership with SWT and its aims.

ACTION: SR to produce topic sheet on Riverwoods project and SFCC's involvement in the Digital Centre for Excellence.

ACTION: SR to draft a list of similar initiatives and bullet point summaries of their aims.

7. Future Meeting Dates

Future meeting dates in September and November were proposed. Due to the fieldwork season, it was agreed to move the September meeting to the week beginning 30th September. The SFCC Biologists conference will be on the 4th and 5th of February 2025. of February 2025.

8. AOB

An update from SG was given by Antje Branding on recent changes in Scottish Government. The new First Minister, John Swinney, is the species champion for Atlantic Salmon. Additionally, the new priority areas for government are; eradicating child poverty, driving economic growth, meeting climate obligations and investing in our vital public services.

9. SFCC Budget - SR excused from meeting

A discussion was had amongst the committee regarding Sean's salary following a recommendation from the FMS Board.

ACTION: AW to circulate a recommendation to the SFCC Committee regarding Sean's salary.