

Fisheries Management Scotland

Meeting of Directors - Minutes

Friday 21st June 2024



By Videoconference

Present

Richard Sankey
Jamie Stewart
Alasdair Laing
Peter Landale
Alexa MacAuslan
Lorraine Hawkins
Claire Mercer Nairne
Jamie Ribbens

Robert Younger

In attendance

Alan Wells
Brian Davidson
Jenny McNeill
Paul Sizeland
Sean Robertson
Helen Feenan

1. Apologies for absence and welcome

Apologies were received from Guy Harris and Chloe Grant.

The Chairman formally introduced CG, who joined FMS in April as the new Wild Salmon Conservation Manager, as well as announcing that LR's contract has been extended to support work developing a portfolio of river restoration projects, led by PS.

2. Declaration of interests

The register of interest was circulated prior to the meeting, with no changes reported.

3. Actions arising from March Board meeting (see appendix)

All actions from the previous board meeting were reported as complete or in progress.

AW confirmed that he has met with SG officials and highlighted the significance of the NEPS programme. FMS will continue to make the case for support to be reestablished in future years. **ACTION: AW**

4. Health and Safety Update

BD provided an update on Health and Safety, with SR having recently completed a 2-day outdoor first aid course. The full FMS staff team are registered to attend the Institute of Occupational Safety & Health course called 'Managing Safely' in November.

It was discussed that any suitable resources would be shared with FMS members following completion of the course, assuming that the course provider was content. **ACTION: BD**

5. Fish handling best practice

RS initiated a discussion on fish handling. In the light of the December announcement that the IUCN now consider wild salmon in Great Britain to be endangered, RS acknowledged the

inevitability of greater scrutiny of the activities of anglers. We are also aware that Marine Directorate are aware of images circulating on social media, and there is a clear need for anglers and managers to demonstrate the importance of following best practice for fish handling. RS placed a particular emphasis on images circulated on social media and other platforms showing fish being held well out of the water. There was an in-depth discussion on the implementation of this updated guidance and ways in which the information is shared with the angling communities and river users via the use of focus groups and on social media. The Board discussed various ways in which fish handling needs to improve to protect the welfare of fish in Scotland's rivers, highlighting the importance of 'no-touch release' and promoting best practice through the FMS membership, gillies, anglers and relevant wider communities.

BD has highlighted these issues through FMS communications group and was reassured to hear that members are working on this with stakeholders - with the River Dee having implemented a policy where images as described above will not be presented on any social media platforms. It is encouraging that a number of other rivers are also promoting this message. The board agreed that this is an important conservation message and that more needed to be done to ensure that members of FMS, and other key stakeholders, are seen to be taking this seriously. FMS are working with partners to develop refreshed best practice guidance and an associated communications strategy (see below). There was an in-depth discussion on the implementation of this updated guidance and ways in which the information might be shared with angling communities and river users.

6. Staff Updates

6.1. Update on current funding and projects:

- **Marine Fund Scotland**

AW provided an update on funding bids submitted to Marine Fund Scotland for 2024/25, to produce biodiversity signage and purchase disinfectant products for distribution to members. While these projects have direct relevance to combatting the spread of invasive non-native species (INNS), they will also support efforts in combatting the spread of more aggressive forms of *Saprolegnia* spp. FMS have also submitted applications to MFS to fund two projects developing artificial intelligence solutions to interpret fish counter data – one relating to sonar fish counters and the other to video-based counters. These are being taken forward jointly with AST and with the input of Marine Directorate.

FMS have also supported members in further applications to the fund, some of which also include sonar fish counters as part of their bid. FMS are also scoping further project funding opportunities to support bailiffs across Scotland, should a second round of funding be announced later in the year.

- **Nature Finance**

PS provided updates on ongoing liaison with The Rivers Trust and a second *Facility for Investment Ready Nature in Scotland* (FIRNS) project, which will develop a pipeline of projects using the FMS members' Fishery Management Plans (FMPs) as the basis, following successful application to the fund in April.

The establishment of a Steering Group is nearing completion, with the methodology for interviewing FMS members and capturing the relevant detail around the actions listed in the FMPs in order to assess their readiness for delivery being finalised. This will culminate in a portfolio of project propositions that will be market tested with potential investors later in the year.

PS announced a second initiative is underway - a new opportunity presented through the OFGEM requirement for the onshore renewables companies' transmission arms to provide biodiversity compensatory measures through the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) mechanism. PS convened a recent in-person meeting attended by Scottish Power Energy Networks and four FMS members, who have been invited to prepare bids to the BNG "Use It or Lose It" fund.

- **2024 adult salmon sampling programme**

AW confirmed that funding of £70,000 has been secured to support six rivers as part of the National Adult Salmon Sampling Programme.

- **Deployment of seal deterrents**

BD provided an update on the deployment of seal deterrents, following a successful bid to secure 19 deterrents and watercraft for members to assist with managing seal predation of salmonids in-river. An online familiarisation session was held in May for members, with the suppliers of the devices providing guidance on usage, and members have now begun active use of these devices. A communication group has been set up to share experience and information, with further discussions regarding ongoing support from the suppliers in progress.

6.2. Wild Salmon Strategy

- **Overview**

AW provided an update on the Wild Salmon Strategy (WSS), highlighting that Scottish Government are progressing work to update the socio-economic analysis committed to in the Strategy. This will be put out for tender soon, and FMS have offered to support this process, through provision of information and helping the successful contractor contact the relevant organisations across Scotland.

AW provided support in a meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon and the chairs of four rivers. The environmental and economic impact of the Wild Salmon Crisis was highlighted, with an ask to Scottish Government to put **wild salmon first**. This meeting was followed up by a letter, which detailed some examples by which the Scottish Government could put this into action, largely focussed on the previous FMS 'call to action' for wild salmon. The outcome of this meeting was positive, and a further follow up meeting with MG will be arranged on the Spey.

- **Governance & finance**

AW chaired a second meeting of a group established to make recommendations to Scottish Government on Action 5.1. of the WSS Delivery plan. The aim of this group is:

- to make recommendations aimed at improving the protection of salmon, and enhancing the environmental, economic, and social benefits arising from it.
- to examine new ways in which we can better support and resource local management.
- to explore new means of making investments in Scotland's rivers, including investigating private sector contributions in line with Scottish Governments commitment to develop a high integrity, values-led market for responsible investment in natural capital.

The group has prioritised resourcing local management, including assessing alternatives to the salmon levy and additional means of funding. The group also recognised that funding of DSFBs cannot be considered in isolation from the governance and constitution of DSFBs, as the availability (or otherwise) of some sources of funding is closely related to the nature and make-up of these organisations.

- **Fisheries enforcement**

BD thanked the Board for feedback on a paper which makes a case for increasing a range of penalties within the 2023 Act. This paper has now been submitted to Scottish Government, in anticipation that some of these changes will be taken forward through the forthcoming Natural Environment Bill.

- **Enforcement undertakings**

AW and CG recently met with SEPA and Scottish Government to highlight the potential use of Scotland's Fisheries Management Plans in identifying suitable projects that might be taken forward through enforcement undertakings. This is part of a wider discussion through which it is hoped that SEPA will work more closely with our sector to identify and agree actions.

AW explained that Enforcement Undertakings are a type of enforcement measure used by SEPA through which an offer is made voluntarily to SEPA by a polluter to make amends for non-compliance – often these offers go towards restoration within the catchment area where the offence occurred. AW emphasised that whilst we do not want to see pollution events happen, fishery management plans are an ideal mechanism to ensure that measures and action are taken to the benefit of our catchments.

- **Catch & release guidance**

BD and CG convened the first meeting of the Catch & Release Steering Group which has been established to take forward Wild Salmon Strategy action 2.6 *to refresh and promote guidance on best practice for catch and release*. The group plan to meet again over the summer. This will focus on refreshing the current guidance on Catch and

Release as well as highlight risks associated with air exposure, fishing in high temperatures and the need for behaviour change when handling fish for photography.

BD added that these matters have been discussed at length through FMS communications group and confirmed that a discussion will take place with FishPal to discuss ongoing issues and changes in policy and guidance.

6.3. Aquaculture interactions

HF gave an update on progress made to deliver a fish health workshop in November 2024 with a date and venue now arranged. HF will communicate details to members in the coming months.

Work is progressing to develop the monitoring programmes which are associated with SEPA's sea lice regulatory framework. HF is on the overarching steering group and each of the subgroups (alongside some member trusts) which are looking at different aspects of the monitoring strategy. There are concerns about the capacity of member trusts to resource this work, and SEPA's overall delivery timeframe is an ongoing concern.

A 'working arrangements' document, which conveys the roles and responsibilities of statutory consultees during the aquaculture consenting process is currently being reviewed in light of the sea lice regulatory framework. HF has been engaging with FMS members to ensure that their views are reflected in the new version of the document.

HF provided an update on the Rural Affairs & Islands Committee's follow up inquiry into salmon farming. FMS will give evidence on 26 June – this session is focussed on wild-farmed interactions, providing an opportunity for us to express our view on the current and future situation.

With all the above currently happening, HF highlighted the need for a refreshed strategy to help ensure effective delivery of our work on aquaculture. The Board agreed that a strategy should be developed over the remainder of 2024.

6.4. SFCC

SR provided an update on recent SFCC activities, including meetings with members to support use of the new electrofishing equipment and upcoming Electrofishing and Fresh Water Pearl Mussel training.

SFCC have a new intern from the University of Aberdeen on a five-week placement, funded by the University, which will focus on working through data collected for the Fisheries Management Plans, and supporting members to develop more refined costings for the actions included in the plans.

SR led on applications for two Marine fund projects on fish counters as mentioned earlier in the meeting, to develop AI software with the processing of images, with an aim to create software that would be available to all FMS members once complete.

7. SEPA

AW updated the Board on recent engagement with SEPA, which saw a national engagement event held in April with a number of river directors across Scotland. The membership group for these sessions is not fixed, and a range of people will be invited as this process progresses. AW reiterated that this first meeting was a useful first step, and these meetings will be utilised to push SEPA to improve current performance and flag areas where the current system is not working.

AW wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon to highlight concerns about proposed amendments to the Environmental Authorisations (Scotland) Regulations. The Cabinet Secretary instructed officials to meet with AW to better understand these concerns. In addition to explaining FMS position on the new regulations, AW also presented a number of case studies where SEPA are failing to deliver their current commitments and appear to be prioritising the economy over the environment.

8. Financial reports

The latest financial reports were circulated to the Board prior to the meeting, and no comments were made.

9. AOB

The Board discussed ideas around restructuring future Board meetings to allow for more detailed discussions on specific topics, and members were asked to consider this further.

ACTION: ALL

2024 meetings 20 September, 13 November