

MINUTE OF MEETING OF THE SPEY  
DISTRICT FISHERY BOARD IN OPEN  
SESSION held at The Orangery at  
Gordon Castle and online, commencing  
at 9.30 am on Friday 24th May 2024

**Present: -**

<b>Chair</b>	Dr Alexander Scott	Craigellachie Fishings
<b>Proprietors</b>	Angus Gordon Lennox (AGL) William Mountain (WM) Callum Robertson (CR)* Peter Graham (PG) Toby Metcalfe (TM) David Greer (DG) George Wills* (GW)	The G.C. Gordon Lennox Estate Company Ltd Delfur Fishings Easter Elchies Rothes & Aikenway Crown Estates Seafield Estates Knockando
<b>In Attendance</b>	Roger Knight Atticus Albright Paul Hughes Neil Torrance Jennifer Heatley (JH) Edward Mountain Harry Mountain* Tom Mountain George Williams	Director Biologist Digital Marketing Director Clerk Nature Scotland

\*Attending via video conference

**WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS AND CONFLICTS**

The Chair noting that the meeting is in fact a blended meeting with some attendees (\*) participating by video conference as well as guests attending in person.

**1. APOLOGIES and CONFLICT**

Apologies had been received from Guy Macpherson-Grant, Grant Mortimer and Peter Austin.

The Chair then asked those present to record any conflict of interest they may have and there were none.

As preliminary matters it was to be noted that

- Dr Phil Williams had been invited by the Chair to attend when dealing with nominations.
- No. 5 incorrectly on the agenda for the Closed Session would be moved to be discussed in Open Session.
- That any reference to the Director was also to include reference to his successor, with it being noted that it is the current director's last Board meeting; and
- That Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2024 was the confirmed date for the Directors leaving do.

## **2. MINUTES OF THE OPEN SESSION OF THE MEETING ON 9<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY 2024 FOR APPROVAL**

The Chair seeking confirmation that all members had read the minutes and requested any comments on the minutes.

No comments or questions raised, and as such the Chair noting the Minutes are otherwise approved.

## **3. MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES**

Moving on to the Action Points and Matters arising from previous Minutes the Action Point Summary document was produced and circulated to the Board by the Director in advance of today's meeting with a list of points and current status referred to. The Director noting that he still had to investigate a linked interest-bearing bank account for the Board and check the tax liability position with the accountants, the description of Depreciation in the Quarterly Variance Reports with the accountants and to apply for grant funding in support of the Smolt to Adult Supplementation Project – and that these items will likely have to be left to be dealt with by his successor. All other are either actioned or ongoing apart from expressing to Scottish Govt. the Board's deep concern that the Wild Salmon Strategy objectives are not being met. The director advising that that has not been actioned as the strategy delivery group has not met since last November. The group is scheduled to meet in person on 13<sup>th</sup> June in Edinburgh and he is scheduled to attend that meeting.

JH raising a query as to Chris Donald of NatureScot's response to the Clerk regarding beaver HRA and the Precautionary Principle. She understood that a letter had been issued. The Clerk confirming that we had not received that. JH to follow it up further.

The Director thereafter Turing to the RAG (Red/Amber/Green) report, with emphasis on the Red entries as requested by the Chair.

The director advising that he had consider changing the Scottish Government's Wild Salmon strategy entry from red to amber, as it is not now correct that there has been no progress albeit that it may not be visible to people on the river. TM commenting that in his view the entry should stay as Red, with the Board pressing hard for visible action.

The next Red entry consider the funding for Digital Marketing and Communications support. The Director noting that the founding for our Digital Marketing Director had initially been provided by the Spey Foundation abut had since April last year been an employee of the Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI), and he had since then been splitting his time between supporting the SCI and the Board/Spey Foundation. The Spey Foundation can no longer assist in any funding, and as such the needed to be consideration as to whether the costs could be supported by the Board rather than the Spey Foundation. The Chair noting that the issue is symptomatic of the much more fundamental question of what DSFB do in the future. Issue has been raised with FMS and is to be further debated with them and via our consultation – the latter being highlighted by TM.

The director advised that he was disappointed to report very little progress on Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENs). Commenting that a meeting in March in Fochabers was positive but there had been very little external support for creating a LENs, and that until it is pushed forward by the SCI it is unlikely to be progressed in any meaningful way.

Perch control in Loch Insh is proving to be a contentious issue. The Biologist providing further information relating to fierce opposition from angling groups, and the lack of monitoring progress due to a resourcing issue. In discussions the use of fyke nets and sterilisation for reduction of the perch population were being evaluated. The Board's Biologist was encouraged to progress the latter and keep the board informed. The Board, prompted by AGL, fully recognising the other matters which have dominated the biologist time.

The Chair noting no further questions on the RAG report.

#### **4. INTERNATIONAL SALMON CHAMPION**

The Chair inviting AGL to advise the board of the work being undertaken regarding the suggested appointment of such a champion. The Missing Salmon Alliance (MSA), chaired by David Mayhew, involved a group of concerned angling

organisations including the Atlantic Salmon Trust, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Fisheries Management Scotland etc. AGL was of the view that the river itself is in good condition but felt we need to get the MSA, which had so far been involved with land-based projects (on the Deveron and Laxford), to move its focus from land-based issues to the issues at sea, where he felt most of the salmon's problems lay. we still send close to a million smolts to sea every year and in years past a good percentage came back but now it is only 2-3%. As such he felt that it was strange that MSA did not have a marine partner. The Blue Marine Foundation, which is a global marine charity based in London, founded by Charles Clover, has done extraordinary things around the world and in particular had been instrumental in stopping sandeel fishing. AGL has approached them for help with the salmon. The foundation has a budget of circa £300m per year from a founding group.

Jim Ratcliffe had also offered to help and was in active discussion with the MSA to make saving salmon his last major project.

AGL mentioned two other organisations, which are closer to home, Open Seas and Our Seas. Our seas major campaign is to persuade the Government to reinstate the 3-mile inshore fishing limit (or an alternative limit) which area is also crucial for smolts as they leave the river before hitting the northerly currents, which had been in place until 1984. Both he and the Biologist had joined a recent online conference with them. The effect of the dredging can be viewed on the videos hosted on both Open Seas and Our Seas websites. He suggested support this campaign against seabed dredging with our time and efforts.

## **5. CATCHES: THE 2024 SPEY SEASON SO FAR**

The Chair advising that he had put this on the agenda, commenting that anglers were getting used to a five-year cycle and with the poor catches of 2018 and 2023, but now that we are in 2024 he had expected a return to the more normal 5½ thousand fish on the Spey for the season. However, he is concerned that at the moment it doesn't look like it will be anywhere near that this year. He mentioned that his concern and lack of number is also being reflected over the other rivers. A canvas of the members going up the river was canvassed, which the Chair then summarised as patchy overall, with some beats doing relatively well, some on par with previous years and others were well behind. Some beats are not seeing a lot of fish, but what is being caught is big. Edward Mountain MSP commented that the huge run of water throughout the long, wet winter would likely have resulted in a significant washout of eggs and he had encouraged Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon to visit the River Spey. The Board's Biologist, Atticus Albright, responded that the early, initial spawning may have been washed-out over the winter and fry counts may have been affected, but that did not necessarily correlate to parr and smolt decrease.

WM encouraging discussion on the state of the river given AGL's comments and the follow up from the prior presentation from the water chemist. CR advising as to the ongoing assessments and testing to build up the data over 4 seasons, including incidents of collection of water samples. Edward Mountain MSP encouraging discussion on political aspects, arguments and approaches. Tm emphasises that we need a coherent plan & strategy as to how we are to be effective.

## 6. FOUR RIVERS MEETING WITH CABINET SECRETARY

The Chair providing a summary and his comments on the recent meeting between the Chairs of the Big Four Rivers and Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon, which had focussed on a lobbying the Scottish Government to put "Salmon First" and implement the Wild Salmon Strategy at visible pace. She had issued a follow-up letter which had been circulated by the Chair yesterday. This had been supportive of the position discuss with her and she also confirmed she would visit the Spey. The suggestion is that Alan Wells (Chief Exec, Fisheries Management Scotland) and the Director would produce a draft agenda for that visit for us to focus on and produce a visit plan and issue that to her by email to put her in touch with people on the river, especially the Ghillies Committee, to hear their concerns.

## 7. DIRECTOR'S REPORT

In line with the new standard process both the Director's report and the Biologist's report were to be read by the members in advance with the intention that any questions on the reports would be raised at the meetings rather than the reports being presented. The Director highlighted a number of issues.

**District Fishery Boards** - highlighting current discussions on the future funding of DFB's.

**Spey Dam** - the director highlighting the compartments that will be modified between June and August this year, with confirmation that the upper compartments would not be altered because they are very seldom watered or used.

**Release the Spey** – discussing further promotion and filming.

**Sawbill Ducks** – with the application of the next licence to be applied for before his departure to take some pressure of his successor.

**Seals** – the director advising as to some potentially good news in that we are likely to get a limited license this year – only from the start of the season from 11 February until the end of March, when the exploitation/ protected by law. The director commented that his view is that this is a bit of a sop to us, that it should be strongly appealed, and we continue to campaign as before. Thereafter reporting on the two portable acoustic devices that we have taken delivery of and steps undertaken to see how effective they are. A discussion then occurred re the jet ski provided by the Scottish government to assist in deployment of the devices – stressing that this has been gifted to the Board, not purchased by it or lent to it – and the logistical/technical

difficulties that would be incurred re deployment and health & safety concerns. As such the trials will be undertaken utilising kayaks. The Director referring to the numerous documents that had been produced and circulated, asking for any comments on them to be sent to him. WM commenting that we should refrain from utilising the jet ski at all thereby negating the chance of setting a precedent that jet skis on the river are to be encouraged. The suggestion made that it be utilised on the coast to check the nets.

**Enforcement** – the director commenting that he had reported that in the 2024 season we had seen a total of 10 reported incidents of illegal fishing so far, and that that had risen to 12 with 2 more incidents in the last week. Reporting that he had lost our Wildlife Crime Officer as he had left Police Scotland to join SEPA and there was no news as to if she would be replaced, never mind when.

**Habitat Restoration** - the director reporting that the SCI had prioritised work on the Allt Bhran (River Tromie tributary), the Cuaich (River Truim tributary) and the Allt Sluie. They are keen to use the Water Framework Directive and Third River Basin Management Plan to get matters completed before 2027 after which the legislative pressure on SEPA will diminish. There is generally a question of the amount of money now available for nature restoration further to applications being rejected.

**Opening Ceremony**– the director thanked the Board for giving him the honour of opening the 2024 Season and advised that PH had filmed the ceremony which had about 150 people present. The ceremony was put out over digital media channels and watched by over 29,000 people.

**“Salmon in the Classroom” programme** – the director concluding by noting that John Trodden (a retired Head Teacher and former SFB Co-optee), who volunteers to help with this is to be stepping down after 8 years. Noting that we would have struggled to host the hugely valuable and popular programme with the schools without him. The Board registered sincere thanks to John for his loyal and stalwart assistance over those many years, to be followed by the issue of a letter to him from the Chair & director on behalf of the Board.

The Director then closed his report with questions invited by the Chair on any aspect presented.

There were no other comments or questions on the Directors Report

## 8. BIOLOGIST'S REPORT

In line with the new process the Biologist report has been produced in advance for review and discussion.

The Biologist highlighting some of the issues from the written text and conducting discussions on -

**Spey Dam** - the Research Team had ceased operating the Rotary Screw smolt Trap (RST) on 20<sup>th</sup> May. 110/120 of the 300 tags deployed had been recaptured in the Wolf Trap immediately below Spey Dam with days varying from 2 days to nearly a month – so hugely variable. Responding to PG query whether the traps in any way harmed the fish and the detection process/figures, and AGL's query re size of the smolts, advising that the smolts emanating from the upper Spey were three-year-old smolts, rather than the two-year-olds lower down the river. In conclusion the results showed circa two-thirds of smolts were being lost as they transited through the reservoir and Spey Dam. He would like to follow up next year with an investigation as to the reason for the loss.

**Visits** – raffle winners taken out to see the smolt trapping with University of Highland & Islands students also taken to see trapping above Spey Dam, with good feedback from all.

**Hydrogen Electrolyser** - in response to questions raised the Biologist outlined the proposal to develop such a plant on Speyside which if approved would begin with a 35 Mw facility but could in future be expanded to 200 Mw of production through Speyside. Although the developers were now considering boreholes for water abstraction, it could take a worrying amount of water from the river. JH providing more details and commented that NatureScot still needed to be convinced by this proposal, with matters just at pre-application. She advised that this could be ultimately elevated to Scottish Ministers for a decision. The Board concluded that it needed to know more about this issue and is to be followed up by the Biologist.

**Pink Salmon Fyke Net study** - in response to query from PG the Biologist referring to his proposal for such a study, advising that these fish generally arrived in late summer every other year, spawned and then left the river quickly afterwards. Their fry remained in-river for 8 months until March, then smolted and migrated to sea. He felt that their numbers were not yet a concern in the Spey, but rather an emerging/growing concern re competition for invertebrates with newly hatched salmon and trout as result of them staying in the river and feeding. The AST monitoring on the River Laxford would act as a warning indicator nationwide.

The Chair formally recording the Board's appreciation for the enormous amount of work being undertaken by the Biologist and his team over the last few months.

## 9. AOCB

- a) Tom Mountain mentioning that it was great to see the survey going out online and the opportunity to see what the views are and develop the future strategy.
- b) Edward Mountain prompting a discussion on water levels, SEPA, water temperature and distilleries on the river. WM querying whether we had received confirmation from SEPA of their reporting structure, given their decision not to attend DFB meetings. The Director advising as to the

progress being made so far in their intended bi-annual meetings, with mention of lack of local engagement with the Boards.

- c) JH mentioning NatureScot now having funding to commission a full river survey for freshwater mussels, hopefully this year. It will have to be undertaken in the summer months rather than the winter months due to safety concerns. The successful contractor will be in touch with proprietors as to timing and steps to be taken to avoid disruption to fishing.

The Chair noting that there was no other business for the Open session.

## **10. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The date of next year meeting had been intimated last year as being the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2024. However due to the uncertainty at present as to the Directors successor and given that it was noted that the Chair, the Clerk and also PG were already aware that they would not be available on that date it was noted that the next meeting would be 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 2024 with the venue TBC.

The Chair thanking the non-board members for their attendance.

The meeting then closed at 11.05 a.m.