** Senior Biologist update** Ant Watkins; 30th November 2023

This update summarises key work tasks completed since the last update from Ruth (15th September 2023). The focus for the end of September was to finish the electrofishing surveys (NEPS), which required help from Chris and Lynne from Ness Fishery Board and me assisting. My induction to the job role and the Beauly catchment with Ruth was extensive, and very beneficial. Ruth completed the reports on fish-habitat-in-relation-to-the-dams (hydro-morphology) for the Farrar and Beauly, and got lots of work tied up, filed and recorded, to help me know where things are at. For me, October and November have also involved the NEPS data entry process (all complete now); collating 2018 and 2019 fish count data for MSS, to support Conservation Grading; submitting funding claims; the second biannual SSE liaison meeting, and the final SISI steering group meeting of 2023.

1. **Beauly Fishery Board**

**Vehicles:** Nissan Townstar delivery delayed – had been told Nov 2023 but this was wrong, its Q1/Jan-March 2024, lease extended for existing SK70 XLC truck into November (and beyond?).

**H & Safety:**

* New (second-hand) office chairs procured by AW from Edinburgh.
* Office fire extinguisher due to expire in December; fire alarm test due in December.

**Staffing:**

* Ness Board have been paid £4,303.50 for surveying assistance - trainee Calum and Ness Biologist’s time.
* AW inducted into most areas of work by RW and set-up on office and work systems.
* Future: Need to advertise for full-time seasonal bailiff for 2024 imminently, as Bob will not be carrying on his part-time role (confirmed with Ali on 23rd November).
* Future: Need to keep good contact with FMS to see what funding options we have for trainees for 2024, and get ball rolling early in 2024.

**Fishery Management Plan (FMP):**

* Phase 2 project underway, deadline 1st March 2024.
* £3,300 has been offered to each board/trust for this further work on the FMP Storyboard online.

**Budget:**

* RW has provided updated figures for 2024 budget.
* NEPS23 payment deferred, on agreement with the Board, to allow FMS the funds to purchase new electrofishing survey kit, under the potential MFS bid, should it be successful.
* SISI work update – discrepancy found between SISI budget and BFB budget – we are contracted to 80 hours of control work (40 on plants and 40 on mink) each year, which would be £2,372 in 2023-24.

**Policy docs**- ‘DRAFT Staff, Volunteer and Board member manual V1’ acknowledged as good work and necessary; discussions at last Board meeting saw it decided that an employment lawyer needs to be appointed to look at the document – Action on Alastair Campbell…is doc good to go?

**SFCC:**

* RW attended committee meeting in October.
* Annual subscriptions paid and NBFT reimbursed (we are members of SFCC through NBFT).
* Reduced fee from 2024 onwards, as NBFT <£50K turnover, to £551 (split with Ness Board, so £276 from BFB).

**Training:** AW’s training requirements approved:

* GIS course booked for 28th November;
* Hydromorph course booked for Feb/March 2024;
* leadership training course still to book.
1. **People: Community engagement, participation and heritage**

**Social:**

* Beauly Balsam Bashers BBQ was held on 27th September.
* End of season drinks (anglers, proprietors, ghillies invited) on Friday 20th October, which was also Ruth’s last day/leaving drinks.

**Proprietors**: Emailed proprietors with news of the Salmon Conservation Grading going back to Grade 1.

**Anglers (future)**: how do we remind and educate about the effects of hydro operations on the river and fishing opportunities? i.e. it’s not always predictable; higher than natural flows due to generation are not guaranteed; it is still related to weather events/rainfall/available water; and quite significant changes to flows e.g. through outages, can occur with little or no notice to the BFB.

**Facebook**: More rod caught fish pics to post online would be good, for advertising for the catchment.

**Future:** Annual public meeting on 7th December at 7pm, at Lovat hotel, Beauly.

1. **Monitoring Methods**

September continued showery, with varied weather continuing through a warmer than average October, including two storms causing bringing prolonged and heavy rain which saw very high river levels on two weekends in October; and just a couple of frosts to date.

**Smolt monitoring:**

* Smolt counts at gate slots peaked at Aigas at 205 on 29th May, whilst at Kilmorack the highest number counted was 15, on 22nd and 23rd May (illustrated in Figures 1 & 2 below).
* 2023 data (smolts, flows and temps) needs to be written up, like the reports produced in 2022 and 2023.
* A new site at Erchless has been identified and needs assessing with SSE to check it is suitable for 2024 smolt monitoring.

**Fish Counts:**

* It is hoped that AI counts for Kilmorack and Aigas will be available by mid-December.
* It was confirmed that the MK12 counters have already been taken out from the Kilmorack and Aigas passes.
* Unvalidated count from Beannacharan for 2023 is **38** fish, which is much reduced than usual numbers (2018: **208**; 2019: **37** (but missing count data for large part of the year); 2020: **144**; 2021: **123**; 2022: **222**).
* Beannacharan is to have AI counter system installed this winter.
* We learnt that the Borland lifts and counters are operating from early March every year, to ensure that they are operating, and compliant on 1st April each year – however no upstream fish recorded using them (occasional kelts are).

**Electro-fishing:**

* The Farrar genetics sampling was completed and invoiced for.
* All 30 NEPS sites have been successfully surveyed. Data entry also complete (AW entered 26 sites and AS did 4), ahead of deadlines, and MSS very happy with quality of data submitted.
* Claim has been submitted for second and final NEPS23 payment of £8,304.95. (Payment likely to be deferred til March 2024).
* FMS have successfully secured the MFS funding for new electro-fishing kit for Boards and Trusts - the Beauly kit is worth over £13,000 (plus a set of volunteer waders).

**Fish habitat/substrate surveys and reporting**:

* Farrar and Beauly habitat reports written and sent to SEPA (hydromorphologist) for comment.
* Unlikely to get funding for a shared project officer to tackle the lack of sediment management at the dams (with Ness and Conon) through NRF unless hang this on a specific restoration project.

**Adult sampling project:**

* 65 adult salmon sampled by LBFS ghillies.
* c.1.5 days of Ruth’s time coordinating sampling and checking data.
* We wait to hear how FMS would like us to invoice for ours and LBFS time.
* This work should be feeding into the Conservation grading.

**Temperature monitoring:**

* The two Misge and Deabhag temp loggers have been retrieved, downloaded and re-calibrated by MSS at Faskally (free of charge) – they are in the post and will be reinstalled as soon as suitable conditions allow it (by mid-December).
* We have the third logger (for monitoring winter temperature downstream of Kilmorack dam to assess if fish pass operation should be extended into December) - installed on 30th November.

**Predation:**

* First spotted in September, one rogue grey seal continues to be seen, and eating salmon, in the Lower Beauly – ghillies reporting sightings on the FMS reporting app.
* FMS successful with funding for acoustic seal deterrents – need to decide if we will accept this if offered, and who will resource it – Biologist and bailiff time is limited – LBFS?
* Bird surveys coming up in January – AS to educate/pass on guidance to AW on this.

**Future: (**carry-over from Sept. 2023 update - AW needs to investigate these items**)**

* Resolve SFCC data exporting issues with SFCC.
* Still need to determine if NatureScot will pay for invertebrate sample analysis (APEM quote of £4850-7307ex VAT) under ‘code of translocations’.
* AS+ JB to replicate aerial photos via drone to support fish habitat reports.
1. **Work Plan Progress to address the Pressures**

A link to the Storyboard Fishery Management Plan (Phase 1) is [here](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/e2200f33a0af4ee28cc0c075094660d4), and has been put on the website.

**Estuarine Netting**: update to be provided by Frank.

**Smolt passage**: see smolt monitoring.

**Invasives (INNS)/ Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI):**

* Invasive control work in the catchment is largely carried out and funded through SISI.
* In addition, in 2023, contractors AMW Arboreal Ltd. were used for Japanese knotweed control work, using the Highland Council ‘Highland Nature Restoration Fund’ – currently awaiting the second and final payment of the £9,000 Ruth successfully applied for.
* 2nd quarter (July-September) SISI claim forms have been submitted – this represents the start of Phase2 of the project (more on that below).
	+ RW: INNS plant work – 15.5 hours + 25 hours ‘In-kind’ work (Moy Game Fair and BBQ), + mileage claimed.
	+ RW: April-June INNS plant work – 18 hours + mileage claimed.
	+ AS: Mink control work – 17 hours + mileage claimed.
	+ AS: April-June Mink control work – 6 hours + mileage claimed.
* I had a meeting with Callum (PM for SISI) on 20th November, to get up to speed with project and to understand concerns – BFB need to try to do all the contracted hours signed up for, and the three partners (us, Ness and Cromarty) are being asked to work more closely with Trudi (local SISI Project Officer (P.O.)), to ensure an effective plan is being followed, and so we all know what it is, and particularly to increase the network of mink rafts and volunteers to run them.
	+ BFB is contracted to 40hours of plant control work and 40 hours of mink control work every year to 2026. This represents £7,409 in total for 2023-2026. This is work for AS and AW.
		- £2,372 for 2023-24; £2,468 for 2024-25; £2,569 for 2025-26.
	+ This is only for direct/fieldwork time and mileage – walks, talks, shows/game fairs, BBQs, steering group meetings, and managing Trudi’s work, is not included – but this still needs to be recorded in timesheets and claims, as ‘In-kind’ contributions.
	+ We are now in the new PHASE2 of the project which is funded by the Nature Restoration Fund and is a lot less flexible than the previous Lottery Funding – funds cannot be carried over from one year to the next; and our timesheet and mileage claims must be submitted within two weeks of the end of quarter (so next claims, to end of December, must be in by mid-January). Volunteer hours claims slightly more lenient, with a 4 week-after-end-of-quarter deadline.
	+ BFB is still responsible for the INNS work in the catchment – we need to plan and understand what work is needed each year, and work with and manage Trudi accordingly, to get the work done.

2023 SISI summary (to end of September) (from Trudi Clarke – SISI P.O.):

* Him. Balsam control: 103 volunteer hours + 7 SISI P.O. hours:         110 total
* Skunk Cabbage control: 2 volunteer hours + 9 SISI P.O. hours:         11   total
* J. Knotweed control: 13 volunteer hours + 13 SISI P.O. hours:          26   total
* Mink control: Total volunteer hours from Jan-Sept 2023:    433
* Total volunteer only hours:     551

**Development in catchment and potential opportunities:**

* Online meeting (FSN, MSN, AW) had with Jim Henderson of Nith Board on 24th October (organised by RW), for insights in relation to upcoming SSEN developments in the catchment.
* Gave us insight into the potential wins that can be gained by working closely with infrastructure developers, in terms of getting best environmental solution, but mostly how to make money for the Board.
	+ It is difficult to see, with such limited staffing resource, how we can get involved, but hopefully can at least help secure compensation tree planting (and in the right places) as mitigation of potential impact from new SSEN developments in coming years.

**Predation**: FMS have put in a funding bid to include 1 Acoustic deterrent device (worth around £6,000) and Canadian canoe for deployment for seal scaring on the Beauly. We await the outcome.

**Pink salmon**- AW chasing up on the MSS/SEPA eDNA project findings.

**Future:**

* Depending on the outcome of the fish habitat reports and discussions with SSE, there could be an opportunity for SSE to work with Breedon Aggregates (who will have green aims) to deliver suitable substrate to the river downstream of the dams.
* Next year we will hopefully employ the same contractor (AMW Arboreal Ltd.) to do follow-up treatment of JK on Lower Beauly (funded by SISI – £4,000 is available in 2024, with an approximate quoted cost of £3,000 for the work).

**Incidents:**

**SSE** – spill events during October storm (9th-11th) meant that fish passes were out of action at Kilmorack, Aigas and Beannacharan for couple days – SSE confirmed this is standard operating procedure and will always be a result of spill events.

**Meetings:**

* Operational meeting on 24th October.
* SSE ‘hand-over’ meeting on 11th October.
* SSE liaison meeting on 8th November.
* SISI steering group meeting on 15th November.
* SISI one-to-one meeting with Callum (Project Manager) to get up to speed, on 20th November.
* Budget Meeting on 23rd November.

Figure 1. Estimated count of smolts in gate slots at Aigas dam.

 Figure 2. Estimated count of smolts in gate slots at Kilmorack dam.

* Zero counts marked include two days a week when no counts taken on weekend.
* Adult gulls on nests hampered full counts being possible (further gates couldn’t be accessed).
* End of May counts at Kilmorack were not possible due to gull chicks.