

Beaully District Fishery Board – Minutes of Board Meeting

Date: 10th December 2024

Location: Bidwells, Ness Meeting Room/By Microsoft Teams

Attendees: Alastair Campbell (AC), Charles McAndrew (CM), Eugenie Haniel via Teams (EH), Donald Fraser (DF), Jim Braithwaite via Teams (JB), Ruth Watts (RW), Ali Skinner (AS), and Victoria Rothroe (VR), Hamish Hope (HH) and Alan Wells via Teams (AW).

1. Apologies

Tom Waring was unable to attend.

2. Minutes of Board Meeting 4th October 2024

Typos were noted and amended. Minutes were approved.

3. Alan Wells – CEO of FMS Update via Teams

AW presented for 20 minutes on the work FMS are carrying out and what is relevant to BDSFB. Topics covered were:

- Wild salmon strategy
- Hydro committee
- Predation
- Governance
- Catch and release guidance

AW offered to answer questions and welcomed emails with any other questions at a later date. Thanks was given to AW for his time and for the information provided. AW left the meeting upon completing his presentation.

4. Senior Biologist Report

RW was welcomed back as this was her first board meeting since returning from maternity leave.

RW noted that the electrofishing report for 2023/24 is now overdue.

4.1 Seal Licence

Seal licence is main priority to have drafted and ready to submit for the end of January 2025 deadline. RW raised the point that even if a licence is granted, it would be a licence for 2026 not 2025.

The Acoustic Deterrent Device (ADD) has very little effect on the seals apart from when it was used close to Kilmorack dam.

Other rivers have been identifying individual seals to better track and keep record of sightings. AS has suggested a camera which will be able to assist with this.

A huge thank you was given to AS and the ghillies who have been recording seal sightings.

AW had provided an update on FMS apps, this poster would be good to have in all fishing huts to help report sightings of various issues including seal sighting and fish disease. The information is available on FMS's website.

Action: RW/HH to electronically distribute FMS reporting apps.

4.2 Sediment Management

RW sought approval from board that they are happy to continue progressing sediment management and suggested that the board visits the Kyle of Sutherland to look at a similar project.

Ross, the main contact at SSE, is moving into another role. The board is still waiting for his feedback on two reports.

RW is due to do a drone flyover with Gordon Armstrong this season to look at where fish are spawning. This will be for the Lower Beaully and Lower Farrar.

Further discussion is required with SSSEN on future data and surveys, in particular who will do what and own the data.

Action: RW to arrange a board visit to the Kyle of Sutherland

5. Catch & Release

Awaiting guidance regarding catch & release from FMS, though it is possible that guidance would suggest a 100% catch and release. RW, thinks that the board should lead by example and recommend doing this voluntarily. CM disagrees, as the catchments catch and release is currently 97%. The board already has good guidance which works well.

AC emphasizes that the boards conservation policy is only a recommendation and is voluntary to follow.

The board should be seen to be support a conservation policy of 100% catch and release to support FMS with their discussions with the government and to limit the risk of a legally enforceable policy.

CM, understands where RW is coming from but suggests we wait until we have FMS recommendation. JB rejoins the call and says if a policy such as this isn't put in place, there is the risk of the government shutting all salmon fisheries.

AC, recent years we have had very high levels of catch & release and as a whole we are in a good position. A voluntary system is much more acceptable and preferable than an enforced one.

VR asked why the 3% were retained. AC says it's usually one of two reasons, the first being that the fish were bleeding and won't survive and the second being the fish was the angler's first fish.

AC, we temporarily park this discussion until we have further guidance from FMS. We have until the 1st April to provide our conservation policy.

Action: RW to source video on guidance from FMS and distribute to board.

6. Monitoring Strategy

When RW started there was limited electrofishing data from the mainstream and not a strong understanding of how salmon are using the catchment. NEPS allowed for a wider understanding and coverage.

RW suggests that for 2025, we focus on the River Beauly as it would be useful to get information on how the fish are using the river. SSEN could be involved and if they are going to assist in funding this will need to be in 2026.

RW, there are lots of other monitoring we could be doing such as genetic sampling. At present, we do not know if there is a difference between a Glass fish, Farrar fish or Beauly fish for example.

RW, we need to think of where the board's funding will come from for electrofishing going forward.

CM, points out we need to have this conversation alongside the budget. The hole in the budget is from the funding we are not receiving from NEPS. As we are not getting NEPS, is it suitable to do electrofishing every 2 years instead of annually.

RW says electrofishing should be done annually, but it has not been confirmed if NEPS will be happening in 2025 or not. RW thinks it is unlikely.

AC, we don't want to be distracted by other people, such as windfarms, who may pay for electrofishing as we do need to focus on our priorities.

RW, we can do electrofishing with volunteers but coverage would be much more limited. RW stresses that the data collected from electrofishing is our only independent data to rely on. We always try to recruit a trainee through traineeship schemes and get an intern, although this has not been successful in recent years. Other boards have a second member of staff to help with electrofishing.

EH, asks if we should do electrofishing every other year if there is no indication of any issues. RW, the bi-annual approach could help with the budget and we do still try and do as much as we can with years where funding is available. In years, where there is no or little fundings we can do what we can with volunteers. RW points out that without doing the surveys, we won't know if there are any problems.

RW thinks it should be a given to do electrofishing but understands that budget constraints will have an impact on this.

It was discussed that we could use a paid contractor to help every other year (or as and when NEPS occurs).

Action: RW to look into the potential having an intern or trainee.

RW to put together the electrofishing reports for the last two years.

7. Bailiff Report

AS and ghillies have cleared blockages. AS is planning on doing some drone works in the next couple of weeks to see if there are any salmon redds. He is continuing seal monitoring.

AS requests the board to approve the purchase of the camera to aid in assisting in identifying seals.

AS will let the seasonal bailiff know when training courses are being run in February/March and will encourage the seasonal bailiff to make these.

AS to go to some training courses in February/March and hopes the seasonal bailiff can join these.

CM, believes the board should approve purchase of the camera. Board approves purchase.

RW, thinks the Lower Beauly Ghillies are happy to clear the burns at Belladrum with AS and seasonal bailiff doing the rest of the catchment. AC happy to have a joint approach on this.

Action: AS to purchase the camera.

8. SSE

RW, we've already mentioned that Ross is moving into another role and we may not get feedback on the outstanding reports.

AC mentioned that, as Clerk of the River Ness, he is aware that board are also frustrated with lack of response from SSE.

RW has said that there may be a delay in recruiting Ross's replacement.

AC, it is encouraging the SEPA will be reviewing SSE's licence in 2027 and the board need to be involved in pushing for this.

RW and Naveed from SSE are to meet with SEPA to discuss what data SSE need to provide to evidence they are following the smolt protocol.

SSE are now using AI to count, in 2024 there were issues with storage capacity but counting in 2025 should be more reliable. RW says that indicatively the counts looks as expected, relatively speaking. AC thinks the board should push SEPA to make it a legal requirement for SSE to count fish.

RW, it was decided in the liaison meeting that there would be no smolt study in spring 2025 as we are hoping for a survival study in 2026. RW thinks pit-tagging would be the best option for survival study.

JB suggests we request SEPA involvement and see if there could be funding from them. RW says that is not something SEPA would fund. AC suggests that any funding from SEPA would need to be a specific grant.

RW, it could be possible to do a joint study with the Kyle of Sutherland and the Conon but the issue with that is that turbine loads and set-up are different at each dam.

RW, we may need to do more smolt trapping this year to determine if we can make an improvement in trapping effectiveness.

Action: RW to meet with Naveed and SEPA regarding data for smolt protocol.

RW to look into if a 2025 smolt trap would be required and present thoughts to board.

RW to prepare a smolt survival study proposal for SSE before their budget is finalised.

9. Financial Report & 2025 Budget

Updated budget sent through by HH, showing a £14,000 deficit. AC states this is a real concern and is unsustainable. We need to be conscious of cashflow throughout the year.

A subcommittee will meet to discuss the budget in more detail and how to improve it, this is to be HH, CM and RW. AC can also join.

The YTD actual in 2024 was better than expected, so there have been some savings which could be considered.

RW mentioned that there is likely to be private funding available for nature and environmental works.

There was further discussion around the budget, but it was decided that the subcommittee would meet in January and revisit the budget before presenting an updated one to the board.

Action: Subcommittee to meet regarding budget.

10. Operational Matters

10.1 Vehicle Update

The van has now been received and is being used by RW. HH provided an update on the remaining truck. It is very likely that Arnold Clark will request this back and figures for a new truck have been considered in the 2025 budget. HH to get further quotes and a wider range of options before a decision is made.

10.2 Bird Licence

The bird licence is now in the name of HH. HH to speak with Gordon Armstrong.

10.3 FOI

The Board received a Freedom of Information (FOI) request. The board do not hold information on what was requested. The requester asked for an internal review to be carried out on how the request was handled. The request was responded to, however, it is noted that the request did not originally come to the Clerk in August. HH became Clerk in October and the request was brought to his attention in November. HH to ensure there is a BDSFB policy in responding to FOI requests.

10.4 Bookkeeping

HH raised the issue with bookkeeping, which is currently with Bidwells. Bell Ingram has quoted for the work, which would allow HH to have better access to day-to-day information and management of funds. The board approved Bell Ingram to take on the role of bookkeeping in 2025.

11. AOCB

RW to work flexibly as of January 2025 but will work the same amount of hours. There is to be regular contact with HH regarding workload and can be reviewed if required.

AC, would like to formally thank Anthony Watkins for his assistance in covering for RW over the last year. RW had arranged for a signed card to be sent to Anthony Watkins.

JB says the angling clubs AGM is the upcoming Thursday night and welcomes any questions. AC asks for the club's feedback on the boards priority.

RW, there will be Christmas drinks on the 18th December and everyone is welcome to attend if able.

12. Date of Next Meeting

HH to circulate options for the next meeting.