

MINUTES OF THE SECOND ANNUAL MEETING
of
HELMSDALE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD
held at Kildonan Hall, Helmsdale,
on Saturday, 9th May 2015 at 4.05 pm

PRESENT

Sir John Nutting Bt. QC
Sir Algy Heber Percy
Neil McCorquodale
William Southall
Donald Sutherland
Robert Mackay
Edward Reeves
Jeremy Clay

IN ATTENDANCE

Sir Michael Wigan Bt. - Fishery Manager
Norman Wright - Clerk
Peter Quail - Head Bailiff
6 Attendees

CHAIR

Sir John Nutting Bt. QC took the Chair.

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Lucy Reeves.

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The Minutes of the First Annual Meeting held on Saturday, 10th May 2014 were tabled, approved and signed by the Chairman.

MATTERS ARISING

At the First Annual Meeting in May 2014, Mr Ronald Sutherland raised concerns about the maintenance of banks on the River Helmsdale and the effects of grazing in certain sites causing erosion of the river system. The Board noted his comments and requested

that Sir Michael Wigan should look into the matter. Sir Michael Wigan presented the following Report to the Meeting:-

Mr Ronald Sutherland's complaint alleged in terms that the Board was in breach of Rule 19 of the CAR, as amended.

The Board decided to treat his remarks as if he had made a formal complaint, which he did not lodge.

Rule 19 of CAR was amended in March 2014. Rule 19a applies to bank erosion due to stock access. 'Significant erosion.....must be prevented.' Sir Michael asked the meeting to note that the Regulations do not require fencing as a blanket solution.

The Board took advice from an independent professional consultant, Dr Angus Spirit of Envirassist, formerly a SEPA officer, who reported that the key word in the Regulation was 'significant'. He advised assessing whether, over time, there was evidence that 'significant' erosion was taking place.

Sir Michael reported that he arranged to have made photographic records of the sites in order to monitor whether further erosion was occurring. Dr Spirit advised that this action demonstrated that the Board were taking heed of the legislation and in particular Regulation 19a. It is apparent from these records that no further erosion is occurring.

In terms of the complaint and the allegation that stock trampling was causing erosion and subsequent siltation, given the limited scale of the local problem, Dr Spirit concluded that "in terms of diffuse pollution it would be difficult to argue that sand/gravel will generate significant silting of the watercourse." He rejected the suggestion that Rule 19a had been, or was being, breached.

The Board also undertook electro-surveys in 2014 including in areas where there was erosion of banks due to livestock access. Mr Ronald Sutherland was invited to participate in these surveys: he declined.

It was found that densities of young fish downstream of the bank erosion, showed 1.5 – 2.0 migratory fish per metre: the SFCC's recommended limit is under 0.5. The electro fishing results also demonstrated that the best habitats show 4 migratories per metre.

In the result, the tests revealed that the Helmsdale has comfortably higher densities of young fish than official limits, including in places where stock graze adjacent to unfenced stream-banks.

In conclusion, the Board intends to maintain its monitoring of the identified sites but is confident that 'significant' erosion is not occurring due to livestock access, and, more importantly, that where there is bank erosion on the river, albeit on a limited scale, no detrimental effect is occurring to the breeding capacity in and around that site.

The mid-August spate in 2014 dumped gravel and sand in large quantities on the lower river showing the scale and dynamism of moving siltation on the Helmsdale. Micro-management of gravel and silt, given these natural events, is pointless.

For guidance in its policy on bank erosion, the Board's Team use the EU-sponsored work done in Ireland by Dr. Martin O'Grady called "Channels and Challenges." Ireland has rivers and floodplains which correspond closely to the flow-rate and peatland background of the environment on the Helmsdale. Some of the techniques, used on the Helmsdale to retain banks, such as the post and turf work on 3 Above, are illustrated and constitute recommended practice in this book.

RESEARCH

A total of 24 sites were checked by electro fishing. The results are encouraging and nothing was found to cause concern. The Caen Burn has recovered from the damage to it caused 2 years ago.

HATCHERY

The return to the river of 150,000 unfed fry was completed on 13th April 2015. A DNA database from our broodstock has been started. Rod Anglers and Ghillies are also contributing samples. It was noted that the Hatchery constitutes a gene bank if a disaster occurs to the River.

FISH RUN VERIFICATION

Camera verification is being fitted to the Counter. A structure is in place and the cameras are awaited. This is Government sponsored: the Board did not tender for the project.

In addition, it was noted that verification cameras are to be installed on the North Esk, but these are of a different type. It appears that no cameras have been specially designed for Counters. Peter Quail confirmed that the new system is to verify our own figures.

KELTS

Not many kelts have been caught as the water has been high. It was noted that sea eagles have been seen in the Strath, and that they were observed sometime ago storing kelts in trees.

OPEN DAYS IN 2015

Very poor weather and sadly no fish were caught, but there were lots of anglers who appeared to enjoy themselves.

HABITAT

Rosal, Borrobol, Achentoul, Badanloch, Suisgill, Kildonan and Rimsdale have been affected by wind-blow. At Rosal, the Forestry Commission suffered damage to 900 ha. Timber removal will, in the future, improve water quality. There will be a reduction in the speed and acidity of run-off.

CATCH & RELEASE

This was discussed in detail in the prior to the Meeting this afternoon.

SEALS

Sir Michael Wigan reported on a meeting of the Moray Firth Seal Control Project held three days ago. All participants agreed to implement their quotas. Our quota is 1 common seal and 2 grey seals.