

MINUTES OF THE NINTH ANNUAL MEETING

Of

HELMSDALE DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

**Held at Kildonan Hall, Helmsdale, Sutherland on Saturday 7thth
May, 2022 at 10.15am**

PRESENT

Neil McCorquodale

Sir John Nutting Bt. QC.

Lady Wigan

Donald Sutherland

Alexander Darwall

George Stephenson

William Jappy

IN ATTENDANCE

Sir Michael Wigan Bt. – Fishery Manager

Martin Mackay – Clerk

Peter Quail – Head Bailiff

Attendees – Mrs D. Darwall, Robert Henderson, John McLeod, John Young

CHAIR

Neil McCorquodale took the Chair.

It was agreed that the last two years had been very difficult and the Board was determined that fishers did not bring the covid virus into the area. A strict set of rules were drawn up and all those employed on the river and in the lodges followed these rules and were to be thanked and congratulated on their responsible attitude which enabled fishing to take place without incident.

APOLOGIES

Sir Algernon Heber-Percy

MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The last public meeting was held on 11 May 2019 due to Covid 19. The Minutes of that meeting have previously been approved.

MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

ACCOUNTS

The Audited Accounts for the year to 31 December 2021 prepared by Saffery Champness, Chartered Accountants were tabled, considered and subject to the need to delete the reference to Robert Mackay as a co-opted Member were approved.

REPORT FOR 2021

The Report for 2021 was tabled considered and approved.

CATCHES

Catches for the 2021 season were 1117 salmon and grilse. 111 were caught on the Lower Helmsdale. There have been 101 fish caught to the end of April which is comparable to last year.

CONSERVATION GRADES

The river has been classified again as Grade One.

CATCH AND RELEASE

The return rate for 2021 was around 97%. Angler's appear to accept rules and are behaving accordingly. Rules are to remain unchanged for 2022. Any pink salmon caught are to be killed.

RESEARCH

DNA samples are collected from both rod caught fish as well as all fish used in the hatchery. The University of the Highlands and Islands ("UHI") compares the DNA to see what percentage of hatchery fish return as migrating adults. UHI have concluded from the first phase of their research that of 93 samples analysed no fish were direct siblings. This supports the Board's policy of rearing fish in the hatchery and demonstrates that genetic diversity is being maintained.

PREDATOR CONTROL

The Board has obtained a licence to control sawbills under which 2 mergansers and 1 goosander may be killed. The licence expires at end May 2022. There is a belief

that the incidence of sawbills has increased over recent years. It was noted that Cormorants are also in widespread evidence. It was generally agreed that this licence must be fully exercised with care to keep within the rules

HATCHERY

150,000 fry had been released by 29 April 2022.

ELECTROFISHING

Electrofishing was carried out at 30 sites in 2021. 15 sites were part of the Scottish Government NEPS programme with a further 15 undertaken by the District Salmon Fishery Board for the purposes of their own research. The Board also undertook research work for the Forestry Commission on the Halladale catchment. Helmsdale fry were fewer and smaller than usual with salmon parr larger and more numerous. The late hatch of insects and young salmon eating their smaller kin are thought to be the cause.

OPEN DAYS

These occurred from 11th January to 24th January. The demand for tickets was larger than in previous years. No fish were caught. For future years angling on Open Days will only be permitted below the Falls.

NETWORK RAIL

The bridge at the Hatchery was refurbished during the 2021 season resulting in the loss of fishing in the three pools below the bridge. Anglers accepted the position and the whole river is now open again. All works have been completed. .

BEATRICE WINDFARM

This windfarm offshore from Dunbeath is being doubled in size. A further 15 new windfarms are planned across the north and north- east coast. No proper investigations are being undertaken to establish the effect of these large structures and the electro- magnetic cabling on marine life. The effects on salmon are not being monitored despite The Scottish Government pledging to protect and rescue the Atlantic Salmon and hence there is no evidence to as to whether they have been affected. It is thought that due to proposed expansion of off-shore wind generation there may be up to a further 100 cables coming ashore..

FISHERY PROTECTION

No poaching events recorded in 2021.

FISH COUNTER

The Board's Counter has not been recording accurately and so there is no reliable data. The cause of the defect is not clear. The Scottish Government have provided a new armoured cable and it is hoped that this is a sign of a commitment that they will assist to ensure the counter is made operational again soon.

AOB

The provision of a boat on Beat 4 above was requested and will be provided.

The continued occurrence of fish with saprolegnia was noted and it is hoped this will subside with warmer water. There are also reports of fish with "red belly" marks from fin to tail. The causes are unknown and the position will be monitored.

The suggestion to hold the meetings an hour later in future starting at 11.00am was agreed.

NEXT MEETING

This will be held at 11.15 am on Saturday 6th May 2023 at Kildonan Hall, Helmsdale.