

## MIGRATORY FISH COMMITTEE

Minutes of meeting on Sunday, 27 September 2020, at 10.30am on Zoom

**Present:-** Messrs Campbell, McKay, Picken, Pirie, Walker and Wight. J Stephen occasionally appeared but was muted. J Twaddle (Chairman of the NMFC) was unseen and unheard but saw and heard everything. Antje Brandling (Marine Scotland) also participated.

1 **Chairman's Introduction:** CC welcomed members and Antje Branding (Marine Scotland) to the committee's second online meeting. He reminisced on the discussion at an earlier meeting when it was resolved to continue with "real" meetings, rather than move to this format. Now, and for the foreseeable future, this was the new normal. Unfortunately Antje connected on sound only. Members introduced themselves to Antje.

2 **Apologies:** B Balfour

3 **Conflicts of Interest:** None were declared.

4(i) **Minutes of Meeting 21 June 2020:-** Approved by those present.

4(ii) **Matters Arising from above:** CC noted that Okain was scheduled to approach his MP concerning the continued deployment of coastal T and J nets in North East England. These are mixed stock fisheries that continue to predate Scottish stocks of sea trout while releasing entrapped salmon. He would chase this up.

### 5 **Completed and Ongoing Issues**

(i) **Seal culling:** CC assured members that following MS's supply of the Bill's text, which was directed to preventing the authorisation of seal culling by fish farmers, he had examined the text of the existing legislation which enables authorisation by Marine Scotland. He had concluded that the Bill's amendment, when enacted, would not jeopardise the ability of DSFBs to get licences to cull seals which had entered freshwater.

(ii) **Consultation on requirement for fish farmers to report sea lice numbers:** Our response had agreed to the measure but was mainly used to exhort Scottish Government to further actions that would improve the environmental credentials of the industry which are at a very low point. CC also noted that the reduced availability of air freight capacity (Jumbo jets not flying and many being scrapped) meant that the industry was unable to export much of its output. At some point, it would not be economic to add further weight to fish and they would be killed and frozen. The overhang on the market of that product would depress prices for fresh fish, if and when, air freight capacity becomes available. A probable consequence would be a much smaller industry than at present.

Triploidy was discussed but there are no indications that salmon farming might adopt the option. The recent escape of close on 50,000 fish and their appearance in rivers in the Ayrshire/Clyde/Argyll area highlights how triploid salmon would avoid any impending genetic consequences.

(iii) **General Licences for Control of Fish Eating Birds:** CC introduced the subject by identifying the subject of "evidence" as critical to our reply to the Minister's letter and invited Antje to update the meeting on the MS evidence. We were advised that the research reports (analysis from stomach contents of piscivorous birds derived from trial culls in May 2019 and May 2020) were not yet available but would be sent to us when released. Covid-related delays were responsible. It was resolved to put in a holding reply and that we should write more substantially when the research material is available.

We were also updated on MS's considerable attention being given to predation in the context of the Salmon Strategy. That is being pursued under the supervision of a slimmed-down Advisory Group and SANA will be consulted.

(iv) **River Gradings etc:** All agreed that we should write to MS with thanks for the continuing ban on coastal nets, rather than offer any commentary on the specifics of individual river grades.

However that subject was also raised in the context of agenda item 8 – the more restricted public disclosure of catch statistics. The response from MS expected by mid July was received. A data protection act of 2018 prevents the publication of 2019 catch figures as before. Hence not all of the columns in the ThelotMFC file can be updated for 2019 catches. A file for the now 56 areas for rod and line and the 10 regions for net fishing for 1952 to 2019 was received.

(v) **RBMP etc:** Agreed that a letter be written to SEPA regarding lack of progress on the follow-up to their consultation. To be copied to MS.

6 **NASCO:** AW noted that NGOs, now over forty in number, were increasingly having an impact. A present concern for them is that, while the Implementation Plans submitted by member jurisdictions are welcome and informative, adverse comments from NGOs on the Progress Reports on Actions Taken are insufficiently used in revised draft reports. An example is the impact of salmon aquaculture e.g. via diseases, escapes, parasites. Bold promises have been made but the issues have not yet been addressed. NASCO might press for the use of triploid fish which if introduced, as in rainbow trout production and fisheries, would prevent the assimilation of farmed salmon genes into wild stocks while closed containment remains on the horizon.

After BREXIT the UK will become a full member of NASCO and the UK will then input directly to NASCO rather than through the EU.

7 **CATCHES DURING 2020:** CC had experienced a remarkable recovery of grilse numbers and strong autumn run (Teith). Some members echoed those observations. While similar reports are widespread from throughout the UK and Ireland not all rivers in Scotland have seen such runs. Parts of the country have also experienced lengthy periods of low flows particularly North of the Great Glen while to the South and West rainfall has been considerable. Whether the late season numbers of new fish remain very low as for the past few years remains to be seen. No reports of pink salmon being caught were known of.

8 **CATCH FIGURES ONWARD FROM 2018:** The Data Protection Act of 2018 has resulted in MS deciding that certain details of catch returns made by fisheries to them by law and in recent years made public can no longer be made public. This decision is effectively a return of the confidentiality clause of the 1951 Act which clause was repealed by a section in the Water Act in the 1980s. As noted in 5(iv) above, for rod and line, 109 reporting areas have been reduced to 56. 27 of these are identical to previous reporting areas and include most of the major rivers. A few others will only differ in catch figures by near trivial amounts from the 'big' river in the new area.

However there are two consequences of data protection and the 173 assessment areas for which grades are calculated. One is that by measuring catch plots, whose content strongly influences grade values and can be viewed, otherwise hidden monthly salmon catch figures can be estimated.

Secondly, rather surprisingly and disappointingly, the catch figures used in determining the grades of a number of assessment areas cannot be similarly displayed in plots and thus a key input to the grade

calculation is not disclosed to the public. This can be seen in the documentation for both the 2020 and the 2021 grades.

*Information on the above issue of data protection constraints was subsequently supplied by AB and circulated to members.*

9        **AOCB:** The umbrella body, ASL, had well argued the case for anglers returning to action from lockdown.

A report commissioned by MS on the economic impacts of aquaculture was published this week and can be read at the link below.

<https://www.gov.scot/news/wider-economic-impacts-of-aquaculture/>

10       The next MFC meeting will be on Sunday 6 December at 10.30am.

AB was thanked for attending, fielding questions and tolerating the inevitable chatter from salmon anglers at item 7.

The meeting closed after one and a half hours of uninterrupted Zoom connection.