MINUTE OF MEETING OF THE SPEY DISTRICT FISHERY BOARD IN OPEN SESSION held at the Craigellachie Hotel and online, commencing at 9.30 a. m. on Friday 26th May 2023

## Present: -

**Chairman** Dr Alexander Scott Craigellachie Fishings

**Proprietors** Angus Gordon Lennox (AGL) The G.C. Gordon Lennox Estate Company Ltd

Callum Robertson (CR) Easter Elchies

Guy Macpherson-Grant \* (GMG) Ballindalloch

Toby Metcalfe\* (TM) Crown Estates Scotland

William Mountain (WM) Delfur Fishings

George Wills\* (GW) Knockando

Peter Graham\* (PG) Rothes & Aikenway

**Co-Optees** Sandy Howie River Spey Anglers Association

Grant Mortimer (GM) Strathspey Angling Improvement Association

**In Attendance** Roger Knight Director

Atticus Albright Biologist

Neil Torrance Clerk

Jennifer Heatley (JH) NatureScot

Tom Mountain\*

\*Attending via video conference

**WELCOME,** **INTRODUCTIONS AND CONFLICTS**

The Chairman noting that the meeting is in fact a blended meeting with some attendees (\*) participating by video conference with a special mention to Tom Mountain.

1. **APOLOGIES and CONFLICT**

Apologies had been received from Paul Hughes (PH) who is on annual leave and David Greer (DG).

Noted that Lisa Forsyth of SEPA had not been invited to today’s meeting for reasons to be discussed later in the Closed Session.

The Chairman then asked those present to record any conflict of interest they may have and there were none.

1. **MINUTES OF THE OPEN SESSION OF THE MEETING ON 10TH FEBRUARY 2023**

The Chairman requested any comments on the minutes other than typos on which an email was to be sent to the Clerk to correct them.

No other comments or questions, and as such the Chairman noting the Minutes as read and accepted.

1. **MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES**

The Action Point Summary documentwasproduced to the Board by the Director in advance of today’s meeting with list of points and current status referred to.

The Director then running through it, noting a number being historic and those to be specifically dealt with, either in the Director’s report, the Biologist’s report or later on as a specific point on the agenda.

As no comments were made the Chairman inviting the Director to deal with his report

1. **DIRECTOR’S REPORT**

The Director seeking to share the screen for those attending via video conference. Referring to the Report produced to the Board, as usual, in advance of today’s meeting.

Thereafter specifically reporting on or highlighting a number of aspects including: -

**Spring Catches**

Advising that the weekly reports that Sandy Howie puts together for us each week indicates a slow start to this year’s season, with weekly catches much lower than expecting or hoping for.

Noting that this is not just a factor affecting the Spey, but rather it appears to be Scotland-wide, and none of the big rivers are performing as well as they should be for this time of year. The Ghillies Committee met last night, and it was discussed with them, who expressed their concerns in that we have a commercial river here, and it needs to have fish in order to attract visitors. When asked what they were looking for they said that they would welcome three things: -

1. they would like to see more output from the Board's hatchery.
2. they would like to see the fish being reared on to the Fed fry or autumn parr stage because they have no faith in eggs being planted out.
3. they also wanted us to challenge the Scottish Government and Marine Scotland over their stocking policy and move them away from mitigation stocking, towards a policy of enhancement stocking.

The clear message from them was action is needed now before it is too late.

It was also reported that there was also a bit of discussion about the counter in the paper that came from AGL, with some support for that. It was indicated that while they supported what the Board are doing with the Spey Catchment Initiative (SCI) with large wood structures and habitat enhancement, they felt that those were long term benefits and they wanted to see things happening now. They also wanted the Board to communicate - particularly on social media - more of what the Board is doing to give everyone hope.

The Chairman then chairing a discussion on these matters and taking the views of the Board Members individually on both the issues at a local level and on the larger marine biology issues raised in the conversation.

The Chairman indicating that he feels something needs to do done now, or bookings for the next year will suffer. He advised that back in March he, RK, AA and the hatchery manager went to Lochaber to look at John Gibb’s “Smolt to Adult Supplementation” programme. Reporting on how the model works and his views on the same and then chairing a discussion on the possible usage of this as an alternative to more output from the hatchery, which required the removal of brood stock, and by which process would supplement what is happening naturally and the suggestion that we approach Jon Gibb to commence a trial, at an indicative cost of £25K + VAT for the production of 150 adult fish. The majority of the Board agreeing to initiate a Smolt to Adult Supplementation trial. In the meantime, AA charged with producing a comprehensive paper covering all aspects of this process, including running costs and set-up costs, for distribution to the Board and discussion at the next meeting.

JH providing her comments as to NatureScot’s likely views as to these approaches and the nature of consent that may be needed, depending on where the smolts are taken from. Clarifying that if smolts are taken from a tributary, the Board is the Competent Authority for this and the Board is able to conduct a Habitats Regulations Appraisal and licence itself to do so. Also advising that she will check with her colleague Colin Bean on what consent may be necessary and what NatureScot are doing on the marine side of things according to their remit. Initial reaction to these to be included in AA’s paper.

PG’s suggestion that we agree that if we are going to go down this route, that it be noted that this is not going to solve the problem, but rather it is a PR exercise being requested by the ghillies, was not accepted by the Board with it being noted by AGL that it was but one way to proceed. WM commenting that he was not going to pre-empt what the science will tell us.

The Chairman then summarising this discussion by concluding that: Jon Gibb is to be approached to rear 150 adult fish from circa 300 smolts; in the meantime, AA would produce a comprehensive paper on the process of Smolt to Adult Supplementation.

**ACTION:** Jon Gibb to be approached to rear 150 adult fish from 300 smolts at an indicative cost of £25k + VAT.

**ACTION:** Biologist to produce a comprehensive paper outlining on the process of smolt to adult supplementation.

**Spey Dam**

The Director reporting on the smolt monitoring project that has been pushed for the last few years is now happening. Sharing pictures for Board to see what has been going on. Commenting on the significant team effort undertaken to achieve this, including 150 mile-a-day round trips, seven days per week for two months.

Also mentioned that GFG are talking about the automation of the pen stocks and gates – the 7 most-used of the total of 14 – at a total cost of about £90,000, which the MD of GFG is keen to pursue.

**Trapping and Trucking**

The Research Team have also been operating a Rotary Screw Trap (RST) on the lower River Tromie. In terms of the trial of trapping and trucking, which has been successfully conducted, we were restricted as to where the RST could be deployed, to ensure sufficient flow to turn the rotary screw.

**Predator Control**

* Sawbill Ducks

Despite the winter counts thwarted by snow and ice, there have been 2 counts since the Board last met – in late March and early May. Also noting that for the first time, we had a team of volunteers coordinated by Wayne Davison up at Tomintoul who have undertaken counts simultaneously on the River Avon. The hope is to use that to get a licence for the Avon as well as the Spey.

* Seal Licence

This was applied for on the 24th of January. Just over four months later and nothing has been heard from Marine Scotland Licencing. The Director to advise the board members as soon as there is any update on that.

**Spey Catchment Initiative**

The SCI launch occurred on 18th May 2023 including getting Feargal Sharkey - who has been renowned for the last two decades for his championing of preventing pollution into (principally English) rivers - onto the banks of the Spey before the launch, to be interviewed by BBC and STV film crews. Subsequently there were 60 attendees at the Boat of Garten Community Hall. It was put out by PH online and we had a further 250 watching online. The opening speech by Feargal Sharkey was passionate, focussing very much on the plight of Atlantic salmon and the world-renowned River Spey, and was reported that the SCI could become a blueprint for rivers across the UK. As a result, the Director reported very successful press coverage followed, on both television and in newspapers. Furthermore, our social media posts received over 40,000 viewings and collected 102 new followers in just one week. The new SCI website also launched.

The Chairman noting that there were no questions in the room or online for the Director on his report and/or his presentation.

1. **BIOLOGIST’S REPORT**

The Chairman inviting AA to introduce his report. AA gave his presentation,reporting on the Spey Dam smolt trapping with the job of trawling through the data scheduled to start at the end of June. Also reporting on the Loch Insh smolt tagging and “Trap & Truck” trial, with the tagging project estimated to conclude by the end of summer. Also advising that the Cairngorms National Park Authority have approved funding for the Nordic netting to investigate the perch population in Lochs Insh and Alvie. He is to meet with Ron Greer next week to develop the plans for that.

Discussions ensued in relation to the deployment of resources if the Trap and Truck scheme is going to be undertaken and expanded next year and need for a strategic programme at the end of each year for the year ahead, setting out where limited resources are to be deployed.

AA commenting on the question raised by AGL as to how many adults produced the smolts that were caught coming through the dam. AA to produce some calculations on that. The Director commented that DNA analysis of juvenile scale data may be utilised in future in that regard.

There were no other questions for AA.

1. **AOCB**
2. The Chairman inviting AGL to address the Board on the email with regard to a fish counter. Reference to the paper placed before the board. Commenting that the email, which came out of the blue, was just a request for the Board to formalise the process and establish a committee to consider having a fish counter installed and whether it was ever going to be possible. Suggestion that this is an issue for the Scientific committee, being an existing sub-committee and the most appropriate forum. AGL clarifying that the authors are offering to go and find the funding. TM recommending that whoever is leading this matter spend some time speaking to Jamie Stewart on the Tweed and David Summers on the Tay, as they have a lot of experience on counters, the technology and accuracy or lack thereof.

**ACTION:** Biologist and Director to consider a fish counter for the Spey and revert to the Scientific Committee for discussion.

1. WM raising the issue of the need or otherwise for the Director and the Biologist to present their report at Board Meetings, on the basis that they write detailed reports that are available for review in advance of the Board’s meetings, and members can just note their questions for raising at the meeting. Suggestion accepted by the Chairman as sensible.

**ACTION:** Board Members to carefully read Board papers in order to ask questions on Director’s and Biologist’s reports at future meetings, rather than have these presented.

1. The Director raised 2 issues: -
   * + Approval for the request in the report for a replacement vehicle for the Board’s Operations Manager. Approval given.
     + With regard to the 3-mile limit and trawling of the seabed mentioned earlier, advised that there is a campaign by Our Seas which have launched a petition asking for the re-instatement of the 3-mile limit. The Director seeking the Board’s approval to sign that petition on behalf of the Board. Approval given.

**ACTION:** Director to sign Our Seas petition on behalf of the SFB, calling for reinstatement of the 3-mile coastal limit.

The Chairman noting that there was no other business for the Open session.

1. **DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting confirmed as Friday 1st September 2023 commencing at 9.30 a.m., to be a blended meeting - physical venue to be confirmed.

The meeting then closed at 10.55 a.m.