**Lochaber DSFB – Clerk’s Update 1ST October 2019**

**2019 fishing season**

* 2019 season that will be remembered for being unusually wet from early summer onwards
* Early runs of fish in the bigger rivers were mediocre but signs were that there were a few more summer grilse around than in previous years
* Later running fish were also in better evidence than the last few years with fresh fish running well into September on some rivers

**Salmon Farming**

Applications

Responded to a screening for an EIA assessment for expansion of four farms owner by Scottish Seafarms in Lower Linnhe. Reiterated the Board’s completer opposition to further inshore open cage salmon farming. This application has since been delayed. Currently there is only an application live to amalgamate the 2 Lismore farms with no expansion of biomass. Nevertheless it is likely that the 4 expansion applications will re-appear within the next year or so, but hopefully there will be some more definitive guidance on locations from Scottish Government published by then.

There is now a requirement for all fish farm applications (new sites, expansions and any changes) to have an Environmental Management Plan (known as EMP’s). The aim of these is to protect wild fish and monitor the impact from the farms on them. They include ‘adaptive management’, the aim of which is to respond with appropriate management on the farm when wild fish monitoring detects an elevated risk or impact from the farm’s activities. It is very early days in this new development and I take a cautious view as to their benefit. Nevertheless it is the first time that there will be a planning condition placed on farms based on their impact on wild fish.

We have been asked to consider an EMP for the Linnhe region in relation to the Scottish Seafarms sites mentioned above. Again, I am taking a very cautious view. Argyll Trust and Board are leading on this as it lies in Argyll region (but of course impacts smolts migrating out from Upper Linnhe).

We have also been asked by MOWI to consider an EMP for the Maclean’s Nose site as well as the other farms in Loch Sunart. This is in the early stages.

I have also had several months engagement with MOWI about an EMP for a farm expansion at Muck. This has centred around a discussion with LFT, APEM consultants and MOWI about a suitable lice monitoring protocol on wild fish, with a particular focus on the monitoring requirements being placed on the developers due to their proximity to FPM SAC rivers. I objected, for instance, to the use of gill nets and fixed nets at sea. I also objected to various other aspects of the proposal. I have been arguing that the best way to monitor the health of wild migratory fish population following this expansion would be to install a fish counter on the dam on the River Moidart (one of the affected rivers). This discussion is still ongoing.

I responded to a MOWI expansion application on at their Rum site and also to a new proposal for a farm at Canna (at the scoping stage). I have stressed the need for smolt tracking for migratory routes and how MOWI should get into partnership with the AST and a tracking project (see further developments on this below). I have also added that, integral to these expansion applications in deepwater sites, MOWI should look at operating the 3 upper Linnhe sites (Gorsten, Linnhe and Leven) as highly sensitive locations and only stock on a single year production cycle from June to April. This would leave these farms fallow during the wild smolt run every year. Discussions are ongoing with MOWI MD Ben Hadfield.

I also responded to a SEPA CAR application for further expansion at the Maclean’s Nose. In the same manner as above – I have objected to the application until we can demonstrate safe results from a smolt tracking survey and also a commitment to run Upper Linnhe on a single year class production cycle. I have had no response yet from planners or SEPA yet about these applications for Rum, Canna or Maclean’s Nose.

Other aquaculture issues

The FMS aquaculture committee has been active over the last few months and we have participated in its deliberations as a member. These have centred around discussions on EMP’s, wild fish monitoring protocols, the aftermath of the Scottish Government’s fish farm Inquiry and the proposed SSPO fund for wild fisheries management.

The Interactions Working Group has been tasked with delivering advice to Ministers on some of the recommendations of the enquiry into salmon farming – minutes of the group meetings can be found on <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/marine/Salmon-Trout-Coarse/salmon> . We expect some draft recommendations to appear by early November which, as a member of aquaculture committee, will be consulted on. It is being suggested that the process may be concluded by the end of the year and will result in final recommendations to Ministers on a new regulatory regime and timescales in which to deliver it.

The Scottish Government Technical Advisory Group is also working alongside the Interactions Working Group. I attended their meeting last week to discuss proposed plans (and zones) for locational guidance. This plan will be out for consultation before the end of the year. There is much to like in the plan but also some highly controversial areas being highlighted for expansion. I will inform all Board members when the plan is put out for consultation.

MOWI management have been open with me about lice figures throughout the last few months. It was encouraging to note that lice numbers in Upper Linnhe (which is in the 2nd year of production when lice can be a problem) were low when the wild smolt run went to sea.

I was invited to attend an event with 40 delegates from the Directorate of Fisheries from Norway (the equivalent of Marine Scotland in Scotland) and gave a presentation on Lochaber salmon and sea trout and salmon farm interactions. It was particularly interesting to learn about the differences between Norway and Scotland. One obvious difference is the ‘protection zones’ they now give around certain key salmon rivers which disallows any further expansion of fish farming. This knowledge sharing will be particularly important when we are making representations on local inshore expansions.

SEPA also presented at the above event and disclosed plans to create a ‘heat map’ for future fish farm developments. It was clear immediately (especially to the Norwegian delegates) that their map (showing distinct farm areas of red/amber/green) would be very flawed due to there being far too many separate areas. A consultation on this map (linked to the consultation mentioned above) will be out in November and I will take a very hard look at this for Lochaber region, and almost certainly object to their planning approach based on experience of a similar approach in Norway.

**Other Issues in brief**

I met with FMS and the Atlantic Salmon Trust to discuss a possible project to track smolts leaving West Coast rivers and monitored on their outward migratory journey with receivers in the rivers, the inshore sea lochs and arrays between the main migratory corridors between the mainland and the inner/outer Hebrides. It would appear that significant funding may be made available by Scottish Government for this project as well as a large contribution from the fish farm companies. The timescale is very tight and it is planned to trap and tag the first smolts next April. I will have further details on this major project in the next few weeks but, in partnership with the LFT, we are keen to have Lochaber at the very forefront of this work.

I met with Simon Dryden (ex head of salmon fisheries in Marine Scotland) to discuss the draft Scottish Government stocking policy prior to its presentation at NASCO – I distributed this policy to Board members once it was published. *If you plan to stock your river and have not seen this paper please contact me immediately as it contains some very important changes to Government policy.*

I attended the FMS conference and gave a presentation on stocking data from the Lochy

I liaised with the Chairman of the River Lochy Association and their solicitors concerning matters regarding water rights acquisitions in the Core Glas pumped storage proposal, and also an ongoing serious issue regarding the increase of average flow rates at Mucomir affecting the downstream River Lochy and its fishing amenity.

I have met with Jahama Estate manager Dimitri Harrsion twice in the last few months to discuss contribution made by new smelter owners Liberty to local fisheries management and organisation in Lochaber. I toured the catchment to look at Jahama Estates fishing portfolio. It is notable that Liberty and Jahama Estates are keen to engage in a way we have not seen before by previous smelter owners.

The proposed power station at the Lochy Tailrace did not get its planning permission. It remains to be seen if another application will be made.

The DSFB was consulted over a wide range of planning and CAR applications – including several bridge repairs on the highway and railways throughout the region; various new forest plans in the region; culvert applications under CAR; and a recreational zip wire application over the River Leven at Kinlochleven. Where appropriate applications were forwarded to local managers and proprietors.

In recent days I was informed that the Fort William water supply pipe was in danger of breaching where it crosses the River Lundy. I have been engaged with Scottish Water in their proposed emergency works to repair it, attempting to make sure that they have the least impact on this very important juvenile and spawning salmonid area.

Conservation Gradings were issued by Scottish Government. All rivers in Lochaber are Grade 3 except the Lochy and Moidart which are Grade 2. I informed all proprietors on our mailing lists.

I was invited to sit on the River Spey Scientific Advisory Committee this summer. I accepted as I believe it will provide our region a useful sharing of experience and knowledge with this major catchment.

There were several fisheries protection/bailiffing issues over the summer, which I was involved in actively as a bailiff or giving advice as Clerk – for instance low level suspected netting on the Lochy in July and difficulties with visiting angling clubs from the central both on Lochs Shiel and Morar.