**CLERK’S UPDATE SEPTEMBER 2021**

The **2021 fishing season** has largely been characterised by a continuous drought and one of the driest summers in the last 50 years according to local hydro operators. As a result salmon and sea trout fishing has been limited and catches are likely to reflect this at the end of the season.

The **proposed conservation river gradings** have recently been set by Scottish Government. The full calculations behind these assessments can be viewed at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/salmon-fishing-proposed-river-gradings-for-2022-season/>

 It is also possible to appeal any gradings and this can be done by 10th September latest by writing to [salmonandrecreationalfisheries@gov.scot](salmonandrecreationalfisheries%40gov.scot%20) . The gradings for Lochaber are below. Grade 3 assessment means total mandatory Catch and Release whereas Grade 2 allows a limited amount of fish to be killed (full details can be found on the links).

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| **PROPOSED RIVER GRADINGS 2022** |
|  |  | **2021** | **2022** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Inverie |  | 3 | 3 |
| Carnach |  | 3 | 3 |
| Guiserein |  | 3 | 3 |
| Morar |  | 3 | 2 |
| Ailort |  | 3 | 2 |
| Moidart |  | 2 | 2 |
| Shiel |  | 3 | 3 |
| Achateny |  | 3 | 3 |
| Strontian |  | 3 | 3 |
| Carnoch |  | 3 | 3 |
| Aline |  | 3 | 3 |
| Coe |  | 3 | 3 |
| Leven |  | 3 | 2 |
| Scaddle |  | 3 | 3 |
| Nevis |  | 3 | 3 |
| Lochy |  | 2 | 3 |

The use of **Freedom of Information** requests under the Environmental Impact Regulations continues to cause disruption to the limited resources of the DSFB (see previous Board report for details). I have had further dealings with the Information Commissioner about the use of these FOI’s by Salmon and Trout Conservation Scotland (S&TC). Both Fishlegal and Fisheries Management Scotland have been assisting me with this matter from a legal and technical perspective. Further documentation about any completed local fish farm agreements (EMP’s) has been sent to the Commissioner. It is unclear as yet whether this will satisfy the original FOI request.

**Atlantic Salmon Trust**

I have spent several months assisting the AST with their latest initiatives and placing Lochaber at the centre of some of their work. The West Coast Tracking Project got underway this Spring and smolts were trapped in the Rivers Loy and Lundy (Lochy tributaries) and Moidart. The Loy and Lundy fish were tagged with acoustic tags and 6 receivers were placed down the River Lochy and several receivers and arrays of receivers were located all the way out to the Western Isles. The aim of the project is to track ocean migration routes. The Moidart fish were trapped and measured this year in order to see if the smolts might be big enough to take tags next year. Early results from this first year of the project are expected later this year.

The AST have been organising several communications initiatives and I have helped with 3 separate films that they have made about both the West Coast Tracking Project and restoring wild salmon populations. These can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCabY7qaVKeANLqCgeSZATLw/videos>

**Salmon Farming**

Due to the use of FOI requests about salmon farming to the DSFB it has been decided that the DSFB does not have the resources or sufficient funding available to deal with fish farming matters directly. As a result the Board now acts as a repository for all communications and consultation/planning documents and forwards this information to the local proprietor or fisheries management body. Matters of a national concern are addressed separately by the Lochaber Fisheries Trust and the DSFB remains a signatory as a statutory body to official documents such as planning responses and EMP’s.

There is a proposal to change a critical ASC standard from 0.1 lice to 0.5 lice. This is a highly important and negative change for us (as many MOWI farms are seeking ASC accreditation). One of the major attractions of the ASC was the 0.1 lice level and this was one of the reasons that we have been less critical of other changes to the standard (such as the recent move to allow open cage smolts farming in freshwater lochs, previously banned under the Standard). The consultation documentation was forwarded to the Fisheries Trust and FMS has confirmed that they are responding to this matter on behalf of all west coast boards.

The SSPO Salmon Support Fund opened this summer with a 4th June deadline (see previous Board report for details). I dealt with enquiries about the fund from interests on the Coe, Morar, Fishery Trust, Nevis and Inverlochy Angling Club. 5 projects were given £70,000 of funding this year including a highly commendable project by the Lochaber Fisheries Trust to measure juvenile densities on 8 Lochaber rivers and assess the approximate amount of spawning adult pairs producing these juveniles through genetic techniques. This may highlight rivers where adult numbers are critically low and may require direct management intervention but may also indicate that there are more salmon spawning in our local rivers that rod catches and observations might imply. The project starts immediately and results will be due early next year.

A CAR application has been made by Scottish Seafarms for a new farm of up to 1800 tonnes at Shuna. The application was forwarded to the Fisheries Trust.

There were highly elevated lice levels on the Upper Loch Linnhe farm in late winter and spring 2021. This matter was dealt with by the Fishery Trust and the River Lochy Association and included site visits and meetings with MOWI management and fish health professional at the highest level in the company. The reason given for the high levels of lice were that due to the Covid pandemic fish could not be sent to market as planned and they had to be grown far larger and for longer than normal in the sea. As a result lice numbers, in spite of biological and chemical control, became far higher than Code of Good Practice levels. Discussions about this and how to avoid this situation completely in the future are still ongoing between MOWI, LFT and RLA.

An ASC application to add the freshwater smolt farm at Loch Arkaig to the Standard was forwarded to the Fisheries Trust.

An ASC application to add 3 MOWI marine farms to the Standard was forwarded to the Fisheries Trust.

An application by environmental contractors APEM was received again to monitor local sea trout and lice levels as part of the requirements for MOWI’s Muck fish farm planning approval. This is to take place on local SAC’s for freshwater pearl mussels. I was very disappointed with the results from this activity last year (as was expected and predicted in our response to Marine Scotland last year) and once again I have pointed out the flaws in the design of the monitoring and its inability to answer the objective.

**Bridges – replacements and repairs**

River Kiachnish bridge repairs liaison with Bear Scotland has been ongoing for several months. This has been largely around when best to block fish migration for 6 weeks in order for construction to take place. After some discussion they changed from a summer to a winter block. Furthermore, a fish rescue has been requested in the dewatered section at these ongoing bridge scour repairs.

The River Coe replacement bridge has also been under discussion with Bear Scotland for several months. I have been assisted by Davy Gunn in this with local knowledge and input. A response was made to the Marine Scotland licence application as well as direct dealings with the applicant. After some deliberation an agreed in river timeline was set based on fish survey work. I have also requested a specific requirement in the marine licence for fish passage. This must cover both smolts and adults at all times. This passage is to be undisturbed by vibration and light pollution.

I approved some drilling work in March in preparation for bridge repairs at the bridge over the River Finnan in Glenfinnan. Application also forwarded to the Shiel sub Board.

I have had ongoing dealings over the complete replacement of the Inverskillavuilin bridge over the River Loy by a forestry contractor in the glen (necessary to take out the timber). I was concerned about the use of poured concrete and requested SEPA intervention, which was forthcoming. Luckily no pollution of the water had taken place. I monitored the work throughout and had no further concerns. Culvert strengthening work in the Glen Loy road is also being undertaken by the same contractor and I am also monitoring this for any impact on salmon and trout habitat.

**Bailiffs and Fishery Protection**

There was a notable increase in illegal fishing this summer in many of the catchments. This was probably due to the increase in ‘staycations’ this year. This reiterated the need for an active bailiff force in order to both police this activity and to educate the public on where to find fishing and permits etc

A new water bailiff in the Morar catchment passed the bailiff examination and became warranted this summer.

Following liaison with the local police force the Regional Wildlife Crime Officer offered assistance, intelligence and police back up where it was required. This included help with incidents on several rivers. Although no serious netting offences were discovered it is still suspected that the activity is taking place as net marked fish are still appearing in some catchments.

A more serious crime was committed in the early summer on the River Lochy which the police are currently investigating – 2 of the 6 in river receivers used in the AST smolt tracking project, which were placed in very deep water in 2 locations on the River Lochy, were removed and stolen. The motive is unclear but it was clearly a targeted act of vandalism/theft. It may also have been linked with illegal salmon netting. Police enquiries are ongoing.

**Other matters**

The Board is being consulted in a scoping study for a new dam on Loch Blair above Loch Arkaig. This is to increase the flow to the existing hydro below.

An agreement has been reached between SSE, RLA and the Board about the flow regimes at Mucomir Dam. This was in response to serious concerns following the installation of a new turbine 2 years ago. The regime looks like a significant improvement ‘on paper’ but as it has been so dry this summer it has been not yet possible to assess it properly.

The Board advised forestry interests at Drimnin about sensitive culvert workings over access tracks

A dredging application at Lochaline was forwarded to the local estate for comment – no direct impact on wild fish is envisaged

I have had several discussions with Forest and Land Scotland about access to the forest estate for fisheries management and monitoring work. Due to new health and safety measures this is now significantly more complicated than it was in the past. I hope that the outcome of my discussions is a more streamlined and timely process to apply for these access permissions.

Fisheries Management Scotland are holding an online meeting this week which is open to all who are interested. It is on Wednesday 1 September. It will start at 14.00 and will be held on Microsoft Teams. If you would like to attend, please let me know and I will forward the joining details.