



LOCHABER DISTRICT SALMON FISHERY BOARD

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

The annual report summarises the work of the Lochaber DSFB to the end of February 2025, particularly with regards to the delivery of its statutory functions, powers and responsibilities.

Membership

Clerk – Jon Gibb, Camisky Streading, Torlundy, Fort William, PH33 6SP.

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Board Members

Michael Mann (Chairman)	Lochy
Colin Corlett	Shiel
Jonathan Hart	Spean and Leven
Astie Cameron	Lochiel Estate
Alister Sutherland	Coe
Andrew Shaw	Lochy
David Stewart-Howitt	Moidart
Grace Henderson	Morar
Tom Leslie	Ailort
David Gunn	Angling Club Rep
Chris Cairns	Angling Club Rep

Lochaber Trust Representatives Rob Pitkin

Board Advisors

Vacant Highland Council

Catches

There was a very mixed picture of catches in the region in 2024. Generally speaking, the rivers on the western seaboard of Lochaber had a better year than the last few, but the rivers in the Loch Linnhe and Sound of Mull region had another poor year. The catches on the Lochy were the poorest for several years and come after a number of declining seasons of catches.

The reasons for this discrepancy are unknown. It may be that the fish farms in Linnhe/SofM are affecting the wild smolts more than the fish farms to the west around the Inner Isles – the Linnhe smolts must pass several farms whereas the farms to the west of Lochaber are in deeper water and the smolts from the Shiel to Knoydart zone may not pass close to them. It may also be that there is a specific predation problem within the narrow confines on the fjords of Linnhe and SofM – the smolts and adults have a quicker and easier migration to the open sea on the west-facing rivers compared to Linnhe rivers. There is also the possibility that the smolts leaving (or adults returning) to the Linnhe region traverse a much more southern route than the west-facing rivers and this is impacting them somehow on their respective journeys or in the feeding grounds.

Conservation Policy

National conservation measures applied during the 2024 season. Most rivers in the region (apart from the Leven and Morar) were assigned Grade 3 status which required 100% Catch and Release of all salmon and grilse. Morar was Grade 2 which allows independent setting of rules, although it is notable that Morar voluntarily return all salmon and grilse. River Leven was assigned Grade 1 (almost certainly due to its very short length and relatively high rod catch per km) and are permitted to set their own rules – again catch and release is operated here too. All rivers in the region also apply local voluntary rules, endorsed by the Lochaber DSFB, where 100% of all sea trout are also returned.

Due to the current national conservation measures not permitting coastal salmon netting, all levy to salmon netting station proprietors was refunded by the Board in 2024. It is proposed that this is continued in 2025.

Fisheries Protection and Bailiffs

There were 19 warranted and volunteer bailiffs currently working in the region in 2024.

There were no prosecutions for poaching in 2024, although several warnings were issued. Although illegal fishing and poaching are currently at a low level due to fish numbers, it is important to maintain a constant vigilance and a programme of information and education. With one of the largest coastlines of all Fishery Boards in Scotland, the Board continues to seek ways of funding a proper fishery protection operation more akin to the protection afforded salmon in the East Coast rivers. There were no major pollution incidents reported by local water bailiffs in 2024.

Marine Scotland Science– 2025 conservation measures and river categorisations.

The Conservation Measures for 2025 have now been set and there are a few changes from the previous year. All rivers in the region have been set at Grade 3 with the exception of **Leven** which is Grade 1. **Morar** has been downgraded to Grade 3 from Grade 2 last year.

The different categories and what they mean and what action they require is as follows-

Category	Probability of Meeting CL	Effectively CL Met in:	Advice
1	At least 80%	4 out of 5 years	Exploitation is sustainable therefore no additional management action is currently required. This recognises the effectiveness of existing non-statutory local management interventions.
2	60-80%	3 out of 5 years	Management action is necessary to reduce exploitation; mandatory catch and release will not be required in the first instance, but this will be reviewed annually.
3	Less than 60%	≤ 2 out of 5 years	Exploitation is unsustainable therefore management actions required to reduce exploitation for 1 year i.e. mandatory catch and release (all methods).

	<u>Gradings 2024</u>	<u>Gradings 2025</u>
Ailort	3	3
Aline	3	3
Inverie	3	3
Guiserein	3	3
Leven	1	1
Coe	3	3
Lochy	3	3
Nevis	3	3
Moidart	3	3
Morar	2	3

Scaddle	3	3
Shiel	3	3
Strontian/Carnoch	3	3

Over the last few months the DSFB has responded to several applications and consultations from developers as well as provided a point of information for the region’s proprietors, fishery managers and anglers. I have also attended several meetings, such as the FMS Aquaculture Committee and the FMS Hydro Committees. As Clerk to the Board I also deal with national issues through FMS and other organisations on a weekly basis. Local consultations are generally forwarded to the local proprietor or sub Board for comment. If you require any details from these day-to-day activities please contact me.

Some of the most important current issues being dealt with are the following (I can provide further details on any of the issues listed below) –

There has been limited development on the proposed **Coire Glas** pumped storage scheme above Loch Lochy. At a meeting in November SSE confirmed that they would be undertaking a full planning application for the structure to be built at Mucomir to manage flood water from Loch Lochy – this would be preceded by a full EIA. This work is likely to take place during 2025 with a full application some time at the end of the year. SSE have already confirmed that a new fish pass would be built at Mucomir should the Coire Glas project go ahead.

There are still ongoing issues with the **Archimedes screw turbine** on the River Arkaig operated by Green Highland Energy. These include fish passage and gravel removal from behind the dam. Currently GHE are only willing to do the bare minimum of what is stipulated in their CAR Licence. Discussions with the operators are ongoing. Meantime GHE have committed to providing an annual electro-fishing survey of the Arkaig catchment despite their 5-year requirement for this in their licence expiring.

A new **single year class production cycle** is planned for Loch Linnhe. This is where very large smolts are stocked into the sea and only spend one year at the farm, prior to a fallow and then another restocking for a year. The idea is to avoid the high lice levels seen in the 2nd year of a 2 year production cycle. This was supposed to be running by 2024 but MOWI have informed us that the new regime has been delayed until 2025.

Matters are continuing with **Loch Long Salmon** to set up an 8000 tonne closed containment salmon farm on Loch Linnhe near Duror, but there was little progress in 2024. A planning application has yet to be received and the company are still awaiting an appeal against refusal on their site in Loch Long - they will probably await the result of that before progressing Loch Linnhe. There is very considerable local opposition to the proposal in Loch Linnhe. The Board also has some very serious concerns about the technology and the size of the farm involved and we were in direct (unresolved)

discussions with the company as well as liaising closely with the Argyll Board as the neighbouring fisheries interests. As of March 2025 there was still no resolution of their planning appeal in Loch Long, nor any planning application submitted for Loch Linnhe.

The new SEPA **Sea Lice Regulatory Framework** has now come into force. It requires stricter lice controls in many sea lochs. The response of the industry has been to appeal 60 farms in Scotland (including most of our local farms in Lochaber) and this is likely to delay the process for several months, if not perhaps even years. The industry are citing inexact science behind the new laws and a lack of consideration of the economic and social impact of the measures should they be implemented.

In early July a 49ft fish farm boat belonging to **Scottish Seafarms** sank next to a fish farm in the Sound of Mull. There was a diesel spillage from the vessel. We do not have evidence that the accident caused damage to wild fish but the timing of the accident was particularly worrying. The fuel spillage was cleaned fairly efficiently and the boat has now been retrieved from the seabed.

The Board received another **FOI request** from an anonymous applicant for information about geographic boundaries under our jurisdiction. Under the Environment Regulations we have a legal requirement to respond to this request. I am in the process of responding and, almost undoubtedly the request will be followed by more requests for information.

Following an application to the Marine Fund by FMS I successfully applied for some **Biosecurity signage** and some disinfectant sprayers and Virkon powder. These are available to any rivers who are concerned about fish disease. Currently there does not seem to be any outstanding threats (the prevalence of naturally occurring *Saprolegnia* fungus that appeared last year on some rivers has not repeated this year) but it will be good to have a store of these to deploy if necessary. Please call me if you would like to discuss the threat of fish disease on your river.

I have also made an application as part of another Marine Fund bid for some **fishery enforcement equipment** including remote cameras which can monitor parts of the river and have been found to be very useful on some rivers. I have also included infrared night sights and other general bailiff equipment. I will liaise with the local bailiffs should the bid be successful.

I applied to Marine Scotland for 2 ADDs (**Acoustic Deterrent Devices**) to scare seals. I now have these available for any river that wishes to borrow them. These devices let off a loud underwater sonic boom and have proven to be very effective on fish farms. However early trials on the River Lochy and elsewhere are showing that the seals need to be in very close proximity and the water needs to be relatively slow flowing. If you are having problems with seals (we can only use them in rivers or river mouths) then please get in touch with me to discuss their possible use.

There are ongoing issues at the **Morar Hydro** operated by SSE. I am dealing with the matter from a regulatory standpoint through the FMS hydro committee and the ongoing hydro review being undertaken by SEPA. The Morar sub Board is leading discussions directly with the operator SSE. Of particular concern is the level of Loch Morar changing noticeably in the last few years. Like Loch Lochy (see previous Board reports) the loch is being drained below the levels it has been previously and this would appear to be linked to operation of the power station (probably due to smoothing out the power grid with the widespread and unpredictable use of wind power). Major engineering and maintenance work is also planned for the station – including the construction of a coffer dam – and I have requested that SSE keep me informed of this work.

Further up Loch Morar Highland Council needed to work on the foundations of the road bridge crossing the **Allt an Loin**, an important spawning tributary. The plan was to do the work this year but due to environmental constraints the work has now been delayed till 2025. I will continue to liaise closely with HC and Viv de Fresnes over this as it is a highly sensitive area for fish.

There were further **fish farm escapes** reported in 2024 (2 landed and several seen in the River Lochy). This follows many more escaped fish caught in the River Lochy in the autumn of 2023. In all cases the fish are sexually immature post smolts in their first year of growth. DNA analysis of last years fish showed that they were of ‘MOWI Ireland’ origin. Sadly many farms are stocked with such fish, including the 2 local MOWI farms but also some Scottish Seafarms sites. It is virtually impossible to trace escapes back to the site of origin using DNA analysis as so many farms are stocked with the same smolts.

The Scottish Government undertook a follow up **inquiry into salmon farming** and, particularly, checked on progress from the inquiry 4 years ago. I was contacted by John Goodlad, the Chair of the Working Group set up after the inquiry, and I was able to brief him prior to him giving evidence to the parliament. The results of the enquiry were, frankly, limited.

Following the end of the 3-year **West Coast Smolt Tracking** project in 2023, I have requested results from the Atlantic Salmon Trust. I have seen some (confidential) early results (which appear to show some interesting details) but the full published results from this very important project have not yet been produced. AST have assured me they will be published soon. I had still not received them by February 2025.

I presented some of the restocking and gene-banking work being done in Lochaber at a ‘**conservation aquaculture**’ seminar held at Stirling University. Fishery interests from Canada and France were also presenting. As officials from the Marine Directorate were also present it was an opportunity to discuss the limitations of the current Scottish Government salmon stocking policy, particularly with regards to highly threatened stocks

on the West Coast of Scotland. I understand that a new policy will be published soon and this may include suitable regulation for gene banking of river stocks and stocking eggs and juveniles from broodstock grown in captivity from wild smolts. We are still waiting for the document in February 2025.

On the **River Coe** the National Trust wish to breach the existing bund on the river in order to divert water into more of the floodplain. Davy Gunn is using his experience of the catchment to inform me of progress and offer advice on the proposal. There appears to be considerable concern from other stakeholders about the plan.

I have been assisting Highland Council in mapping the spread of **Japanese Knotweed** in the Lochy catchment. They have just produced a very interesting and comprehensive report with maps of the exact locations of the plants. The plan now is to apply for Nature Restoration Fund funding to start a programme of eradication. This will be a mammoth task as it has spread so widely, particularly on Scottish Water ground at the Camisky wellfield site and Jahama ground at the Tailrace Island.

A planning application was received for expansion of the Corran ferry slipway and facilities to which the Board will be replying as it is a sensitive location. Other consultations were received and responded to – including a railway bridge on an Upper Shiel tributary and a bridge over a small tributary of the River Coe.

Stocking consents

Stocking applications for the following catchments were approved in 2024 – Loy and Arkaig.

Although the DSFB is the issuing authority for stocking consents, anyone considering stocking of any sort should be aware that the application must be preceded by an application to Scottish Ministers to remove adult broodstock **at any time** on a Grade 3 river, or after 31st October on a Grade 1 or 2 river. The advice is as follows (which should be read in conjunction with the Conservation Regulations which make it illegal to remove any salmon on a Grade 3 river) -

Parties seeking consent to collect wild brood-stock, rear their progeny and release them into a freshwater river or loch system must –

- Apply to Scottish Ministers for a licence to catch wild broodstock if such an activity is planned after 31st October (*it is illegal not to have this licence in your possession before netting broodstock*);
- Specify the origin of the fish from which stock will be taken;

- Where those fish will subsequently be released and at what life stage;
- Provide evidence to support the need for artificial intervention and demonstrate that the stock and carrying capacity is sub optimal. This should include evaluation of any negative effects on existing wild fish populations;
- Provide an evidence base to clearly state anticipated outcomes from the programme;
- Provide a description as to how the effectiveness of the action will be monitored;
- Taking account of brood-stock removal, demonstrate that sufficient numbers of adult fish are left to support natural production from that area;
- Record mortalities (including loss of adult brood-stock, and ova and fry from hatchery);
- Report on the outcome – what was the measured effect by monitoring the outcome?

Furthermore, should any manager plan to trap smolts in a Grade 3 river for hatchery purposes then permission is also required from Scottish Government. Please get in touch with the Clerk in these circumstances.

Priorities for 2025

The Lochaber DSFB will continue to work with all other stakeholders for the improvement of Lochaber's salmon and sea trout.

The Lochaber DSFB will continue to deliver its statutory function to the best of its abilities, using all of the available powers wherever necessary to protect and enhance migratory fish in the Lochaber region.

Mindful of the perilous state of all Lochaber salmon fisheries, the Board will continue to aim to keep proprietor levy as low as possible, the aim of any saving being for proprietors to invest locally in the research and management of their fisheries through their local sub Boards and management groups. The Board will continue to support this practical management of the fisheries while offering a central administrative facility through their part-time Clerk (principally in the issue of bailiff warrants, stocking consents, responses to national consultations and dealing with local consultations of a regional importance).

The Board will continue to engage with all stakeholders for the improvement of migratory fish and these will likely include (amongst others) the fish farming industry, the Scottish Government, the hydro-electric industry and local fishery interests. The Board will also continue to work closely with the biologists at the Lochaber Fisheries Trust and assist this charity in their ongoing local projects researching migratory fish.

Complaints to the Board

There were no complaints received by the Board in 2024.

Good Governance compliance

Meetings

The annual meeting of qualified proprietors was held online on 26th September 2024. This meeting was publicised on the Board's website and a copy of the notice was sent to the Scottish Government.

The annual public meeting for 2025 will be held in Fort William on 27th March 2025.

Annual Report and Accounts

This annual report will be published on the Board's website and a copy sent to Scottish Government.

The accounts for 2024 are published on the Board's website and a copy will be sent to Scottish Government.

Complaints

The Board has set up and maintains a complaints procedure which can be viewed on the Board's website. This has been sent to the Scottish Government. Details on the number of complaints and how they were disposed of are included above.

Members' interests

The register of members' interests is available from the Clerk on request. We have included a standing item at each Board meeting inviting Board members to declare new/amend existing interests and all such instances are recorded in the minutes of these

meetings.