DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL AFFAIRS SALMON AND INLAND FISHERIES FORUM

-Note of Proceedings-

MINUTES OF AN AD HOC MEETING OF THE SALMON AND INLAND

FISHERIES FORUM NI HELD VIA ZOOM VIDEO LINK ON **WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2020 AT 2PM**

Present Mr Edward Montgomery – Chair

Mr Gary Houston

Mr Pat Close

Mr Aidan Hannon

Mr Jack Tisdall

Mr Robbie Marshall

Apologies

Mr Jim Haughey

Mr Maurice Parkinson

Mr John Mc Williams

Mr Albert Keys

Mr Paul Johnston

Mr Frank Conlon

Mr Michael Crilly

In attendance

DAERA Mrs Fiona Lavery (Minutes)

DAERA Mr Seamus Connor

DAERA Mr Liam Devlin

DAERA Mr Damian McCann

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Zoom meeting and thanked them for their time.

**AGENDA**

1. **Apologies -** as above.
2. **Minutes of the last meeting 17 June 2020 for approval –** The minutes were accepted and approved. Proposed Mr Pat Close, seconded Mr Jack Tisdall
3. **Matters arising from the last meeting**. The Chair highlighted some carry over items, Brown Trout restocking, Cormorants and NIEA strategy. Mr Robbie Marshall suggested that following the recent *NI WFD Lake Quality Update 2020* findings by NIEA that a different strategy is required to improve water quality, noting that recent stats were not at all satisfactory and matters were getting worse. Following, discussion the Chair agreed to write to NIEA highlighting SIFF concerns. **Action Point – Chair to write to NIEA to highlight SIFF concerns.**

**Cormorants**: Gary Houston outlined the ongoing problem with Cormorants, noting that there are two separate species, both are protected but one species is invasive. The Sinensis species are currently protected. Discussion was held on the damage caused by Cormorants and it was suggested that NIEA could provide an update on the current strategy. Robbie Marshall felt that NIEA do not appreciate the seriousness of the situation. In support, Mr Pat Close provided anecdotal information on the increasing numbers of Cormorants in Lough Neagh, noting especially the newer Eastern European species which targeted spawning fish. Continuing, Mr Close felt that there was a need for controlling the numbers of Cormorants and a recognition of the danger posed by this separate species would help to address the problem. In addition, he advised that some 30-40 Cormorants had been seen feeding downstream for the Toome Eel Weir which indicated a change in the Cormorant behaviour. Further concerns were raised from a Ministerial response received by a fisherman which seemed to be a bland reply which did not address the problem. Mr Aiden Hannon suggested that the birds did not seem to move as much across Lough Neagh, seeming to stay around the shores. Following discussion Mr Pat Close stressed that this was a definite problem which should not be dismissed and needed more investigation, giving an example of the destruction caused to a water body in Holland. Mr Jack Tisdall outlined the problem on inland fisheries such as Loughgall Country Park and other PAE waters where birds nested in trees on islands. Continuing, he suggested that Inland Fisheries and NIEA should address the issue, in an effort to move the Cormorants to sea.

Summarising, the Chair agreed that it was a definite problem and maybe a focused presentation/discussion with NIEA may provide SIFF with an outline of NIEA strategy.

Mr Pat Close suggested requesting some data in advance of the meeting.

**Action Point: An invitation will be extended to NIEA to provide a presentation at the December SIFF meeting.**

**Brown Trout:** Fiona Lavery advised that Mr Haughey had raised this topic. Mr Gary Houston suggested that the Department should have a Stocking Policy for Brown Trout. Members supported this view.

**Action Point**: **SIFF should request that DAERA Inland Fisheries develop a formal Brown Trout stocking policy.**

1. **Correspondence**

Mr Jack Tisdall advised that he had sent a letter from Lakeside Angling Club in relation to the consultation. Seamus Connor confirmed that he would reply to the correspondence.

1. **Approval of SIFF response to Lough Neagh and Lough Erne Fisheries Management Plans.**

The Chair outlined the consultation process to date. Continuing, he noted that given the extended discussions already held on the documents he requested only succinct points. Mr Robbie Marshall proposed the document and Gary Houston seconded. Mr Aidan Hannon queried if this process was now complete. Mr Seamus Connor advised that DAERA would finalise the comments and develop the legislative changes, which SIFF will be further consulted on, stressing that this was an on-going process. Discussion was held on the process and Mr Seamus Connor clarified that during the process all parties would have an input of views, but that the Minister and MLAs would also have opinions and could propose additional changes. The Chair noted that any consultation exercise was liable to create change. Mr Pat Close queried the prospect of further research on a lot of critical issues such as net size and bycatch. He felt that these will need a lot of survey work and legislation, which will take time. Concluding, Mr Close was pleased to see that DAERA proposed to keep Anglers and Commercial fishermen updated and hoped that the Department would continue to use the open meeting forum to discuss and obtain opinions before any legislative changes. Full discussion and keeping people updated was vital.

Mr Robbie Marshall had concerns that it would be a fait accompli that the Minister will agree to, giving the example of the change to the trout bag limit, which would go against the majority view as expressed by SIFF. In reply, Mr Seamus Connor clarified that the Minister must put any legislative changes to the Committee but did stress that if it was approved then it would become legislation. Mr Seamus Connor thanked SIFF members for all the effort taken on the consultation document and agreed to take all points on board and the process should be seen as a means to take things forward, noting that items would come back to SIFF either as single or group issues. He noted that the long term object is the improvement of the fishery and was aware of the importance of nets, bycatch, mesh size, all of which will require further investigation and research. Mr Pat Close queried if the recent changes in Sea Fisheries policy, e.g. around by-catch, could be examined to see if they might be relevant to Inland Fisheries policy and asked if Seamus Connor could get feedback from Sea Fisheries management on their changes.

**Action Point – Seamus Connor to obtain feedback from Sea Fisheries re by-catch changes.**

The Chair noted that this was a democratic process which SIFF had inputted to, but as with any democratic process the ultimate decision lay with the Minister.

Mr Robbie Marshall felt that the Minister should take guidance from DAERA Inland Fisheries and stressed that the Department’s role was to provide the correct guidance. In response, Mr Seamus Connor advised that any advice should be based on scientific research.

The Chair referred to the Lough Erne Commercial Policy which was mentioned in the Fisheries Management Plan. Mr Robbie Marshall voiced concerns that the Department referred to a consultation document and not a Policy. Mr Seamus Connor outlined the historic background to Lough Erne commercial fishing and outlined what the Policy was based on stressing that consultation had taken place prior to any decisions. Continuing he advised that a new draft Policy would be circulated for consultation by SIFF in the near future. Mr Gary Houston advised that he had asked for a signed and dated Policy and never received it, stressing that it needs to be written down. Moving to another point, Mr Houston queried the outcome of the 2001 recommendations (18) for the Erne Salmon Programme. Discussion was held on the research carried out then, which members suggested should be included in the Lough Erne Management Plan.

In reply, Seamus Connor felt that this work was nearly 20 years old and some recommendations were not taken forward. Newer research and methods have been developed as the Department needs to understand the movement of Salmon and other species in the Erne system. In addition, it is a cross border catchment and both jurisdictions are working together to progress the future of the fishery. However, he took on board Mr Houston’s points.

At this point the Chair asked Mr Seamus Connor to outline the proposals for the Lough Erne Commercial Policy. Mr Connor advised that the draft Policy would be circulated to members prior to a meeting on Wednesday 14 October 2020. The meeting could comprise the SIFF or a sub group. In addition the Department intended to write to the Commercial Licence holders as well. Following this the draft Policy would be forwarded to the Minister for approval and implemented before the end of December 2020.

Members agreed to meet on 14 October 2020 as a sub group and then forward the proposal to the full SIFF for agreement. Mr Seamus Connor stressed that the input and response would be required by the end of October 2020. The Chair proposed that the sub group should comprise himself, Mr Robbie Marshall, Mr Albert Keys, Mr Jack Tisdall and Mr Pat Close. It was also agreed that the draft document would be circulated to all SIFF members prior to the 14 October 2020 with a request for comment.

1. **Any other business**

Mr Gary Houston queried the situation on the progress of legislative changes required for opening certain waters i.e. Shaw’s Lake etc. In reply, Mr Liam Devlin explained that currently there were a number of legislative changes to be taken forward and that the programme would take between 12 – 18 months to complete, outlining the consultation and Ministerial approval.

1. **Date of nest meeting**

Members agreed that the next SIFF quarterly meeting would be held on **Wednesday 16 December 2020 at 2pm via Zoom**

Members agreed that **Wednesday 14 October 2020 at 2pm** the agreed sub group members would meet, observing social distancing policy and other Covid-19 precautions, in Mahon Road Portadown to review the draft Lough Erne Commercial Policy.