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

-Note of Proceedings-

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE SALMON AND INLAND FISHERIES FORUM *NI* HELD VIA WEBEX VIDEO LINK ON **WEDNESDAY 16th JUNE 2021**

*Present*  Mr Jim Haughey (JH) - Chair

 Mr Gary Houston (GH)

Mr Pat Close (PC)

 Mr Robbie Marshall (RM)

 Mr Paul Johnston (PJ)

Mr John Mc Williams JMcW)

Mr Maurice Parkinson (MP)

Apologies Mr Michael Crilly

Mr Jack Tisdall

Mr Francis Conlan

Mr Mark Horton

Mr Aidan Hannon

Mr Albert Keys

*DAERA Officials in attendance*  Mr Liam Devlin (Minutes)

 Mr Owen Lyttle (OL)

 Mr Seamus Connor (SC)

The Chair welcomed everyone to the Webex meeting.

1. **Apologies**

See above.

1. **Minutes of the last meeting 24 March 2021**

Members approved the minutes subject to an amendment to Paragraph 11(2) – LNFA to be amended to LNFCS.

1. **Matters arising from the last meeting**

Corlacky Wind Farm

Action:

* JMcW and PJ to send Fiona Lavery recent research papers on this issue to circulate to Members.

Broadwater

DAERA and Lagan Rivers Trust are to meet to consider outstanding issues.

Commercial Pike Policy on Lough Erne

SC advised that a Habitats Screening exercise had been carried out on commercial activity which ruled out the need for a full assessment. A screening of recreational activity should be completed by the end of the summer. It had not been clear what actions should generate a requirement for a Screening or Assessment, clarity on this should be sought.

Action:

* OL undertook to provide an assurance check on the screening process and to advise of the appeals mechanism should Members disagree on the outcomes.

WFD Barriers Report

SC advised that salmon passage was a key priority and under NASCO, DAERA was required to assess all primary salmon rivers by 2024.

Action:

* GH to circulate 2012 NIEA Working Group Report highlighting the work already done on barriers to fish passage.

1. **Correspondence**

NIEA – H Anderson – Cormorants

No response to date.

Action:

* JH to speak to Fiona Lavery to issue a reminder

DAERA Minister – Cormorants

While Members expressed their thanks for the timely response, they were disappointed in the content. Members sought clarification on the issue of culling permits which only appear to be issued for stocked fisheries and not wild fisheries.

Action:

* SC undertook to clarify position on the issue of permits with NIEA.

A question was also raised regarding references to The EU Birds Directive in the response and whether this has been super-ceded by domestic legislation following Brexit.

During the course of the meeting, OL was able to ascertain that The Birds Directive (2009/147) is transposed into NI law by the 1985 Wildlife Order, and The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995. In 2019, in preparation for leaving the EU, amendments were made to correct deficiencies, which arose as a consequence of EU Exit, thereby maintaining the existing protections and enforcement for species of wild birds, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2019/582/contents/made>. Whilst the Directive no longer applies, the amendments that were made in 2019 ensure habitat and species protection and standards as set out under the Nature Directives are implemented in the same way or an equivalent way in the UK after EU Exit.

It was pointed out that reasonable information on numbers of the various Cormorant species is very difficult to obtain for Northern Ireland. Counts are done by NGOs, not DAERA. Counts seem to be only for coastal populations, excluding the problematic inland population.

DAERA Minister – Water Quality

Members expressed concerns that even with all the measures outlined in the Minister’s response on this issue, water quality was still deteriorating. PJ pointed to slurry and fertilisers as being the main problem which was difficult to resolve given the importance attached to the farming industry. GH advised of the increase of nitrates and phosphates in Lough Erne.

Actions:

* SIFF to consider making a submission to the WFD River Basin Management Plans by the end of the year.
* SIFF to consider asking the Minister for more data on the number of farms subject to regular soil analysis to determine the level of artificial fertiliser.
* OL undertook to relay SIFF concerns to appropriate forums within DAERA.
* GH to forward NIEA info on trend.

DAERA Minister – Wind Farm Applications

RM asked that DAERA consider the precautionary principle in considering wind farm applications.

Action:

* PJ asked that future correspondence drafted by SIFF should include a heading summarising the subject matter.
1. **Lack of progress with Lough Erne (no stocking, few habitat improvements).**

RM outlined the dis-satisfaction of anglers with lack of, catches on Lough Erne, re-stocking and habitat improvements. He advised that anglers had considered protesting at the recent N/S meeting in Enniskillen.

SC outlined that even with millions of re-stocked fish in recent years, this had not resulted in larger trout populations due a number of factors. Better water clarity due to invasive Zebra Mussels had made trout more susceptible to predation by increasing pike stocks, resulting in trout moving to deeper waters, away from traditional angling areas. Habitat improvements had been carried out on the Ballinamallard river and a change to the minimum landing size of trout was included in the Fisheries Management Plan for the Erne. He further informed Members that a lake survey was scheduled for 2022. GH pointed out the lack of data on trout numbers in the Lough, suggesting DNA sampling as an aid. Piecemeal data on river populations has been available at times but not usefully collated to date.

Action:

* SC to request AFBI to present to SIFF trout data for L Erne at the next SIFF meeting.
1. **Review of SIFF**

Members were informed that the Terms of Reference had been approved by the Minister and that the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) will undertake the review and will engage with SIFF accordingly.

1. **Review of Licences and Permits**

Members were informed that the Minister had approved the mechanism for the review. Again, SIB would undertake the process and SIFF would be consulted as appropriate.

Action:

* PC asked if recognition of the permit scheme for Lough Neagh could be included within this process and undertook to outline his rationale in an e-mail to the Department.
1. **AOB**

Action:

* PJ – undertook to circulate a C4 news report on water quality which focused on the trade deal with China and the associated intensifying of pig farming.

PC – informed Members that links for eel trade in the UK market had been re-established and expressed thanks for all involved in the negotiations. He also extended an invitation to OL to visit LNFCS which was gratefully accepted.

OL provided an update on on-going and increased workloads resulting from Brexit which included policy and legislation (e.g. the Fisheries Bill and Joint Fisheries Statement) and the impacts of vacancies and Covid-19.

OL also responded to Members concerns regarding potential impacts on angling arising from the draft Animal Sentience Bill. The Bill aims to recognise animals as sentient beings which experience pleasure, pain and fear. This is currently at Committee stage in the House of Lords.

Action:

* OL undertook to update SIFF on timescales and procedures at the next meeting.

**9. Date of next meeting**

The next DAERA Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum meeting will be held on:

**Wednesday 15 September 2021 at 2pm via Webex.**

The following DAERA Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum meeting will be held on:

**Wednesday 8 December 2021 at 2pm via Webex.**