

Lough Erne Commercial Fisheries Meeting

21 November 2023 – 1:30pm

Inishkeen House

Attendance

Seamus Connor (DAERA Inland Fisheries Inspectorate) Chair

Richard Turner (DAERA Inland Fisheries Inspectorate)

Paul Caldwell (DAERA Inland Fisheries Business Support) Minutes

Frank Storey

Liam Boyle

Roy Shaw

Eugene Brazil

No.	Item	Action
1	Apologies	
1.1	Steven White (DAERA Inland Fisheries Business Support)	
2	Previous Minutes	
2.1	Previous minutes discussed and agreed with no changes.	
3	2022/23 Commercial Fishery updates from Fishermen	
3.1	<p>SC asked fishermen for their views on the 2022/23 fishing season and if there were any issues the Department should be aware of. General discussion by all.</p> <p>FS indicated that he did not fish last year. Fishermen reported that there is no local market for pike. The main dealer that buys pike has frozen substantial pike catch from last year. Price for catch is reduced significantly around £0.50 / lb, with supplies from Canadian fishermen affecting the market. This year fishermen have been told that the dealer would only buy 100kg of fresh fish but will not buy any to freeze, though fishermen are hopeful that the situation would change if the demand was there. SC indicated that this would have a big impact on the fishery as there would be little incentive to fish and confirmed that the Department would be sensitive to the current market conditions in relation to the L Erne permit policy. He also asked if the fishermen had considered other options or outlets to sell their catches. Most fishermen were focused on catching the fish rather than the difficulties around trying to sell it to other markets.</p>	

	<p>Fishermen indicated that there was potentially a large European market for pike, especially Germany. Members discussed various prices for catch throughout recent seasons, and if there was any other dealer that operates with fresh water catch in NI. RT asked what the idea size of pike was for the market. Fishermen confirmed it was less than 7kg. SC confirmed that they would provide suitable contacts from the Sea Fisheries industry and enquire if there are any in the UK that fishermen could try to sell their catch to.</p> <p>Members discussed the ongoing friction on Lough Erne between commercial and recreational fishermen and that the Upper Lough would be very difficult to fish due to damage to nets.</p> <p>Some issues over nets being cut and this damage was reported to the PSNI for action. Whilst no one was successfully prosecuted the PSNI did interview those that carried out the damage. RT advised that he should be contacted immediately on detection of any illegal activity and provided his contact card.</p>	
4	<p>2022 Triennial Fish Survey update - AFBI.</p> <p>4.1 Seamus gave an update (provided by Kevin Gallagher, AFBI):</p> <p>All samples have been through the lab and are processed. Currently, AFBI are working on age and growth analysis. In terms of stock assessment, pike numbers appeared to be about average. As with previous recent surveys, few bream were captured. Brown trout numbers had more than doubled since 2019, and the 2022 numbers were the highest in 12 years. The roach-bream hybrid population has dipped a little as older fish move out of the population. Perch numbers were at their greatest since 1992, and roach numbers have been reasonably stable since 2010.</p> <p>This year, AFBI also conducted an open water survey in the areas of Magho, Hills Island, and Heron Island. Samples are still moving through the lab, but we had good numbers of pollan and brown trout at these sites.</p>	
5	<p>Public Meeting proposed Spring 2024 – suggestions for topics.</p> <p>5.1 SC confirmed that DAERA will be holding a Lough Erne conference, probably after Easter 2024 – DAERA will keep members updated. This will be open to general public. AFBI should have updated/finalised figures by then from the 2022 fish survey.</p> <p>5.2 RS had proposed a new net for catching pike and RT will take this forward – he has already approached Collin’s Nets in England with a description and to ascertain if they can source it – they have not responded yet so RT will contact the environment agency in England</p>	

	<p>and Kevin in AFBI to attempt to move things along. Once sourced it can be trailed using a Section 14.</p> <p>RT will follow up on initial inquiries regarding Roy's net proposal.</p>	
6	AOB.	
6.1	<p>Seamus highlighted a new policy that 4 fishermen would be maintained on Lough Erne though currently there are only 3 active. This means that there is a vacant permit available and the first option to fill it goes to nominated helpers. Seamus advised that there were two named helpers on the system - one for EB and LB who is a helper for FS. He asked that those interested in becoming a commercial permit holder should contact Steven White at the Portadown office within the next 5 days to allow the Department to consider the policy for filling it. It was confirmed that there was interest from two helpers for the vacancy. – PC asked for email addresses and then he will supply Portadown contact details for any follow-up with Steven White.</p>	
6.2	<p>FS enquired if Upper Lough can be opened up for fishing as he has a longer distance to travel to fish but SC advised that commercial fishing would remain only on Lower Lough to protect salmonids in particular there. He also stated that the Department would review the need for retaining the protected areas in the L lough going forward. RS and EB highlighted the fact that when trials were carried out with AFBI by fishing in the designated river mouths no trout were caught at all. (SC asked if there was support and interest in developing a perch fishery during the spawning season. All confirmed that such a move would help sustain commercial fishing on the L Lough along with the pike season and the conservation eel fishery. SC advised that he would engage with AFBI about the to potential for perch fishery and ensure they had all the required data to provide the scientific advice. – Members confirmed that this would likely be a 3 month fishery window but with fishing only over 2 months depending if fish spawned early or late in the season. It would likely start mid-April until mid-June. RT informed that this would require legislative work and with no Assembly, it could be a couple of years before any decision was made. SC stated that this would provide an opportunity to get the required policy and legislative work completed in advance.</p>	
6.3	<p>SC thanked everyone for attending and that the draft minutes would be issued in due course for comments.</p>	

	<p>Action Points.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. DAERA to provide a list of possible contacts from Sea Fisheries and the UK that may purchase fish from the Erne fishermen. 2. RT will follow up on initial inquiries regarding the perch net proposal. (5.2 above) 3. PC will supply Portadown contact details for any follow-up with Steven White. 	<p>RT</p> <p>RT</p> <p>PC</p>
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