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

-Note of Proceedings-

MINUTES OF A QUARTERLY MEETING OF THE SALMON AND INLAND

FISHERIES FORUM NI HELD VIA ZOOM VIDEO LINK ON **WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE 2020 AT 2PM**

Present Mr Edward Montgomery – Chair

Mr Maurice Parkinson

Mr Gary Houston

Mr Pat Close

Mr Albert Keys

Mr Jack Tisdall

Mr Frank Conlon

Mr Robbie Marshall

Mr Jim Haughey

Mr John Mc Williams

Apologies

Mr Mark Horton

Mr Aidan Hannon

In attendance

DAERA Mrs Fiona Lavery (Minutes)

DAERA Mr Seamus Connor

DAERA Mr Art Niven

AFBI Dr Richard Kennedy

AFBI Dr Robert Rosell

DAERA Mr Liam Devlin

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 10 June 2020 for approval –** The minutes were accepted and approved.
3. **Matters arising from the last meeting**. The Chair noted that there was some unaddressed business from the previous meeting Agenda, i.e. Brown Trout restocking, Cormorants, NIEA strategy. Members agreed that these should be carried over to the September meeting.
4. **Correspondence**

The Chair noted that the DAERA Minister had declined the invitation for a meeting with SIFF.

Continuing, he highlighted that the additional response from Tracey Teague did not address the matter of unlicensed slurry contractors and noted the rise in slurry pollution accidents during the recent dry spell. The Chair felt that this needed to be addressed. Mr Jim Haughey noted that Fiona Lavery had circulated two responses from Tracey Teague dated September 2019 and April 2020, he noted that between these two dates, NIEA seemed to have moved from a standpoint of enforcement and regulation, to advising and education. Mr Haughey voiced concerns about this move and felt it was a major issue now. The Chair noted that it was the Forum’s role to advise DAERA to keep pressure on NIEA, and the importance of this point should be noted by DAERA officials.

1. **Review of Fisheries Management Plans**

The Chair noted that there were 40 items for discussion and outlined the process, requesting members to keep their responses short and relevant.

Mr Robbie Marshall advised that the Fermanagh Anglers would have preferred to meet to discuss this document, but due to COVID -19 restrictions members were unhappy that they could not input to the discussion. Mr Marshall therefore requested an extension to the July 10 deadline.

In rely, Seamus Connor advised that they were live working documents and not set in concrete. The document was a strategic view of the management of Lough Neagh and Lough Erne. Offering the example of the issues with barriers, Seamus Connor outlined the process of establishing joint working practices with DFI and outlined the procedures to move the Management Plans to the Assembly. The document is a working document that sets out the important areas of work for the Department. Seamus Connor stressed that it can change and is not the final to Departmental decisions. Continuing, he noted that the document allows DAERA to draw up and prioritise workloads.

In response, Mr Albert Keys felt that nothing has been done and the document is not a plan. He was unhappy with the proposals. At this point the Chair advised members that Mr Keys had emailed his concerns to the Chair.

Mr Tisdall advised that comments had been sent back to him by Angling Club members and a balance had been reached.

***At this point the Document was displayed on the Zoom link for members.***

1. **Review of legislation for Lough Neagh**

Mr Seamus Connor advised that the consultation will be reviewed and legislation will have to be formatted by DAERA, a lot more work is needed to meet the 2025 target.

Mr Pat Close advised that he had no issues and he understands the long term targets but that by-catch and selectivity of mesh sizes were important.

Mr Jim Haughey queried the 5 year time frame which Seamus Connor clarified was due to budget resources, Brexit and other pressures which need to be allowed for. Dr Robert Rosell advised that the work will encompass a lot of elements, noting that net construction is not in Primary legislation. Continuing, he outlined the intricacies and complexities of net construction and the need to simplify the process and run trials to get accurate data and establish and effective minimum twine diameter.

Mr Pat Close stated for the record that Toome Eel Fishery is fully committed to research and will cooperate fully in any projects or trials.

1. **Weekend Closure Lough Neagh**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the proposal which is in line with the Fishery owner’s Friday to Sunday not the current Sat am to Monday am. Pat Close advised that the 48 hour closure was for eels fishing and highlighted the conservation and marketing reasons to retain the scale fishery closure and was content with the proposal.

Mr Albert Keys queried why DAERA had opted to propose legislation when a SOP approach will allow practices to change according to need, whereas legislation is fixed and does not allow flexibility. Mr Gary Houston supported this.

1. **Net lengths**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the current net lengths available to fishermen and advised that an upper limit for coarse net should be 1500 m as a conservation measure. Mr Pat Close advised that the Toome permit currently limits net sizes; it is not a statutory requirement but a permit condition. Continuing, he advised that tighter controls will be enforced by the Fishery owner. Concluding, he noted that Department prices may restrict holders of a Toome ‘hobby’ permit and consideration should be given to this when reviewing the prices.

Mr Haughey pointed out that making changes to Primary legislation is a slow and complex process and legislation should be made at a lower level. In reply, Seamus Connor clarified that these changes were not an amendment to Primary legislation.

1. **Use of Agents on Lough Neagh**

Seamus Connor advised that the proposal was to remove the use of Agents and have a case by case practice in place.

Mr Pat Close agreed to the removal of the Agents, but said that a case by case system will need a data sharing agreement. Mr Albert Keys felt that the Department had failed to manage Lough Erne and at present there were no fishermen there, let alone Agents.

1. **Use of Draft nets.**

Seamus Connor outlined the reasons for proposing the increased use of commercial freshwater Draft nets. Mr Pat Close agreed in principle that it is the best way forward. Mr Jim Haughey suggested that it showed DAERA were not retaining control of Lough Neagh and seemed to want to absolve themselves of decisions. In reply, Seamus Connor disagreed and noted the need to work with the Fishery owner to ensure the future of the fishery.

1. **Simplify legislation and licence types**

Seamus Connor outlined the proposal, noting that a review of the angling licence system was long overdue. Mr Jim Haughey queried the licence requirement for a mixed stock fishery. Mr Robbie Marshall agreed citing Lough Erne as a mixed fishery and suggested one rod per licence, i.e. a single rod licence as opposed to a coarse licence with 2 rods permitted. Mr Gary Houston supported this. Continuing, Mr Seamus Connor advised that the proposal was a summary and a detailed policy will be developed which will involve a lot more work. It is only a proposal and is part of a complete review of licences and permits. Mr Albert Keys outlined some background to this suggestion which he felt would adversely impact Lough Erne fishermen.

1. **Review of cost of Commercial and Angling licences**

Seamus Connor outlined the Department’s proposal to complete a review of all licences and permits, which will consider the cost of commercial v angling licences. Mr Albert Keys highlighted that there was no current commercial fishing on Lough Erne and no DAERA management policy. Mr Gary Houston agreed that it was confusing as there were no commercial licences for Lough Erne. In reply, Seamus Connor advised that the Lough Erne Policy had been in place since 2000, but agreed that it does need reviewed and updated. Continuing he advised that a Policy will be in place by December 2020 which will be given to SIFF for consideration prior to implementation. Mr Albert Keys voiced concerns and discussion was held on the lack of a market for Pike, which impacted the number of commercial fishermen. Mr Jack Tisdall noted that Lough Erne was a commercial Pike fishery yet there are currently only two licence holders. Mr Pat Close supported a simplified licence system for commercial licences noting that commercial fishing on Lough Neagh was not an issue for anglers.

1. **Daily Catch records**

Seamus Connor advised that this was an important element in the management of the fishery. Currently the requirements for the dealer’s register provides limited information and there is no requirement for individual catch records from commercial fishermen. It is envisaged to obtain a daily record of fish numbers and nets used. In response, Mr Pat Close advised that as Lough Neagh fishery owner they have systems in place, but he agreed with the proposal despite noting some practical issues. Mr Gary Houston asked if there were plans to introduce a quota system in the future. Mr Seamus Connor replied that a lot of survey work would be required to formulate a Policy but that it is a proposal which has been under consideration.

1. **Regulation of permits on Lough Neagh**

Permit System introduced June 2016 by LNFCS.

1. **Establish regular meetings with Commercial representatives.**

Mr Seamus Connor advised that regular meetings are being held and this will be ongoing for both Lough Neagh and Lough Erne. Mr Pat Close supported this. Mr Albert Keys advised that it had been 4 years since any meetings were held regarding Lough Erne, which was unacceptable. In reply, Mr Seamus Connor advised that meetings with Fermanagh MLAs and the First Minister had been held, but committed to holding regular meetings going forwards.

1. **Improve Catch return from Anglers.**

Seamus Connor outlined the current systems to allow the capture of catch return from anglers, noting that it is a legal requirement. Dr Richard Kennedy outlined the historic percentage levels of return when the FCB log book was used which was 20% - 30% annually. However, with the introduction of the on line system and catch and release the Department were getting very low returns (under 5%) and he now has to work with individual Angling Clubs directly to establish sufficient data levels. He stressed the importance of using the Department’s on line system.

Dr Robert Rossell supported Dr Kennedy stressing that it was critical that Anglers make returns in order to gather data.

Mr Jim Haughey supported this and suggested that the Department use a carrot and stick approach and offer an incentive to Anglers. Mr Robbie Marshall was aware of problems with the on line system but Mr Seamus Connor advised that it was now working adequately. Mr Marshall suggested a free licence as an incentive to anglers. Mr Gary Houston suggested the development of an App to simplify the process for anglers. Mr Albert Keys noted the dramatic drop in the number of anglers on Lough Erne, highlighting the reduction in the number of cars in the car parks.

1. **Angling development on Lough Neagh**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the proposal as per the discussion document. Mr Pat Close advised that this has been on their agenda but that commercial fishing was a priority. Continuing, Mr Close advised that he was open to suggestions and working in partnership.

1. **Angling development on Lough Neagh tributaries**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the proposal. The Chair queried if this included the Lower Bann which was confirmed. Mr Albert Keys advised that Trout and Salmon magazine did not include Northern Ireland reports and felt that this was due to a lack of fisheries management and promotion of the fisheries.

1. **Economic returns from recreational and commercial fisheries**

Mr Seamus Connor opened discussion on this item, outlining the use of the NI Angling Forum. Mr Gary Houston referred to cancelled NIAF meetings and suggested that, as per the Strategic Review of Angling document, this topic would need to be taken forward and completely revisited and work done to develop a strategy to promote both Loughs. Mr Connor also referred to other issues, such as those posed by Brexit.

1. **Fisheries Protection. (Private Water Bailiffs)**

Mr Robbie Marshall queried if the Private Water Bailiffs (PWB) fund would continue and also the Access NI checks system, following the loss of the Angling Development Officer post. Mr Seamus Connor advised that support would continue for the repayment of PWB court fees, although applications have reduced recently. Regarding the Angling Development post he advised that it had been jointly funded and any new post would require prior investigations into funding opportunities. It may be possible by 2021 to have the post in place again depending on available budgets. Mr Gary Houston was surprised that the Angling website could not be financially supported due to lack of resources, given it was a modest cost. Continuing, he noted that DAERA have a role to support angling in NI and clearly more funding is required. In reply, Mr Seamus Connor clarified the Department’s role regarding the Angling Development Officer’s post.

1. **Promotion of Education for stakeholders**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the background to the proposal. There were no comments from members.

1. **Review of Commercial Net mesh sizes**

Mr Seamus Connor outlined the proposed changes for net mesh as contained in the document, noting that discussions were ongoing with Lough Neagh eel fishery representatives. Dr Robert Rosell outlined the complexities of net mesh sizes and the options. Mr Pat Close supported Dr Rosell’s summary but advised that any proposal needed buy in from the Lough Neagh fishermen and processes that allow collaborative working arrangements. Mr Jack Tisdall queried if the mesh sizes allow coarse fish to spawn before capture? Continuing, he provided anecdotal evidence regarding pike sizes. Mr Albert Keys suggested that there was no requirement for legislation, what was needed was a Policy which would allow flexibility. Mr Keys supported Mr Tisdall regarding Pike and felt that not enough Pike were being caught in Lough Erne. In response to Mr Tisdall’s query, Dr Rosell confirmed that coarse fish are allowed to spawn and moved on to describe the complex effect on Bream, Pollan and other species. Discussion was held on various mesh sizes for the capture of fish. Mr Seamus Connor again stressed the point that this was a consultative process and the document was a working document open to further change.

1. **Minimum landing size for Lough Neagh Trout**

Dr Richard Kennedy outlined the work undertaken to establish bag limits and landing size for trout, noting the rationale used. Dr Kennedy included Brown trout in his findings. Mr Albert Keys disagreed and outlined fish mortality issues on Lough Erne especially the tributaries noting the year class. In reply, Dr Robert Rosell clarified and defended Dr Kennedy’s findings. Mr Robbie Marshall suggested amending the proposed reduction in the bag limit from 6 to 2 fish per angler; 4 fish would be more acceptable. He highlighted that many Angling Clubs operate minimum fish size and bag limits on their waters anyway.

Mr Albert Keys clarified that he was quoting the local Fisheries Officer’s anecdotal remarks which Mr Seamus Connor was aware of. Mr Seamus Connor agreed that many Clubs operate bag limits but there was a need for regulated bag limits for non PAE (Departmental) waters. Dr Rosell noted that it was essential to reduce the bag limit and outlined issues regarding take able fish size and bag limits.

At this point the Chair noted the length of time the meeting had taken and asked members if they wished to continue or reschedule to another date to address the remaining proposals. It was agreed to reconvene on Thursday 25 June 2020 via Zoom at 2pm.

1. **Any other business**
2. **Smolts on Rivers**

At the request of the Chair, Mr Gary Houston raised the issue of barriers to smolt passage on the Clady River, Erne, Lagan and Bann. The present extreme dry conditions in 2020 had worsened this problem. Continuing he felt that there are major failings in fisheries management to address this and the issues need to be integrated into the Fisheries Management Plan. In reply, Seamus Connor noted issues such as freshets, barriers to fish passage and encouraged members to lobby the NI Assembly directly. Continuing, he advised he was aware of the problems and admitted while it was on his to do list, barriers and fish passage involved a lot of work and resources. Efforts were being made by the Department to address this area of work.

Mr Pat Close wished to clarify that Toome Co-op had not prevented freshets to assist smolts on the Bann and stressed that it had no influence on the operation of the sluice gates by DfI Rivers, noting that the Eel fishery encounter similar problems during elver runs and outlined their issues with the operation of the sluice gates at Portna. Continuing, he stressed he wished to reject any idea that LNFCS were solely responsible for influencing the operation of the sluice gates.

Discussion was held on smolt runs, river flow and spring tides, smolt windows and the complexities of obtaining research data.

The Chair ended the meeting at 16.30hrs.