



17th March 2016

Paper Title:	Salmon and sea trout stock management - update
Paper Reference:	Paper 22.16
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Purpose of Paper:	Information
Recommendation:	To note progress

<p>Impact: To note – all headings might not be applicable to the topic</p>	<p>Impact on the Environment: Fish, particularly salmonids, require good water quality and availability and access to high quality habitat. They are therefore a key indicator of ecological performance and environmental quality.</p> <p>Impact on the Economy: Wales’ fisheries have an important role in providing jobs and income in recreational fishing, fisheries management and tourism, notably in rural areas.</p> <p>Impact on Community: Fish can play an important role in engaging people in their environment and providing opportunities for education, recreation and associated health benefits.</p> <p>Impact on Knowledge: We need a strong evidence base to inform our advice to Welsh Government on fisheries policy, to inform Natural Resources Wales’ decision making on fisheries management and to inform discussions with partners and co-deliverers.</p>
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Issue

1. This paper provides an update on progress made in our review of salmon and sea trout stock management matters since the last Board engagement in July 2015, and the Board sub-group meeting in December.
2. The purpose of the paper is to set out the current position and next steps, and is therefore for information only.

Background

3. The full background was set out in the Board paper, 9.7.15, and is summarised here:-
 - Salmon stocks are considered to be at an all-time low across their North Atlantic range. The generic reason for this is the historically low level of survival of salmon at sea, which is considered to be a result of changing environmental conditions in the North Atlantic due to climate change. This is changing available habitat and presumably prey availability, and consequently is adversely influencing the survival of salmon.
 - Sea trout stock performance is more variable, but some rivers in SW Wales are giving real cause for concern. Sea trout do not occupy the same marine habitats as salmon, and generally appear to remain within the confines of the Irish Sea. Here they are less exposed to deteriorating marine habitat quality.
 - We also measure the performance of our juvenile salmon and trout stocks through our assessments carried out under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and our routine freshwater fish monitoring programmes. Our current assessment is that about 60% of river water bodies in Wales fail to achieve Good Ecological Status, and of these about 35% of the failures are due to fish.
 - Regulatory control is important to protect and conserve the breeding populations, however it is important that action to address fundamental matters of river habitat quality is taken.
4. Salmon and sea trout are popular sport fishing species caught by anglers in most Welsh rivers:-
 - We sell about 5,600 migratory salmonid rod licences annually, representing an income to NRW of about £290k.
 - We also sell 50 netting licences each year generating about £16k income.

- Inland fisheries contribute strongly to the economic wellbeing of Wales (a 2009 study estimated that inland fishing generated £74 million expenditure by anglers in Wales).
- Anglers currently return about 75% of the captured salmon and sea trout alive to the river. This is a statutory requirement in all salmon fisheries prior to the 16th June, but is thereafter a voluntary act (except in the rivers Wye and Taff/Ely where full statutory catch-and-release fishing byelaws for both species are in place).
- It is a statutory requirement for anglers and netsmen to submit catch returns, and the rod catch data is used to assess the status of stocks of both species.
- Some net fishing, notably that using coracles, is recognised by many as representing heritage value. Further restrictions of activity could threaten the viability of some activities.

5. Our current stock assessments indicate that:-

- all of our 23 principal salmon rivers are classed as 'At Risk' of failing to achieve their conservation and management targets. Moreover salmon support the designations of 6 rivers under the Habitats Directive and their poor performance therefore constrains achievement of these targets.
- Application of the requirements of the Decision Structure for managing salmon exploitation, an approach agreed with WG, is clear that we must "...urgently achieve zero exploitation by rods and nets (include 100% C&R)..." whilst maintaining socio-economic benefits where possible.
- 40% of our sea trout stocks are also classified as 'At Risk'. The methodology for this is less robust than that for salmon, however we believe that the principle is sound.

New stock assessments will be produced in April 2016, however our initial indications are that there is unlikely to be any change in the salmon assessments, and few changes to the sea trout assessments.

6. We do not believe that fishing (by rods and nets) is the cause of stock decline, however it is clear that the immediate requirement to increase the numbers of fish surviving to spawn can only be achieved if rod and net fishermen stop killing fish altogether. This would give an immediate boost to the numbers of spawning fish and mark progress towards a key objective to optimise the numbers of smolts leaving our rivers in future.

7. This would have greatest effect if methods to restore catchments continue, and we are urgently exploring options to maintain work in this area by ourselves and partners.

Update on partner engagement

8. Since the last Board sub-group meeting we have:-
 - Held special liaison meetings with all of our 7 Local Fisheries Groups (LFGs) where the evidence of stock status and options to address the poor status have been debated.
 - Held further such engagements with angling groups in areas not currently covered by LFGs (Ceredigion and the upper River Severn catchment).
 - Held specific meetings with net licence holders.
 - Produced and circulated widely a questionnaire intended to facilitate individuals or fishing representative groups to provide considered comments on the issues. We have received about 100 responses and these are currently being assessed.
 - Attended the Environment Agency/DEFRA “Salmon summit” at which the Environment Agency (EA) brought an invited audience up to date with the status of salmon in England, and presented a “Five Point Plan” to address this. The EA plan is very similar to the plan outlined to the Board last summer:-
 - I. Improve marine survival
 - II. Further reduce exploitation by nets and rods
 - III. Remove barriers to migration and enhance habitat
 - IV. Safeguard sufficient flows
 - V. Maximise spawning success by improving water quality
9. The NRW plan, as presented to the Board in July 2015, is currently:-
 - I. Restoration of freshwater habitats (this includes the EA’s points 3, 4 and 5).
 - II. Encouragement of further voluntary C&R fishing to increase spawning escapement.
 - III. Regulating the catch and kill by rods and by nets.
10. We also recognise the importance of engagement on marine survival matters.

11. We have continued with technical assessments of catches in rod and net fisheries and options to achieve stock conservation targets, including:-

- a. options for voluntary uptake of C&R, season and method controls
- b. options for byelaws and Net Limitation Orders (NLOs) to regulate rod and net C&R, fishing methods and seasons

Next steps

12. We have recently been informed that our bid to WG for additional resource to progress the work on new regulations for salmon and sea trout fishing has been successful. We are therefore implementing our plan to take this work forward.

We will:-

- Complete the project plan for the work
- analyse and interpret the responses to the questionnaire survey,
- update our salmon and sea trout stock assessments
- explore a more robust methodology for sea trout stock assessment
- seek a review meeting with the Board sub-group to explore options and tactics
- consult with legal and communications colleagues
- report on each of these matters to the LFGs in late May
- continue engagement with the EA to seek a consistent approach.

13. Subsequently we will consider all matters in compiling a technical case for potential new control measures, including byelaws and NLOs.

Assessment

14. This subject will be very contentious with our stakeholders, however the protection of our valuable fisheries resource is of paramount importance. It is noted that statutory measures to constrain the killing of fish have been put in place, or are now being actively considered, in other jurisdictions including Scotland and Ireland.

15. Matters of concern that have already been raised by stakeholders include:-

- New controls will result in reduced uptake of fishing in Wales with concomitant economic impact.
- Membership of angling associations across Wales will decline.
- NRW will suffer further reputation loss.
- Fishing rights will be reduced in value as further controls regulation fishing are introduced.
- Anglers do not 'like being told what to do'.

- There should be a consistent implementation across Wales of any proposed measures.

Recommendation(s)

16. The Board is requested to note the issues in this paper and to provide any feedback to the author.
17. Further, the Good for Environment Board sub-group is requested to support the ongoing process in discussions at a future meeting.

Key Risks

18. This paper is for information, and describes the options around protecting our valuable fisheries resource. However it is worthwhile to consider risks around introduction of potential future fishing controls.
- Failure to respond to poor stock status will represent a failure to implement measures for protection and restoration, and may therefore contribute to ongoing failure to achieve targets under the HD and WFD.
 - Failure to address the issues will contribute to ongoing perception of a failure to deliver our fisheries duties.
 - This would also represent a lost opportunity to increase stocks and potential economic value of our fisheries.
 - Any response might give rise to legal challenge
19. All risks should be addressed through ongoing communication with stakeholders and partner bodies, however it is recognised that it is unlikely to be possible to reconcile disparate views.

Financial Implications

20. Progression of new control measures will require:-
- Financing of ongoing liaison meetings with stakeholders (staff time)
 - Costs of advertising any proposed measures (costs likely to be less than £5k)
 - Staff resources: it is estimated that a full package of byelaws and NLOs would require 2.4 FTE, consisting mainly of technical fisheries staff but also legal and communications staff. A proposal has been included for new fisheries resource in the un-funded burdens bid to Welsh Government.

Equality impact assessment (EqIA)

21. No EqIA was required.

Index of Annex

22. None required.