

Salmon Aquaculture and Seals Working Group Meeting No 15

19 Aug 2015, Marine Harvest, Rosyth

Draft Minutes

Present: [REDACTED], SMRU (Chair); [REDACTED], MH (Host); [REDACTED], Crown Estate; [REDACTED], Sainsburys; [REDACTED], Seal Protection Action Group; [REDACTED], SSPO; [REDACTED], RSPCA; [REDACTED], FF; [REDACTED], FF; [REDACTED], FF; [REDACTED], IAR; [REDACTED], SNH; [REDACTED], BFF (Minutes)

Apologies: [REDACTED], Marine Scotland

1] Opening matters

SN opened the meeting by stressing confidentiality, and placing it in the context of the 12 months that have passed since the previous meeting and the concerns expressed by some that the group may not be fulfilling its mandate effectively. Agenda point 5 is therefore particularly relevant.

Minutes of meeting 14

- Adopted

Working Group operation and membership

- Correspondence from Waitrose/Aquascot looking for membership – no-one had any issues so they have been offered membership, response awaited

Action: AD to chase Waitrose/Aquascot

Previous actions

- It was agreed not to formally go through the 18 actions from previous meeting given the time that has elapsed

2] Updated RSPCA/FF standards

JA described both the process and relevant detail of the updating of RSPCA/FF farmed salmon standards:

- FF – covers 75% of Scottish salmon by production, but only 8/21 companies
- Standards are reprinted every 2 years
- Predator control was one area discussed with FF members last year
- Amended standards pre-agreed with the membership and due to be adopted on 9th September include the following, which are now requirements rather than recommendations, with consequences for non-compliance:
 - o Seal shooting incidents must be reported to FF within 72 hours, with details of license holders/ammunition use/seals killed (dates, circumstances etc)
 - o Evidence to show that shooting was 'Last resort' now required, which includes demonstration that the following measures were in place:

- Net tensioning – site and equipment specific – discussion ensued as to how sites ‘demonstrate’ nets are tensioned adequately
 - Topnets secured
 - Mortalities regularly removed (min 2x/week)
 - ADD’s employed where appropriate and working properly
 - Curtain nets employed ‘where appropriate’
- Welfare of salmon is important – FF needs to know numbers of fish killed/maimed by seals (although there is no specific guidelines on degree of predation that might justify a shooting)
- Tougher sanctions will be applied for non-compliance with FF standards across all species, with ignorance of standards not an excuse
- Standards should be a part of all fish farm workers’ induction
- Streamlined reporting within FF should trigger prompt investigations of reported shooting incidents
- FF is moving towards ‘no shooting’

The ensuing discussion included the following:

- A discussion of the efficacy, practicality and danger of predator nets - W Coast Canada experience discussed – shootings have reduced but many sea lions caught in predator nets
- The possibility of getting farms to inform FF of plans to shoot seals in advance to ensure it is truly last resort and everything has been done to avoid the situation, and so that unnecessary shootings can be avoided. FF agreed it was something they should discuss for the future
- The need for a process for reviewing shooting experiences, in order to inform future reviews of standards, and the possibility of a site-specific section on predator control
- Scottish Government base licenses on latest info on seal surveys, and on what seal populations can sustain
- The need for liaison between RSPCA/FF standards and Scottish Government

ADD monitoring for correct operation

- SN circulated responses from ADD manufacturers – mixed response
- The need for an on-farm piece of kit for routine use by farm managers and occasional use by FF inspectors and ADD manufacturers was re-emphasised
- The prototype testing stick has never been developed; problems with its practicality in adverse weather conditions were raised
- Mohn Aquaculture have apparently developed a hydrophone test kit
- SNH pointed out that triggering systems would be better (reduces seal habituation and baseline disturbance to other species), also better to use frequencies targeted specifically at seals
- We are still lacking information on how big a problem ADDs are for other species, and whether eg ACE Aquaculture device, supposedly targeted specifically at seals, solves this problem
- The need for further ADD trials in Orkney, where most seal shooting takes place, was agreed

3] Update from MH

SB summarised the current situation within MH:

- 2013 – 5 seals shot; 2014 – 7 seals shot; 2015 to date 15 seals shot
- MH Environment team looking into reasons for increase
- Salmon mortality patterns similar to previous years
- Most seals shot in April, half on Skye farms which are using ADDs which seem to be effective on most sites but not on individual sites on Skye – MH is working with ADD manufacturer to investigate
- Marginally colder seawater temperatures to date in 2015 could possibly be affecting wild fish availability for seals
- MH policy includes a decision-making process for lethal control, which if not followed by site staff leads to disciplinary action. Information is passed from Farm Manager to Area and Production Manager – ultimately the Production Manager makes the decision (the individual Farm manager cannot make that decision unilaterally). MH has policy of only ever shooting one seal per day – each event is considered individually before any shooting (no multiple shootings) and triggers a post-shooting review process
- MH internal plan
 - Looking at mortality removal systems
 - Net pen kit standardised – circles with bird net and seal blind round mortality sack
 - 3 x ADD types used
 - Seal licensing makes difference to attitude
- Aim is to reduce number back to 5 or below/year
- Focus is on sorting the problem on problem sites, rather than abandoning sites that consistently end up shooting seals
- MS is installing predator nets at the problem site on Skye as a trial

4] Interactions Management Plans

AA presented on Management Plans from the renewable energy industry focussed on the desire to learn to coexist with nature, and marine mammals in particular, rather than simply practicing exclusion. Seals are interacting with farms all the time – we only focus with interactions that result in fish losses.

The possibility of cross-over in terms of techniques, performance assessment etc. with the requirements of the Aquaculture Industry was discussed.

- Degree to which local management plans account for particular circumstances can help with regulatory control and standards
- Performance needs to be viewed in terms of co-existence with seals, rather than just data on seal license returns
- Can this group come up with a protocol for measuring success of industry to co-exist with seals and other wildlife?
- How do we look at this in a geographic context? Farm level, local area level etc.

FF gave an example of a farm that collects all information on seal proximity and interactions, including but not limited to potential/actual impact on fish.

Wild fisheries' interactions with seals are potentially more complex to assess.

- Interactions with particular salmon farm will be impacted by complex factors including wild prey availability, seal population density etc.
- Impact of human presence on seals should also be accounted for.
- Range of interactions could be incorporated into predator control plan/environmental plan.
- Aquaculture and fisheries need to show that the industry is publicly acceptable in terms of what it delivers and its environmental impacts. The possible pursuit of a 'social license' for aquaculture was discussed.
- Previous wildlife monitoring schemes on fish farms could be developed – currently wildlife logs are sporadically maintained, and their value in terms of informing management practices is unclear.

It was generally agreed that mechanisms for engaging fish farm workers with the wildlife with which they interact can't be a bad thing.

5] Progressing the aims of the SASWG – working together

Discussions ensued on what the SASWG has achieved, and how it might move forward. Points raised included:

- The good positive input today from both FF and MH
- The need for a small number of concrete timetabled actions
- The need for the group to encourage greater input and action from ADD manufacturers
- FF takes issue very seriously, and emphasises the need to engage with industry rather than attack it
- A greater emphasis on investigating and understanding hot-spot seal shooting areas is required
- Scientific Technical Advisory Groups at RSPCA are responsible for drawing together the evidence and research, in order to inform FF standard development. This should be a good vehicle through which the aspirations of SASWG can be progressed
- The role of Scottish Aquaculture Innovation Centre was discussed
- We need to identify how we get ideas beyond the ideas stage and into some kind of practical implementation phase
- Trial results from individual farms and companies need to be disseminated to the wider industry good practices can be adopted
- The issue of how we engage with sections of industry who don't seem to want to enter into these discussions was raised
- It is vital to highlight both good and bad practice
- The SASWG needs to have 'ownership' of projects aimed at finding solutions to recurrent problems
- The SASWG needs to focus on its objective of reducing seal shooting to zero, not simply minimising the numbers shot
- FF stated that progress would be much harder to achieve without the SASWG
- Increasing the group membership to include more fish farm company and retailer representatives was discussed – FF might be able to encourage more members onto group

- FF/RSPCA have a role in demonstrating the benefits of eliminating seal shooting to FF members
- SSPO has a sophisticated system of gathering, analysing and disseminating information to Members on sea lice. A similar model could be used for disseminating information on seal predation mitigation
- Specific issues to focus on:
 - o Startle response ADD
 - o ADD checking/monitoring device
 - o Econets
- There was a discussion on who the website was aimed at. It was noted that the site has recently resulted in Waitrose/Aquascot enquiring about membership, and has aided a student in her research project on the issue

6] AOB

Netsmen (wild salmon capture fisheries) now shoot the majority of seals - USAN is responsible for 40% of all seals shot. They would not be likely to join the meeting, nor would we necessarily want them to join. However, any relevant progress on the aquaculture side should be disseminated to netsmen, albeit solutions might be rather different. There may be mileage in pursuing this with Scottish Government via members of SASWG, although the SSPO expressed concerns that this should not be a specific remit for the SASWG.

7] Next meeting

Because of the cost and logistics involved in getting relevant people to meetings, it was agreed that meetings should take place twice yearly, with every other meeting being by conference call.

Next meeting scheduled for February 2015, details to be announced.

Actions:

- **RSPCA/SMRU to organise a meeting with marine Scotland to discuss FF 'last resort' requirement and its applicability to government license conditions**
- **FF/SSPO to consider ways of improving information gathering on seal predation mitigation techniques and dissemination within industry**
- **SN to circulate list of issues, group to comment on points worth seeking industry feedback on**
- **FF to circulate questions to industry members based on agreed key issues with a view to getting responses in time for December STAG meeting**
- **FF (in consultation with MH/SMRU) to approach ADD manufacturers to follow-up on feedback on device innovation and monitoring, and arrange a meeting**
- **MH to report back to group on its investigations into increased seal shooting incidents in 2015, and to feed back to FF on how standards might evolve in light of its findings**
- **AD encourage Waitrose/Aquascot to participate in the group**
- **FF to inform the group on the agenda and outcomes of its October meeting with its members**