

## **Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development**

### **Rhona Brankin MSP**

Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted to be able to join you today in Dundee for this, the third Freshwater Fisheries Forum.

We have come a long way since the publication of the Scottish Salmon Strategy Task Force Report in 1997, which outlined an overall strategy to develop and manage sustainable salmon fisheries in Scotland.

How then have we arrived at where we are today? The Executive has published two significant policy documents on freshwater fisheries and aquaculture: the Green Paper of 2001 “*Scotland’s freshwater fish and fisheries: Securing their future*” and in 2003 the “*Strategic Framework for Scottish Aquaculture*”. These initiatives have formed the basis for our recent thinking and I am delighted that this Forum has picked up the key issues and drawn together firm proposals designed to improve both freshwater fisheries and aquaculture.

In some instances, and where appropriate, we will implement proposals by administrative means. For example, we have already banned the sale of rod caught salmon and measures to control the introduction of exotic species, but I welcome the fact that we now have an opportunity for a Bill to take forward some of those proposals that clearly require legislation.

The Forum process is still in its infancy but I believe in a short space of time – less than 2 years – it has already come a long way. I also believe it is an excellent example of best practice in developing policy collaboratively, with stakeholders and others.

The Executive and Ministers have no monopoly on good ideas. Your Steering Group, I am told, has worked splendidly together and in that spirit of co-operation has helped develop the freshwater proposals which now feature in the Bill consultation document. I think it is fair to say that this is your consultation document as much as it is ours, and for that I thank those organisations and individuals represented on the Steering Group.

I hope that everyone here has either had access to or received a copy of the Consultation Document on the forthcoming Aquaculture and Fisheries Bill and I look forward to hearing your views this morning.

#### **The Bill:**

Let me then say a few words now about the Bill proposals.

On aquaculture, the Bill provides us with an opportunity to take new powers to help realise the ‘vision’ of the Strategic Framework for Aquaculture; deliver on our Partnership Agreement commitment to support the aquaculture industry and address some of the tensions that still exist between the industry and freshwater interests.

My Ministerial colleagues and I believe that fish farming and freshwater fisheries can and should live harmoniously together in Scottish waters. Both sectors are vitally important and we are anxious to create the climate in which they can co-exist and be sustainable. Of course, the two sectors will not always see eye to eye but that represents the ongoing challenge.

Now, in the Bill, we propose to tackle some important issues such as fish farm containment, sea lice, fish health and farm relocation. I am confident that by this dual approach – an improved regulatory framework together with the voluntary initiatives that are ongoing – we will deliver an industry that is truly sustainable, diverse and competitive; one which operates in harmony with the environment.

Much, however, is to be achieved by voluntary means. By simply being good neighbours. The development of the Area Management Agreements process under the Tripartite Working Group is testament to that voluntary approach. And the industry now has its new trade body, the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation, with over 90% of companies signed up and where membership is conditional upon compliance with the new “Code of Good Practice”.

Therefore, the proposed Bill provisions represent a statutory minimum, a backstop if you will, for any companies that fail to consistently meet the industry’s own standards of good practice.

There are those of you who may think that the proposals on aquaculture do not go far enough, but I am confident that they are balanced and robust and will underpin the voluntary approaches to good practice.

The Bill proposals will impact heavily on any operator that fails to meet the industry’s own high standards. Or put another way, the good operators in the industry should have nothing to fear from this Bill and you too should take confidence from this.

On freshwater fisheries, the proposals represent the first of what I hope will be two legislative stages towards improving the future of salmon and freshwater fisheries in Scotland.

The first stage, quite obviously is the Bill and the proposals before you today. Some are technical. Others quite fundamental, such as the introduction of movement controls. All are important.

Time, however, has prevented us from coming forward, on this occasion, with proposals for a thorough revision of freshwater fisheries management structures – an issue, I know, the forum and the Steering Group have debated at length.

There are many complex issues associated with such fundamental change, not least the fact that District Salmon Fishery Boards are legally constituted bodies with assets that cannot easily be spirited away. I believe it is more important to get such changes right than to deliver them quickly.

Stage 2 of this process on future management is therefore some way off. I have however made sure that the consultation document looks beyond the current Bill and addresses the future management arrangements, as well as the access and related funding issues.

My Ministerial colleagues and I are very attracted to the proposals for a new, nationwide system of unitary fishery management bodies. Bodies that will take responsibility for the management of all fish species in their respective areas.

I understand the Forum Steering Group, are also broadly supportive of the unitary concept. It will be therefore very interesting to see whether the public responses to the consultation also share that vision. This will be politically important too.

Consultants have already been invited to come forward with options for the future management of freshwater fisheries in Scotland. They have been tasked to take the views expressed by this forum into account in their deliberations and report accordingly. You will hear an interim report of their findings later in the day and have the opportunity to ask the contractor questions.

It may have slipped your minds, but it most certainly hasn't escaped mine, that the next elections to the Scottish Parliament are just 15 months or so away. If, as seems likely, there is support for a new system of fishery management in Scotland, and particularly if there are possible public expenditure implications, then that needs to be clearly understood by my Parliamentary colleagues and I have to ensure such proposals are reflected in future plans for Government.

You, the freshwater community, therefore have an important role to play over the coming weeks and months in getting that message across.

### **Meanwhile:**

Meanwhile life must go on. My colleagues and I are acutely aware of the importance of the salmon and freshwater sector to the Scottish rural economy. The present system of District Salmon Fishery Boards, the Fishery Trusts, Improvement Associations and others continue to serve us well.

A great deal is going on, besides the Forum process.

I touched on the Tripartite Working Group earlier, but this is a process, particularly the development of area management agreements, which continues to make a real difference in the working relationships between the freshwater sector and its fish farming neighbours. Although not without its challenges, we are about to see the next chapter in the TWG process unfold, which the Executive and certain other public sector agencies expect to fund.

We need to further expand the network of area management agreements, improve the reporting and transparency of relevant information within and between area management agreements and to energise our restoration efforts where there are good working relationships between the sector and the fish farmers.

I like to think that the Executive is playing a proactive part in supporting and developing the freshwater sector. That we are increasingly working together for the common good. Not always agreeing, but able to see the bigger picture and prepared to compromise. I think there are some good examples of that.

In recent times, we have seen a number of District Salmon Fishery Board amalgamations and others are in the pipeline. The Argyll and the proposed Northern Districts to name the most recent are examples. I emphasise however that they must offer advantages for the whole sector, not for exclusive parts.

We have begun paying for services provided by the Fisheries Trusts. As from the new financial year a total of £300k will be available to pay the Trusts for work undertaken on behalf of ERAD, in particular, information about freshwater species across Scotland, which will help inform future management arrangements.

We commission, through FRS, a comprehensive programme of research and monitoring which informs policy choices and decision making. And the laboratory at Pitlochry provides extensive advice to the Boards, the Trusts and other freshwater interests.

The Scottish Freshwater Fisheries Centre based at Pitlochry is at the forefront of informing the management of all freshwater fish issues. Indeed we are currently sponsoring a review of their role with the view to enabling a more holistic view of fisheries management.

#### ***Gyrodactylus salaris* (Gs):**

Of course, as in life, where there are opportunities, there are also threats. The most potentially serious threat is one I know you are all acutely aware of – the possibility of the parasite *Gyrodactylus salaris* being introduced to Scotland. I am grateful to the Forum for providing a number of experts from among your ranks to work on the Gs Task Force, set up by the Executive to develop a strategy for tackling the threat of Gs – both prevention and, should it ever become necessary, treatment and cure.

This developing strategy will cover both legislative and non-legislative proposals and is expected to be completed in the spring. You will hear later from the Task Force leader, Arthur Griffiths and will have the opportunity of further discussion of this potentially very serious issue.

#### **The Freshwater Sector:**

I am always enormously impressed by the energy and commitment invested by so many of you in the freshwater sector and much of it, as I have already said, is voluntary. Indeed the present system could not function without that voluntary commitment.

It was therefore particularly pleasing to see Jane Wright recognised in the Queen's New Year's honours list [she should be in the audience]. I am sure all of you will join me in congratulating Jane [applause?] I hope Jane will also agree with me that the award not only recognises her enormous contribution, but also the importance of the salmon and freshwater sector to Scotland.

While in a congratulatory mode, I would also like to take this opportunity to mention two organisations that have reached special birthdays. NASCO, which as you know is the only international treaty organisation based in Scotland, has reached its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary and the Salmon Net Fishing Association of Scotland which is 100 years old this year. My heartiest congratulations to both organisations.

### **In conclusion:**

Making informed decisions is important. This applies not only to the issues I have just mentioned, but to everything that is done in fisheries management. Policy decisions, whether at the national or local level, should be based on sound evidence.

I would like to draw to a close by turning to what we here today can do to keep this whole process moving and evolving.

- We can continue the high level debate that is required to make those informed and appropriate decisions for the freshwater environment in Scotland.
- We can continue to support this Forum process. Its future will be discussed later in today's programme when Ron Woods of the Coarse Angling Association will lead the discussion. I would merely say now, from an Executive perspective, that I hope the Forum process will continue and move on to a new agenda. And the Executive stands ready to play a full part if that is what the Forum wishes – as we hope you will!
- Finally, we must ensure that our various constituents at grass roots are consulted and kept fully informed of developments.

These are not earth shattering proposals, but if implemented, they will ensure the freshwater sector has a major say in the destiny of our fishing stocks.

### **Future promotion of sector:**

When we consider salmon and freshwater fisheries, Scotland is really very fortunate in having what must be considered to be a world class resource. Not only do we have stocks of fish that many other countries are rightly envious of, but we have some wonderful places where the sport of angling can be practiced and equally wonderful hospitality to extend.

I think we sometimes fall into the trap of assuming that our fisheries and stocks are always in a bad shape and in terminal decline. I do not accept that. While there are problems and issues to tackle, there is also a good story to tell and some very good examples where the health of stocks and their habitats is markedly improving. There is, I think, a greatly untapped market for angling tourism and freshwater fisheries and I support moves in this direction so long as sustainability remains the cornerstone of our management policies.

We must never be complacent. Resources must be managed properly. It has been estimated that angling in Scotland supports some 2,800 jobs, most of them in rural areas. I am sure that with the correct management and promotion this sector can be expanded even more so long, as I have said, it is done with care.

I look forward to spending the morning with you and hopefully, over lunch, will have the opportunity to meet and speak with at least some of you. I am sure you will take a full part in today's consultation process on the Bill and I would urge you to do so and I hope that you enjoy your day.