

Communiqué: England Salmon Summit, 19 November 2015

1. Purpose of the Salmon Summit

In 2014, England's 42 principal salmon rivers were assessed to be at the lowest levels on record with no rivers classified as 'not at risk'. In response, the Environment Agency hosted the Salmon Summit in Defra's offices in London on 19 November 2015, to raise awareness about the state of England's salmon stocks and to bring together influential leaders, policy makers, delivery bodies and NGOs to discuss and agree how we can collectively protect and enhance England's salmon stocks.

This communiqué is a summary record of the different sessions at the summit for delegates to share within their organisations and/or the interest groups they represent. At this stage it does not constitute any commitments to action. They will come from the Environment Agency's five point approach re-launch in the New Year once funded commitments have been secured from all parties.

2. Attendees

George Eustice MP, Minister of State for Farming, Food and the Marine Environment, Sir Philip Dilley, Chairman and David Rooke, Acting Chief Executive of the Environment Agency met with senior executives and representatives from organisations that have a key part to play to secure the future of England's salmon.

3. Pressures on salmon and options for action

Ted Potter, Cefas Senior Scientist, set out that to best manage stocks this needs to be done on a river by river basis and against compliance with Conservation Limits. Impacts on salmon later in their freshwater phase and during their marine phase have the greatest effects on stocks. Depleted stocks are less resilient to environmental change. Salmon are subject to many pressures in freshwater including water quality, water quantity and habitat degradation. With population growth, urban development, increasing demands for water and climate change, pressures on freshwater will increase, which requires long-term planning and catchment scale solutions that deliver multiple benefits. Priorities include:

- (a) **Improve/mitigate reduced smolt to spawner survival** through minimising impacts and delays to smolt emigration and setting clear criteria for increasing restrictions to net and rod fisheries where stocks are very low.
- (b) **Maximise the river catchment carrying capacity** through ensuring free access of fish past man-made obstructions. Fish passage should be evaluated on the basis of both the proportion of fish passing and the length of any delay.
- (c) **Restore/improve freshwater productivity** through: safeguarding suitable river flows for all life stages; maintaining and improving water quality; integrated catchment management including headwaters and small streams; applying a flexible risk-based approach to identify management actions that provide the greatest multiple benefits to all users relative to their costs. This may require major changes in the relationships between land use and aquatic ecosystems (e.g. use of set aside, re-establishment of wetlands, etc). There should be a long term catchment approach with strong engagement of local communities

4. Salmon conservation NGOs' priorities

Ivor Llewelyn, Atlantic Salmon Trust, said that the key objective should be to ensure the maximum number possible of healthy smolts leave our rivers and estuaries. To achieve this, salmon conservation needed to be treated not just as a fisheries issue but as an integral part of all relevant policy areas, including water abstraction, land use, flood protection and agriculture. Action to reduce numbers of salmon killed from threatened stocks was still needed, as was the closure of mixed stock fisheries, but on their own these would not be enough. Moreover, this was not just about salmon; the recovery of salmon would symbolise a wider improvement in our natural environment. This would not be possible unless the Government and its agencies, NGOs and other fisheries interests worked in partnership: this meant working together to identify problems and possible solutions and then to implement those solutions.

5. Angling Trust Perspective

Mark Lloyd, Chief Executive of the Angling Trust and Fish Legal highlighted the importance of fishing for individuals, for communities and the economy. He said that there was nothing new about this problem and quoted the 2004 Stock Assessment which identified all the same problems being discussed at this summit. Urgent action was required, and most of it by other parts of the Environment Agency and Defra, rather than the fisheries department which now has a very small budget.

He reported that the Angling Trust is leading the Save Our Salmon campaign in partnership with Trout and Salmon magazine with three key priorities:

1. All salmon netting should be stopped and salmon and sea trout should be designated as sport fish.
2. Agricultural pollution needs to be tackled by ensuring compliance with agricultural regulations - enforcing cross compliance as a condition of agricultural subsidies.
3. Fishery owners should have more freedom to control cormorants and goosanders to protect parr and smolts.

He noted that implementation of abstraction reform and new fish passage regulations had been delayed by many years. The Trust consulted with its membership throughout England before the summit and there was an almost universal resistance to mandatory catch and release being imposed on anglers given the high rates achieved by voluntary action. Calls for hatcheries and culling of predators are becoming more widespread as anglers are frustrated by the lack of progress in other areas.

6. The Environment Agency's 5 point approach

For the Environment Agency, Chairman, Sir Philip Dilley noted that salmon are an iconic species for the water environment. He outlined a 5 point approach to secure a better future for salmon that is centred on meeting the needs of salmon throughout its lifecycle, engages all those who have an influence on the salmon's environment and is designed to deliver multiple benefits:

1. **Improve marine survival** – supporting government to continue international engagement to limit high seas fisheries and improve knowledge of salmon at sea
2. **Further reduce exploitation by nets and rods** – Environment Agency is considering significantly changing the approach to regulating fishing by working to the presumption of banning the killing of wild salmon unless the stock is shown to be able to sustain a fishery. This would include the suspension of many net fisheries, more catch and release and rules on angling methods and lures to reduce accidental mortality
3. **Remove barriers to migration and enhance habitat** – working with others and focusing on critical and high priority obstructions to improve access to more river catchment.
4. **Safeguard sufficient flows** – implement the programme to amend abstraction licences to improve flow regimes on principal salmon rivers
5. **Maximise spawning success by improving water quality** – secure action on England's 42 principal salmon rivers through River Basin Plans, the Water Companies' National Environment Programme and Countryside Stewardship

This is not just about salmon, for most of the actions will greatly improve our rivers for local communities and the wider water environment. Salmon too are a valued part of our 'natural capital'. To help draw this together at a catchment scale, the Environment Agency will be working with catchment partnerships to identify priority salmon actions for England's 42 principal salmon rivers.

6. The Government's position

George Eustice MP, Minister of State for Farming, Food and the Marine Environment, supported the 5 point approach and emphasised the importance of working in partnership to deliver multiple benefits. To address agricultural diffuse pollution, Defra are consulting on new rules to deliver good farming practice and Countryside Stewardship is providing £400million to help farmers reduce water pollution. As part of new legislative measures to improve fish passage, Defra are looking at a range of options including strengthening the presumption to improve fish passage when works are undertaken on a weir. To reduce the impact of salmon netting, Defra are considering options to expedite the phase out of mixed stock fisheries and changing the basis of regulating salmon netting. To improve spawning escapement, where

rivers are not meeting their conservation limit, there is a need for more catch and release. Collective action across the range priorities is needed to conserve and enhance England's salmon populations.

7. Discussion

Summit delegates identified a number of key issues and potential actions under three topic discussions which will now be considered. In summary, the views given were as follows:

Managing exploitation

1. Quotas as a means to manage the level of exploitation by net fisheries

The angling and fisheries NGOs said that if the closure of mixed stock fisheries was not brought forward, a quota on the number of fish that can be caught in the North East net fisheries should be introduced as soon as possible; the Environment Agency are already investigating this. It was noted that quotas are used extensively for sea fisheries management though they have not always been considered to be successful. Quotas for salmon fisheries have been used successfully in Ireland and Canada to implement a reduction in exploitation. Issues include discards and enforcement. There are other options to control effort such as adjusting the length of the fishing season. Their use requires careful evaluation prior to implementation.

2. Mixed stock net fisheries

The angling and fisheries NGOs argued for the immediate closure of these; NASCO and ICES guidance make clear the high risks involved. The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations said that this was not likely to solve the underlying problems; it is too easy to pick on salmon netting. It was noted that assessments of the effects of removing net fisheries should take account of both the socio-economic and wider environmental impacts. The Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authorities raised concern over displacement of fishing effort caused by the removal of salmon nets onto other sea fish species.

3. Funding to reduce net exploitation

The Minister said that in view of the tight funding settlement that Defra was expecting, Government funding for a net buy-out was unlikely. The NGOs responded that a Government contribution was essential if funding from private interests was to be secured. It was pointed out that anglers already contributed to salmon conservation through paying for fishing and contributions to conservation organisations, e.g. Wye and Usk Foundation. However, it was agreed that all funding options should be considered, such as the Irish salmon conservation stamp, which provided an additional levy on top of the rod licence to fund conservation works including net buy-outs.

4. Stock assessment and conservation limits

If stock assessments were to lead to additional regulatory measures, there needed to be confidence in the approach being used to assess stock status. Earlier assessment would allow earlier management decisions to be made. There needed to be a review of assessment methods and of the data used in these.

5. Rod exploitation and catch and release

There was agreement that there should be a presumption against the killing of salmon from severely threatened stocks. However, the balance between mandatory and voluntary measures to reduce exploitation should be carefully considered. Anglers are worried about being required to practice even greater levels of catch and release, which could reduce angler numbers. While conservation considerations should be paramount, salmon should where possible be managed to realise the greatest socio-economic benefit. Anglers would like salmon and sea trout declared as sport fish only with no commercial exploitation for food.

Fish passage and habitat

1. Single or multi-species fish passage

Should we consider installing salmon specific fish passes where funding is limited rather than all-species passes? A pragmatic approach is required that provides for all species and ideally aims to restore natural river processes.

2. Wider impact of barriers

Barriers impact on flow, water quality, predation, substrate movements and natural river processes. Barrier removal has a range of benefits but all implications need to be considered.

3. Fish passage regulation

Increasing catchment connectivity needs to be a key objective of the proposed fish pass regulations. Political commitment is required to drive this through.

4. Upstream and downstream passage

Improving upstream passage is a key action to increase extent of spawning and juvenile habitat including headwaters and small streams. It's vital to provide for downstream smolt passage in freshwater and estuaries.

5. Funding and delivery

Contaminated land legislation could be used to address orphan structures. Too much red tape remains. Rivers Trusts are well placed to deliver. Take a strategic long-term approach and target action. Involve communities, e.g. adopt a river scheme. Use the Institute of Fisheries Management and Atlantic Salmon Trust's small streams training programme. River fencing allows natural recovery and is quick and cheap.

Agriculture and water quality

1. Clear priorities and messages

The Campaign for the Farmed Environment and LINK Farms work because they are about local activity. NFU feel voluntary measures often work best. It's important to be clear about priorities, build on existing initiatives and not to give contradictory messages. Talk to farmers about ecology and the environment. Use education and work with agricultural colleges.

Focus existing and new funding streams to maximise the benefits to catchment ecosystem services. Water company initiatives are demonstrating benefits to their business through improved farming practice. Advice to farmers needs to demonstrate improved profitability from the application of best practice. Best value advice can be provided by the third sector.

2. Evidence

Sediment fingerprinting is a very powerful tool for providing evidence. It helps to turn things around.

3. Regulation and enforcement.

Firm regulation and enforcement plays a key role in ensuring uptake of best practice and environmental improvements. Sediment causes pollution. Enforcer, educator and funder roles should be separated.

4. Long-term view and resources

A long term strategic approach is required. Catchment Sensitive Farming is under resourced with phosphate being a key issue under the Water Framework Directive. Put money into the third sector who can deliver best value.

8. Next steps

The Environment Agency is now reviewing the valuable and extensive contributions made in the Summit.

The England Fisheries Group, in which the Environment Agency discusses strategic fisheries matters with the key national angling and fisheries representative bodies (Angling Trust, Atlantic Salmon Trust, Canal and Rivers Trust, Institute of Fisheries Management, Salmon and Trout Conservation UK, The Rivers Trust and Wild Trout Trust), will discuss how action for salmon should now proceed and the development of the Environment Agency's 5 point approach.

Further development will proceed in the New Year to the extent and at the pace that Government and Environment Agency resources will allow.