

Salmon fishing: proposed river gradings for 2023 season - consultation outcome report

December 2022

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1. Background

1.1. River gradings

Since 2016 annual stock assessments have informed the Conservation of Salmon Regulations, which aim to protect wild Atlantic salmon populations in rivers where they are most at risk. This is achieved through annually assessing the conservation status of Atlantic salmon stocks across 173 separate inland water assessment areas. These assessments are then used to inform the proposed river gradings for each of these areas in the upcoming salmon fishing season. The Scottish Government seeks views on these proposals annually through public consultation.

The conservation status of each stock is defined by the probability of the stock meeting its conservation limit (CL) over a five-year period. Stocks are allocated to one of three grades, each with its own recommended management actions:

Category 1

At least 80% probability of meeting the CL. Exploitation is sustainable therefore no additional management action is currently required. This recognises the effectiveness of existing non-statutory local management interventions.

Category 2

Between 60-80% probability of meeting the CL. Management action is necessary to reduce exploitation. Catch and release should be promoted strongly in the first instance. The need for mandatory catch and release will be reviewed annually.

Category 3

Less than 60% probability of meeting the CL. Exploitation is unsustainable therefore management action, including mandatory catch and release (for all methods), is required to reduce exploitation.

[More information on the conservation of salmon can be found on the Scottish Government website.](#)

1.2. The status of Atlantic salmon populations in Scotland

The total reported rod catch of wild salmon for Scotland in 2021 was 35,693, the lowest on record and 75% of the previous five-year average. Moreover, in the proposed river

gradings for the 2023 season 113 out of 173 stocks have been assessed to be in poor conservation status (65%). These figures form part of a long-term trend in the decline of salmon populations over the past few decades. An overview of this trend and further information on the [stock status of wild Atlantic salmon in Scotland has been included in a report](#) provided by Marine Scotland for the purposes of this consultation. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that wild Atlantic salmon are in decline across their North Atlantic range. In response to this situation the Scottish Government has published the [Scottish Wild Salmon Strategy](#). This sets out the vision, objectives and priority themes to ensure the protection and recovery of Scottish wild Atlantic salmon populations. We are working with stakeholders to prepare a detailed strategy implementation plan, which will guide collective action for wild Atlantic salmon across government, business and charitable sectors.

2. Consultation

2.1. Purpose of the consultation

We sought views on the proposed river gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season and on a regime to enhance catch and release rates to 100%, either through the use of voluntary or mandatory measures.

2.2. Consultation process

The consultation opened on 10 August 2022 and closed on 9 September 2022.

[Information in support of the consultation was provided online](#) and responses to the consultation could be submitted on [Citizen Space](#), by email or post.

The [consultation questionnaire document](#) contained twelve questions which covered the proposed river gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season, seeking views on the catch and release regime, the use and accessibility of information provided in support of the proposed river gradings and a final question for other comments. Respondents were free to answer as many or as few of the questions as they wished.

In the analysis of the consultation responses the number of respondents who held a specific view is given as a percentage of the total number (211) of respondents to the consultation, unless otherwise specified.

3. Consultation analysis

3.1. Respondents and their interests

There were 211 responses submitted to the consultation from individuals (77%) and organisations (23%). A range of organisations submitted responses to the consultation including sixteen district salmon fishery boards, the River Tweed Commission, three river or fisheries trusts, ten angling clubs or associations, six organisations with national membership such as Fisheries Management Scotland, two community councils and five other businesses.

A large majority of respondents (81%) indicated that they had an interest in the river grading assessments for the whole of Scotland, although many were also interested in specific freshwater systems. More than 90 rivers, lochs and geographical regions across Scotland were indicated to be of interest to the respondents of this consultation.

3.2. Views of consultation respondents on the proposed river gradings

Nearly half of respondents (47%) agreed with the proposed gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season, while a third (33%) objected and a fifth (20%) had no specific view for or against the gradings. A few respondents (7%) indicated that they believed the proposed grade assigned to a specific river was incorrect and should be changed.

A proportion of respondents (13%) raised concerns over the methodology used to calculate the conservation status of rivers. Prominent issues raised included:

- requests for fish counter data to be used in addition to rod catch data in the assessment of river conservation statuses (7%)
- that environmental conditions such as low water levels reduced the number of catches (5%)
- that rod effort on rivers should be considered in the assessment method (4%)
- the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on reduced rod effort and corresponding lower number of catches (4%)
- concerns that the proposed gradings for upper tributaries should not influence the gradings of main stem rivers (3%)

Most respondents indicated that the sources of information provided in support of the proposed river gradings were 'useful' or 'very useful', although on average this majority was greater for organisations (85%) compared to individuals (65%). Individuals were also less likely on average to indicate whether the information provided met their accessibility needs (43%) compared to organisations (70%).

3.3 Views of consultation respondents on the catch and release regime

3.3.1. Catch and release

The practice of catching and releasing Atlantic salmon in recreational angling has substantially increased in the past three decades to support the species. Catch and release in 2021 accounted for 95% of the total rod catch of salmon and 99% of the rod-caught spring salmon (taken before 1 May).

Since the introduction of the Conservation of Salmon (Scotland) Regulations in 2016 river assessment areas that are categorised as grade 3, which indicates that exploitation is unsustainable, require statutory mandatory catch and release of salmon for all fishing methods. Voluntary catch and release actions are strongly promoted in grade 2 areas and most grade 1 areas also encourage anglers to practice catch and release.

3.3.2. Views on enhancing catch and release rates through voluntary or mandatory measures

While a large number of respondents (42%) voiced support for the regime to encourage 100% catch and release across Scotland through voluntary measures, the majority of respondents (48%) opposed this. A small proportion of respondents (10%) did not provide a specific view on the regime for voluntary measures.

A majority of respondents (75%) opposed a regime for mandatory measures to achieve 100% catch and release across Scotland in future and less than a fifth (18%) of respondents supported the prospect. A small proportion of respondents (7%) did not provide a specific view on the prospect of mandatory measures.

A few respondents rejected the use of voluntary measures in favour of mandatory measures to achieve 100% catch and release rates instead, meaning that in total 46% of respondents supported the idea of either voluntary or mandatory measures, or both.

A broad array of reasons were provided in either support or in objection to the catch and release regime. For example, 34% respondents felt that catch and release rates were already high in Scotland and 40% of respondents felt that pursuing a policy of 100% catch and release would not be effective in protecting wild salmon populations. This latter view was largely held for three reasons:

- respondents felt that angling did not constitute a significant pressure on wild salmon populations;
- that as catch and release rates are already high the small increase to 100% would not have a substantial benefit;
- that salmon populations in rivers which are already operating a 100% catch and release policy, such as rivers that have consistently been grade 3 over several years, have not recovered.

The views of some respondents on the use of voluntary or mandatory measures in future to achieve 100% catch and release are included below:

“A very high level of catch and release has been achieved without mandatory measures. Anglers have demonstrated a willingness to apply the measure in places where it is not already compulsory. Therefore, there would be no meaningful change by making it compulsory”

“I think, whilst hugely unfortunate, that this is required. This is not only because the small proportion of adults killed would then contribute to recruitment. This is mostly because I feel other sectors such as aquaculture and forestry are unlikely to take seriously their impacts on salmon stocks when those advocating their conservation only do so, so that they can kill them for sport”

3.3.3. Views expressed on other actions to protect and restore wild Atlantic salmon populations

Over two thirds (67%) of respondents indicated that they would like to see action taken on other pressures impacting wild salmon populations. Respondents were similarly likely to indicate that other pressures needed to be addressed whether they supported or objected to voluntary measures to encourage full catch and release (69% or 61 out of 89 positive responses compared to 65%, or 65 out of 100 objections). However, only 46%

of respondents who supported mandatory measures (17 out of 37 responses) indicated that other pressures needed to be addressed compared to 73% of those who objected to them (116 out of 159 responses).

There were a number of pressures on wild salmon populations identified by respondents, these have been ranked by the percentage of total respondents who mentioned that pressure:

- predation (53%)
- fish farms (41%)
- habitat degradation and river barriers (20%)
- low water quality and pollution (19%)
- pressures in the marine environment (19%)
- low water flows and abstraction (11%)
- climate change (10%)
- estuary netting (9%)

Furthermore, a number of actions were suggested by respondents to help protect and recover wild salmon populations. These are ranked below by the percentage of the total respondents who mentioned these actions:

- stocking (13%)
- preventing illegal fish poaching (7%)
- prohibiting specific fishing methods or tackle (4%)
- close rivers to angling for set periods of time (3%)
- adjust angling season times (2%)

Responses from organisations tended to be more comprehensive than those from individuals. For example, more than half of the responses (52%) from organisations highlighted three or more pressures other than angling that should be addressed to protect and restore wild salmon populations, compared to less than a quarter of individual responses (23%) who did the same¹.

¹ These percentages are not a proportion of the total number of respondents but represent proportions of the organisational (48) and individual (163) responses received.

The views of some respondents on other actions needed to protect and restore wild Atlantic salmon populations have been included below:

“An alternative approach to mandatory catch and release would be to use the river grading system to enforce and increase what funding and management tools are available to local stakeholders (DSFB’s, SEPA, SNH [sic], landowners) to protect and enhance salmon stocks to improve river gradings. Management tools should include proportionate licences for predation control (FEB’s & In river Seals), stronger diffuse pollution control measures and improved habitat schemes linked to agricultural subsidies, more robust abstraction control and regulation and restorative or mitigation stocking of salmon if proven to be required and appropriate”

“The costs of this legislation could, arguably, be better spent in addressing other factors affecting the fish and the riverine habitat.”

“We are also of the view that more can be done to ensure that best practice in catch and release is followed both locally and more widely in Scotland, particularly in relation to air-exposure of fish and fishing in high temperatures. We would be supportive of more guidance being developed and circulated on this”

3.3.4. Concerns regarding the potential impacts of a 100% catch and release policy

A number of potential impacts of a Scotland-wide 100% catch and release policy were identified by respondents. These are ranked below by the percentage of the total respondents who mentioned these impacts:

- deter anglers from the sport and reduce tourism (39%)
- have an economic impact on businesses that benefit from angling and local economies (26%)
- reduce income for businesses directly or indirectly associated with angling (17%)
- reduce the contribution of the angling community (due to reduced angling and associated income) to initiatives that promote the protection of wild salmon populations such as habitat restoration projects or the reporting of pollution incidents (12%)

- result in an increase in fish poaching and other wildlife crimes due to reduced angler presence on rivers (10%)

11% of respondents also expressed views that a 100% catch and release policy either through voluntary or mandatory measures effects their personal freedom to catch and eat wild salmon and 15% commented that anglers value the choice to 'keep one for the pot'. Some 11% respondents also commented that they would be opposed to returning injured fish that were unlikely to survive, or fish that died during handling, back to the river.

Organisations were more likely to highlight the potential impacts of a 100% catch and release policy, including deterring anglers (33% of individuals, 59% of organisations) and reduced income for businesses that benefit from angling (10% of individuals, 38% of organisations).

The majority of comments relating to the impacts of a 100% catch and release policy identified likely negative trade-offs, whereas a few respondents expressed their views on potential benefits. For example, some respondents highlighted that promoting a 100% catch and release policy could promote a more ecologically-focused tourism industry for angling. Others mentioned that a 100% catch and release policy may not have a severe impact on the income of fisheries managers, as numerous fisheries across Scotland have already been operating a 100% catch and release policy for some time.

The views of some respondents on the potential impact of a voluntary or mandatory 100% catch and release policy are included below:

“Efforts to enhance conservation work best when those directly affected have full buy-in to the process. Statutory intervention and prohibition would have the direct opposite effect, leading to disenfranchisement and a drop-off in interest and participation in conservation measures and potentially in angling itself. There is considerable psychological difference between voluntary C&R and a compulsory scheme which carries the threat of prosecution”

“I personally think that a 100% catch and release (including for heavy bleeders) across all grades would be beneficial. At the moment beats (even category 1) which have

voluntarily moved to catch and release only and focus on other marketing aspect to maintain/grow their revenues and maintain jobs are somehow penalised by opportunistic fisheries whose key selling point is “you can kill fish within the law”

3.3.5. Views on review period length of a catch and release policy

The majority of respondents (41%) felt that the introduction of a 100% catch and release policy, either through voluntary or mandatory measures, should be reviewed annually in line with the annual assessment of the conservation status of salmon stocks and the proposed gradings for the upcoming salmon fishing season. A smaller proportion of respondents indicated that catch and release policy should be reviewed over longer periods including every three years (15%) or five years (7%) in line with the life cycle of Atlantic salmon.

The views of some respondents on how often a Scotland-wide catch and release policy should be reviewed are included below:

“This [a 1 year review period] could allow fisheries a regular opportunity to assess the impact of mandatory C&R in terms of bookings and income, local angler interests, as well as assessing and taking in to account the annual runs of salmon”

“By adopting a period of 100% catch and release across the country, for at least one lifecycle (5 years), then robust assessment of the wild stocks and the trend will be possible without any skew from anglers harvesting salmon. If this conservation measure works, this should be reflected in monitoring results following a period of mandatory catch and release.”

4. Conclusions

There were 211 respondents to the consultation who had interests in rivers and freshwater systems across Scotland, including from regional and national fisheries management organisations. 47% of respondents supported the proposed river gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season while 33% objected to them. Many of those who rejected the river gradings appeared to do so due to their views on the assessment method or their concern that rivers of interest to them were incorrectly graded.

Nearly half of respondents (46%) supported a 100% catch and release policy in some form, although only a minority (18%) supported the use of mandatory measures to achieve this. 40% of respondents indicated that they felt a 100% catch and release policy would not be effective in protecting and restoring wild salmon populations, whilst 67% of respondents highlighted pressures other than exploitation through angling that they believe have a greater impact on wild salmon populations. Respondents who held this view felt these pressures should be addressed through actions either in parallel with, or instead of, a 100% catch and release policy either through voluntary or mandatory measures.

Several potential impacts of a voluntary or mandatory 100% catch and release policy were raised by respondents including deterring anglers from the sport, the economic impact on businesses that benefit from angling and reduced contributions from anglers to conservation and habitat restoration projects. However, benefits of a 100% mandatory catch and release policy were also identified including the promotion of a more ecologically-focused tourism industry for angling. Finally, 41% of respondents felt that if new measures to achieve 100% catch and release are introduced, then they should be reviewed annually in line with the annual assessment of the conservation status of salmon stocks and the proposed gradings for the upcoming salmon fishing season.

5. Scottish Government response

5.1. Response to respondents' views on the proposed river gradings for the 2023 salmon fishing season

The views given on the proposed river gradings have been used to inform the process of finalising the gradings for the 2023 fishing season, which will be used in the annual amendment to [The Conservation of Salmon \(Scotland\) Regulations 2016](#) that regulates:

- permission for the killing of salmon within inland waters where stocks are above a defined conservation limit such as category 1 or 2 rivers; and
- the mandatory catch and release of salmon in areas which are below their defined conservation limit i.e. those assigned category 3 status.

Respondents who commented that the proposed grade for a specific river was incorrect and should be changed were contacted to discuss these matters further. Once a review of the evidence provided has been completed, the regulations will be brought forward for

amendment subject to parliamentary approval. After this process has concluded, the finalised river gradings will be published on the [Scottish Government website](#).

A number of issues were raised by respondents on the assessment methods used to assess the status of stocks and assign the proposed river gradings. The methodology used is the best currently available, is aligned with international best practice and has been developed over a number of years by Marine Scotland scientists. The basic methodology is the same as previous years, the only amendment being those additional [methods developed to account for the reduction in fishing that was associated with lockdown measures related to the pandemic in 2020 and 2021](#).

Marine Scotland is continuing to improve the data used in the modelling by, for example, supporting new counter developments. The stock assessment methods themselves are also being updated to incorporate additional information, notably the impact of fishing effort on catches. However, rod fisheries have only collected effort data since 2019, and more time is required in order to produce and consult on new methods.

There were a small number of respondents who raised concerns that the proposed gradings for Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) which form only part of a larger assessment area should not influence the gradings of the larger area. Within these discussions we have explained that salmon from these SACs may also be caught in the wider river. A precautionary approach is therefore taken where the wider assessment area is not treated as being in better condition than the SAC. This general approach has been taken since the start of the Regulations in 2016. For the 2023 season there is no impact on the ability of these wider areas to retain salmon.

5.2. Response to respondents' views on enhancing catch and release rates through voluntary or mandatory measures

Whilst no specific plans for the introduction of a 100% catch and release policy were laid out, this consultation sought the views of stakeholders on encouraging voluntary measures or introducing mandatory measures to achieve a 100% catch and release policy. An additional aim was to highlight how post-catch mortality can be reduced by adhering to [catch and release best practice](#). There are no plans to change the existing approach to catch and release, however the views received will help to inform policy development in the future. Actions that contribute to further the protection and

restoration of wild Atlantic salmon populations will be set out in the [Wild Salmon Strategy](#) Implementation Plan.

The Scottish Government is considering a range of options and pursuing actions to protect and restore wild Atlantic salmon populations as outlined in the [Wild Salmon Strategy](#), and which will be covered in full through the Implementation Plan. We recognise that the fisheries management community have taken important and significant steps in the past three decades for salmon conservation, including increasing catch and release rates across Scotland and contributing to the creation of guidance for [catch and release best practice](#).



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The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80525-331-0 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, December 2022

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1210522 (12/22)

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