

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action and Environment

Opening Statement of

Inland Fisheries Ireland

Chairperson, Deputies, Senators I would like to thank you for the opportunity to come before the Committee and outline some of the significant activities and progress of Inland Fisheries Ireland in recent years.

I will touch on a few of the key areas which I believe may be of interest to the Committee. In 2018 IFI engaged in over 170,000 patrol hours divided over 30,449 individual patrols.

In 2018 808 items including fishing rods, fish, nets and other types of illegal fishing engines were seized. An average of 14.4km net has been seized in recent years and 11.5 Kms was seized in 2018 and while this represents a reduction from previous years, which is likely related to the reduction in the abundance of our salmon stock it is none the less a considerable amount of illegal net which is capable of doing significant damage to our fish stocks. IFI initiated over 83 prosecutions for fisheries and environmental offences in 2018 and 82 prosecutions in 2017.

A significant amount of IFI's work is about regulatory compliance and in this regard almost 33,000 anglers have been checked in 2018 for compliance with licenses, permits. An average of 645 checks were carried out on fish dealers and almost 24,000 environmental inspections were carried out on industrial, agricultural, waste water treatment plants and civil engineering works.

In 2018 44 fish kills were reported however given the extreme climatic conditions experienced during the summer drought period the number of fish kills was relatively low. This is a credit to our staff working in tandem with other relevant agencies and also to the responsible actions of the farming community and others involved in water infrastructure.

IFI have invested over €3 million in renewing its RIB fleet and 12 specialised RIBs are being delivered to IFI on a staged basis. 8 have been delivered thus far. These boats are built to the highest standards of safety and each boat carries an inflatable life raft and has a P6 license. IFI will now be able to operate single RIB patrols, as opposed to twin RIB patrols, a significant operational efficiency for the organisation.

The National Strategy for Angling Development (NSAD) was launched in February 2016 following an extensive research and a public consultation process. It is the first comprehensive national framework for the development of Ireland's angling resource.

In 2017 IFI developed an online grant application portal to improve systems and processes used in managing funding schemes to ensure that public funds are managed in line with governance requirements. IFI also introduced an Environmental Assessment Process to ensure environmental governance was achieved.

During 2017 IFI assisted clubs in delivering on the 50 locally led projects awarded under the 2016 Capital Grants scheme and launched a number of additional funding schemes.

From 2016 to 2018 a total of €2.9 million has been awarded to 174 projects nationally and 60% of all the schemes have been delivered. Angling access has been improved at 78 locations with an additional 22 locations due for completion in 2019. Included in the 2017 and 2018 schemes are 35 habitat enhancement projects which we expect to complete over 2019 and 2020.

Recognising the difficulties of voluntary stakeholders have in achieving governance standards, IFI established the Project Management Office, appointed an overall programme Director and 5 animators whose role is to work directly with stakeholders and improve project development and delivery. The benefits of this approach were felt during 2018.

IFI's Research division conducts a wide range of applied research programmes enabling the provision of data and knowledge concerning the habitats and species under its protection in order to support, our parent Department and a range of government departments in policy development and in support of decision making, stakeholders and other agencies. The focus on applied research resulted in the publication of 27 international peer reviewed publications in 2017. IFI's National research programmes are reinforced by co-operation and partnerships with national and international research and funding organisations, with the success in partnering in the COMPASS (€6.3m – IFI element €500k) and Catchment CARE (€13.8m – IFI element €2.37 million) Interreg projects a particular highlight in 2018.

IFI remains seriously concerned about salmon abundance levels. One only has to look at the pre fishery abundance levels, which is the estimated number of fish returning to the coast before any exploitation takes place. Current estimates are that between 240,000 and 300,000 wild salmon are returning to the Irish coast as against highs of almost 2 million salmon in the 1970's. Had action not been taken by Government in 2006 the likelihood is that the decline may well have been more pronounced.

Concern about salmon abundance both nationally and internationally has led to the 2019 being declared as International Year of the Salmon. This is a joint world-wide initiative of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission (NPAFC) to raise awareness of what humans can do to ensure salmon and their habitats are conserved. IFI will be taking a full and active part in the International Year of the Salmon to raise awareness of the state of Irish salmon stocks.

IFI successfully implemented two major transformational projects in the business in 2018. IFI transformed its fleet management and utilisation - all existing systems and processes were over hauled, electronic logbooks, standardised maintenance programmes for all vehicles, and additional training for all staff and a vehicle telemetry system was implemented. This has resulted in significant savings on fuel, over 30,000l in 2018, and increases organisational efficiency.

On foot of these changes IFI were awarded the Fleet Transport Association of Ireland 'Van Safe' Accreditation and our logistics manager was awarded with a Road Safety Authority Leading Light award. In early 2019 IFI will complete this programme by replenishing the fleet with fewer, smaller, fit for purpose vehicles including a number of electric vehicles. In addition to further fuel savings this element of the programme will generate a significant CO2 reduction and put IFI well on track for achieving its current carbon reduction targets.

IFI also implemented an organisation wide Time Management System in which all staff are now recording daily time, absences and leave in a consistent manner via an online system. This system has improved IFI's operational efficiency, allowed the development of appropriate management reports which will ensure that IFI can easily demonstrate compliance with relevant legislation. It is planned to extend this system in 2019 and incorporate additional functionality, such as online subsistence and metric collation.

Finally I would like to highlight an issue which could have positive impacts on IFI if it could be resolved. The Principal Act governing the sector is the 1959 (Consolidated) Fisheries Act. This Act is a consolidation of fisheries legislation from around the late 19th century to 1959, and it is currently 60 years old. While it has served inland fisheries well over the years it is no longer fit for purpose and is holding back the modernisation of the service. My parent department have done a significant piece of work on preparing a new fisheries act, and, recognising that legislation is entirely in the remit of the Oireachtas, I would stress that from an agency perspective the sooner we have more modern fisheries legislation the better.

I would like to thank you for your attention and again stress that this is a snapshot of some of the work completed by IFI and I would be happy to take any question Committee members may have.