

Job fears over wild salmon 'crisis'

MIKE MERITT

RURAL workers are fearing for their jobs as government figures revealed wild salmon catches in Scotland are at their lowest level since records began in 1952.

Fisheries Management Scotland said the data highlighted that stocks of the fish are at "crisis point".

The total reported catch through rod fishing was 37,196 for 2018, which was just 67% of the previous five-year average.

Workers are calling on the Scottish Government to draft an urgent "action and delivery plan" for the iconic salmon, fearing their jobs will be next to go.

The Scottish Gamekeeper's Association Fishing Group, which represents workers such as ghillies, boatmen and bailiffs, believes there is now genuine on-ground concern over employment due to declining

fish numbers. Government reports have highlighted that wild fisheries support 2,800 jobs but it is acknowledged that losses of salaried positions would have a disproportionate local impact due to many of them being in remote locations.

Now the SGAFG feels that the Government must convene a short-term priority group to establish a timeline of supported actions to safeguard the sector.

There are around 1,000 active fisheries in Scotland but falling rod catches, competition and the lack of a central vision have led to a decline in assets and investment.

"Many of the problems facing salmon are at sea but we need to look to home first," said Duncan Ferguson from the group.

"Years were spent on the abandoned reform of wild fisheries. During that time, investment halted and there is real fear now that what is left to strip is our employment and way of life.

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There are few places you can fish a great river at the prices charged

"We have an amazing product. Famous rivers, skilled ghillies who promote their river and sell Scotland.

"There are few places you can fish a great river at the prices now being charged.

"But we need to save it now. A timeline of actions needs to be drawn up and followed through, with support.

"Government needs to involve all the stakeholders but, crucially, they need to listen to the men and women who have worked these rivers for years."

Among the priorities river workers feel need to be addressed quickly are the impact of predation, barriers to salmon passage, industrial water extraction and disease.

Today, from every 100 smolts, or young salmon, heading to sea from Scottish rivers, only five adult salmon return.

The number of predatory seals and dolphins is placing increasing pressure on

survival as is the activity of goosanders and cormorants.

The Scottish Government has set out a number of salmon conservation measures in recent years.

But Alan Wells, chief executive of Fisheries Management Scotland, said more needs to be done.

He said: "Figures for 2018, taken together with those of recent years, confirm this iconic species is now approaching crisis point. Some of the factors impacting on wild salmon stocks may be beyond human control."

Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham said that she was "determined to safeguard the future" of wild salmon.

She added: "We have identified 12 groups of high-level pressures on the species, and we're working closely with key partners to address these."