

# EXPANDING NETS AND STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

**Angus Woodward: Scotland's mixed stock fisheries and the peculiar relationship between Scottish Government and Usan Salmon Fisheries**

Those of us who have expressed concerns that Scottish Government's recent support for the salmon netting industry would prompt an increase in netting activity and effort are now being vindicated.

Far from signalling that it wished to see a reduction or phasing out of mixed stocks netting stations, in line with international obligations and enlightened salmon management, Scottish Government has actively encouraged the netmen. Well over two years after the Mixed Stock Fisheries Working Group (set up by Government) issued its comprehensive Report including clear conservation recommendations from its independent chairman, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs (and Fisheries Minister) Richard Lochhead is still to give a proper response; one can only assume that the document still languishes in his "too difficult" file. In 2010 Scottish Government backed the (successful) application by Scotland's biggest salmon netting company, Usan Salmon Fisheries, for a £100,000 grant from the European Fisheries Fund.

This year to date (this is written in early July) there has indeed been a significant increase in netting activity and intensity around the Scottish coast. Two netting stations in Dunnet Bay, Caithness (previously lightly and intermittently fished in the summer only) and a further two by Gardenstown east of the Deveron (mothballed for some 20 years) have been acquired by Usan Salmon Fisheries; they began operations at all four in April. Netting in Loch Linnhe began in

May, unilaterally ending an agreement not to exploit spring salmon. Netting at Rosemarkie on the Black Isle (which has not happened since 2006) commenced in June; the owner had declined any extension to the arrangement under which the Ness Board paid him £5,000 annually not to fish. This list is by no means exhaustive and other dormant netting stations are currently attracting interest.

## Who is correct: the Scottish government or S&TA?

When S&TA Scotland recently issued a news release highlighting the upsurge in netting activity and deploring the fact that Scotland is "the only country in the northern hemisphere where coastal salmon netting is actually increasing in intensity", Scottish Government issued a terse statement that "salmon netting in Scotland is not increasing". This is simply not consistent with the facts.

Nor is this the first time that Scottish Government's statements on netting have been at variance with the reality or indeed indicative of a degree of duplicity. As is evident from the foregoing paragraphs, the major player in the netting industry – with ambitious plans for expansion – is Usan Salmon Fisheries. In January 2011 Fisheries Minister Richard Lochhead responded to a parliamentary question on Usan's £100,000 EU grant as follows (highlights for emphasis): "The business made an application for grant support from the European Fisheries Fund (EFF) programme towards an on-shore pre-fabricated building for the repair and maintenance of nets and other gear. The facility is designed to

improve working conditions and the health and safety of the business's employees, not to increase the level of exploitation of salmon stocks".

How very odd that the Minister's statement made no mention at all of Usan using the new building (the size of a massive aircraft hangar) for actually making nets or indeed boats for netting. Usan's website is quite clear that the building is in fact a "Net and Boat Manufacturing Unit". In effect Usan's new building enables it to produce – at minimal cost – all the equipment necessary to furnish any defunct or semi-dormant netting stations the company adds to its portfolio, such as the four it has already purchased this year. In other words the building is being used to expedite an increase in the exploitation of salmon, which is completely at odds with the Minister's bland assurance.

Links between Usan and Scottish Government (through Marine Scotland) continue. This spring Usan began working with Marine Scotland scientists (as part of a three year programme) to capture and radio tag salmon. For tagging 153 salmon between February and May this year Usan has been paid a fee of £30,000. Just why Scottish Government determined that, on top of this generous fee, Usan should receive a "reward" (potentially worth several tens of thousands of pounds), permitting it to net salmon commercially for an (unprecedented) additional two week period after the statutory close of the netting season at the end of August, is something of a mystery. The relationship between Scottish Government and Usan appears to be all too cosy.



**Main:** Usan netsmen emptying a bag-net in Dunnet Bay (Caithness) into which Scotland's largest netting company has expanded its operations this year.

**Below left:** Netting off the beach at Rosemarkie on the Black Isle. Fishing took place here this year for the first time since 2006

**Below Right:** Mixed stock catch

