**4. Please provide your comments on the potential options to manage the Yorkshire and North East coastal fishery after December 2022.**

In preparation of this response from the Wild Trout Trust, we have worked closely with Salmon & Trout Conservation UK and support their input to this consultation.

**Option 1**

**Do nothing. Allow the current NLO to expire in December 2022 without replacement. Anyone applying for a T or J net licence would be issued with one.**

WTT cannot support option 1: it fails to provide any protection for the numerous unassessed, recovering, and at least two Probably At Risk sea trout populations (Wear & Tees, 2020), not to mention the significant impact upon contributing Scottish populations, and could lead to over-exploitation of any/all constituent populations in this Mixed Stock Fishery.

**Option 2**

**Replace the 2012 NLO with a new reducing NLO with identical provisions - licences are restricted to those already operating in the net fishery, and as current licensees retire, the number of licences is reduced.**

Of the four proposed options to replace the 2012 NLO, only Options 2 and 4 come close to meeting the Environment Agency’s duty to protect two Probably At Risk sea trout populations in this region (Wear & Tees, 2020 data), and potentially many more at risk unassessed populations. If limited to the four proposed options, Option 2 would be WTT’s preference; however, WTT does not support MSFs, and certainly not in a scenario where any of the constituent fish populations are of unknown abundance and some are assessed as Probably At Risk.

In the absence of robust assessment for sea trout populations and more meaningful conservation targets (which must be progressed as a priority), the North East sea trout fishery must not be offered to offset the loss of the salmon net fishery. Option 2 still falls well short of the precautionary principle, in that, we do not know what impact any exploitation could have on certain (any) individual stock components. It is still incongruous that this principle should be applied for the protection of salmon populations but not sea trout.

While the Y&NE Net Fishery is naturally diminishing, in line with the aspiration for the 2012 NLO, the rate remains slow; an important consideration in light of several rivers where any additional recruitment could help to redress the apparent current population decline on many catchments and move them towards recovery. The EA’s own Salmon Five Point Approach advocates “only allowing exploitation where there is a harvestable surplus, and of ending coastal mixed stock fisheries for sea trout where these cannot be demonstrated to be sustainable.” Why should salmon receive that higher level of consideration and protection and how has any sea trout fishery been demonstrated as sustainable without appropriate assessment? With PAR rivers and unassessed rivers contributing to the mixed stock fishery, it is difficult to envisage a scenario where any net exploitation is possible without significant risk.

We appreciate the importance of preserving the livelihoods of certain operators within the Y&NE fishery (noting that not all are solely reliant on the sea trout fishery), but feel it is also important to recognise that even with a decreasing NLO, exploitation rates could still go up, in contrast to the current trend in decreasing catch rates, especially if some fishermen currently not fishing (but with licences) resume. For this reason, we feel that where licences are not fished, they should also be relinquished, as they are clearly not pivotal to any livelihood. We believe there should also be a limit upon the maximum number of fish that can be landed by the fishery per year (ideally monthly), to ensure that the intended reduction in catch is delivered. With unrestricted catches still possible, certain populations could be disproportionally exploited, particularly in certain months, owing to the geographical location of their natal stream and the nets. There is strong anecdotal evidence that in more abundant years/months, excessive exploitation actually floods the market with sea trout, resulting in a significant reduction in their wholesale value. Introducing an upper catch limit would therefore help ensure that sea trout are viewed and valued as the premium product they are, while also offering some protection to the constituent populations.

However, we believe that the EA as the fishery manager is currently hamstrung by a lack of reliable stock assessment information, so we support all ongoing work to produce an accurate system for assessing individual sea trout populations, such that meaningful catchment conservation targets can be set, bringing sea trout population data and species protection in line with that of Atlantic salmon.

In 2020, 10,000 sea trout were killed in the NE T&J net fishery and, although this is well down on the 60,000 caught in 2015, we believe that the lack of knowledge on individual catchment sea trout populations and the mixed stock nature of the fishery means that this is still too many, with unproven sustainability. In 2021, 11 of the 36 licence holders did not fish and the remaining 25 licensees caught around 5,000 sea trout, with all salmon apparently returned alive. While 5,000 fish is too many in terms of protecting sea trout stocks of largely unknown sustainability, we believe that as a maximum limit (within a reducing NLO), such a number provides some compromise between conservation and the socioeconomics of the fishery.

WTT, in collaboration with S&TC, therefore, strongly urge that a quota be set for the fishery not to exceed 6,000 fish killed in any one year. If this figure is reached before the end date of the relevant season, the fishery should be immediately closed to protect sea trout stocks. While we appreciate that this will involve real-time reporting and processing of catches to and by the EA, it is the same practice that NASCO demands of the Greenland government in controlling their salmon fishery and so we believe it should be adopted by the UK government to protect sea trout and salmon in home waters.

**Option 3**

**Introduce a fixed NLO that caps the number of licences at the current level, such that as existing licensees retire, their licences are made available to other fishermen.**

WTT cannot support a mixed stock fishery for sea trout that would be against the best practice guidance of ICES and NASCO. There are only limited data on any of the contributing sea trout populations (which needs to be addressed) and what data there are suggest that many of the constituent populations are in decline. We therefore cannot support an unregulated fishery.

**Option 4**

**Introduce an NLO which sets the number of licences available at zero, suspending all netting for sea trout.**

This option is undoubtedly the best option for conservation of sea trout populations in Y&NE waters, particularly as many of the constituent populations are assessed as being in less than favourable condition. This would also protect any small, unassessed and/or recovering catchments where the total numbers of fish contributing will be low and any net exploitation could jeopardise their long-term viability. The fact that sea trout populations in many small catchments are not assessed at all, and no populations are assessed to any degree of certainty, means that any exploitation is at odds with the precautionary principle and is an unquantified risk.

WTT believes that the effective management of migratory salmonids requires population assessment at an individual river catchment scale. If individual river salmon and sea trout abundance can be shown to have recovered to a point where they provide an exploitable surplus in the future, controlled harvesting of that surplus could again be considered, but not until the assessment protocols and subject fish populations are robust enough to demonstrate a surplus. Any future Y&NE fishery (any salmon and sea trout fishery) must not be via the current system of indiscriminate MSFs. More logical and potentially policeable is a targeted fishery based in river estuaries, appropriately monitored and assessed on a monthly basis, to ensure overexploitation is prevented, with an appropriate maximum take of fish. An alternate day fishery (fishing one day on, one day off) could be initiated help to reduce the impact upon any single portion of a given population/run.

We also have major concerns that the immediate (or long-term) closure of the NE T&J nets could lead to the local Inland Fishery and Conservation Authority (IFCA) permitting an extension of inshore netting targeting species such as bass. Research – both in the UK (SAMARCH) and in Europe (e.g. Finland) - has shown that migratory salmonids are extremely vulnerable to inshore nets and therefore significant numbers could be exploited as by-catch in an extended coastal net fishery targeting other marine species. This is especially concerning, as recent consultations involving IFCAs (e.g. along the English south coast) has highlighted a reluctance on their part to conserve migratory salmonids and protect them from by-catch, as required under NASCO guidelines, instead favouring the promotion of commercial, coastal marine fisheries. We believe that the UK government must therefore take ultimate responsibility for protecting salmon and sea trout in coastal waters. Gradual closure of the T&J net fishery under option 2 gives time for a policy change whereby Defra, rather than IFCAs or the Marine Management Organisation, sets policy for protecting migrating salmonids in coastal waters, therefore abiding by governmental responsibility agreed to by the UK within the NASCO forum.

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