

## **ASF Strategic Plan Report to Boards of Directors, November 2020**

**Robert Otto - COO**

The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact ASF including budgets, fundraising, staffing decisions, travel, fieldwork, advocacy, and outreach. With our year of experience navigating during a pandemic we understand the constraints far better and, although perhaps still unable to carry out work as we previously did, we are better able to quickly determine what we can accomplish and then concentrate on its delivery. We remain hopeful constraints will ease as 2021 progresses.

It has been three years since ASF's Strategic Plan (Blueprint for Saving Wild Atlantic Salmon) was unanimously approved by the joint Boards of ASF at the May 2018 Board meetings in Toronto. The notional timeframe that the Plan would cover was estimated at the time to be four to five years, and it is now time to start an assessment of progress against the Objectives and Activities contained in the plan.

Assessment of progress of the Outcomes and Outputs is a higher bar than we've previously undertaken previously when assessing Annual Mileposts. This has been done with the intention of identifying where ASF needs to pivot or re-assess the Activity, depending on the reason(s) for any lack of progress. Recall that this Plan attempted to measure progress against Goals and Objectives based on ASF's own actions and not be dependent on other organizations for successful action. While this is appropriate, the following evaluation of Outcomes and Outputs shows us the impact of ASF actions. If ASF does all the work necessary that we can but has little impact due to other factors, we should evaluate whether to continue to do that work, or shift. Following a short summary of progress for each of the four Goals you will find those assessments described with a recommended action.

### **Goal #1 – Ensure Fisheries are Sustainable**

*Good Progress* continues to be made for this Goal overall.

The 2020 Greenland salmon fishing season opened two-weeks later than usual this year, on September 1<sup>st</sup>, and was closed on September 20<sup>th</sup> when 15.7 tonnes had been reported harvested. Although the final harvest figure exceeded 30 MT, the level of reporting was the highest ever for Greenland meaning the unreported harvest level is very low.

Our efforts with Indigenous and First Nations communities continue to progress, while Covid continues to impact and affect indigenous communities greatly. We continue to support the First Nations fishery for striped bass in the Miramichi and indications are the fishery for spring 2021 will use four nets. Aside from the striped bass fishery on the Miramichi, progress at

supporting alternative fisheries with possibility of commensurate decrease in FSC salmon fisheries has been limited.

ASF continues to engage Greenland communities and fishers in conservation programs through the Greenland Conservation agreement. ASF continues to work and establish productive relationships with First Nations and Indigenous communities generally in conservation activities but specifically in research and monitoring programs. Through the Wild Salmon Watersheds program ASF has plans to actively participate in delivery of the Wild Atlantic Salmon Conservation Policy Implementation Plan action items.

ASF has continually worked to advocate and support action to expand the network of salmon monitoring and assessment sites across eastern Canada, call for and support “in-season” reviews of salmon runs (adaptive management) and encourage improved catch and effort reporting and statistics in Atlantic Canada (*Good Progress*). However, success at effecting changes from the *status quo* for these must be assessed as *No Progress*.

#### **Goal #2 – Understand Salmon Mortality - Tracking Programs**

Good Progress has been made overall for this Goal.

ASF is a major partner in the Environmental Studies Research Fund (ESRF) program which is expanding tracking programs across eastern Canada. It is coordinated by DFO but includes a long list of partners like first nations and indigenous groups, research entities, NGOs and local conservation groups. ESRF tags and transmitters are being deployed on rivers where ASF traditionally captures fish for tagging studies including the Restigouche, Cascapedia, and Miramichi. Target sample sizes are as follows:

	<u>Restigouche</u>	<u>Cascapedia</u>	<u>Miramichi</u>
ASF smolts	80	60	160
ESRF smolts	up to 140	70	70
ESRF kelts	30	20	26

Our experience with travel restrictions in 2020 has driven our field planning for 2021. Early on ASF research staff reached out to our partners in other provinces to make sure we had field and tagging crews lined up to capture and deploy tags on our focal rivers. Field equipment packages were prepared and delivered to the crews to support the fieldwork. At the time of writing, tagging efforts for kelts are underway with an early spring in most areas in 2021, smolt migrations should start early. Where we depend on partner’s infrastructure to support our tagging, discussions on contingencies around field abilities and Covid happened early and often.

ASF's investigation of oceanographic influences on salmon movements in marine systems continues, and Research Scientist Jason Daniels recently gave a presentation on the project at a virtual Research and Environment committee meeting.

### **Goal #3 – Contain and Reduce Impacts of Open Net-Pen Aquaculture**

Some progress has been made for this Goal.

As was included in the autumn 2020 Strategic Planning report, DFO released a discussion paper on the 2019 Federal Aquaculture Act consultation process. ASF was heavily involved in the Public comments on the paper through shared submissions with other eNGOs. New Brunswick has adopted a new Aquaculture Act, and ASF made a submission on its development and what we viewed as directions and requirements; however, neither process appears to offer any increased protection to wild Atlantic salmon or effectively regulate the industry. So, although we met our internal mileposts of heavily engaging with the development of these regulatory documents (*Good Progress*), the effect of our work cannot be assessed similarly (*Some Progress*).

ASF's efforts to engender support and agreement from management authorities for the creation of aquaculture-free zones has not been successful. ASF carried out the outreach, met with provincial authorities, and discussed the concept. Clearly in Atlantic Canada the provinces are prepared to support expanded salmon aquaculture operations:

1. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador continues to explicitly plan to expand the footprint of ONP salmon farming, and recently announced four expressions of interest in expanding locations in SW Newfoundland.
2. The government of Nova Scotia created the Aquaculture Review Board as an arms-length process to advise government on industry operations but has only recently announced hearings into long-standing industry complaints. The current provincial Minister believes the ONP industry and wild salmon abundance can co-exist.
3. The government of New Brunswick developed a new Aquaculture Act that did not adequately make change to effectively regulate the industry.

### **Goal #4 – Improve Freshwater Connectivity and Productivity**

Good progress has been made for this Goal.

ASF is certainly On Track on improving fish passage, particularly in Maine under our US Programs.

The conceptual engineering layout for the Alaskan steppass fishway and needed dam repairs at Branch Pond Dam was completed. ASF initiated a final design contract with Kleinschmidt in

January. A construction design package will be completed over the next few months, followed by permit applications and identification of a contractor for construction (2022). Once completed, 325 acres of river herring spawning habitat and 9 stream miles will be reconnected to the Sheepscot River. Construction of the Walton's Mill Dam Removal Project on Temple Stream in the Kennebec watershed and the Baskahegan Fishway Project in the Penobscot watershed have been pushed back to 2022. Although multiple grants have been secured, these projects are the two most expensive projects of the Maine Headwaters project in the last two decades, and timing of grant applications and results do not line up with the need to sign contracts for 2021. For the Baskahegan fishway, ASF is working to reduce construction costs through design changes.

The situation with power dams on the Kennebec river in Maine is moving quickly. The Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) proposed a major Amendment to the State's Kennebec River Management Plan including removing two dams but made a procedural error and has decided to start the process over instead of being taken to court by Brookfield Power. Please see the International and Government Affairs report for a more fulsome accounting of the current situation.

Much progress has been made on the concept of Wild Salmon Watersheds as well as minimizing and eliminating impacts of land-use practices on freshwater systems. Geoff Giffin has been working on the concept, developing the approach through conducting the background research and environmental scan, and speaking with key and trusted contacts across the salmo-scape for opinions, guidance, ideas, and concerns. A presentation is planned for the Board meeting on 6 May 2021.

We continue discussions regarding ASF's involvement in a planned review of the New Brunswick's *Crown Lands and Forests Act* including buffer zones. ASF continues to engage with the Province of New Brunswick on the expansion of provincial protected areas from 4% to 10%. ASF's proposal to government included additional known cold-water sources across the province as part of the expanded protected areas. After several rounds of announcements delineating the additional protected areas, ASF is very pleased with the results that provide significant expansions of protections for headwaters streams of salmon rivers.

Commented [RO1]: Confirm with Nathan

The Miramichi Lake smallmouth bass eradication project has reached the key point. In ASF's opinion the eradication must occur in 2021 or the prospect of success declines significantly. At the time of writing, we are extremely hopeful that both provincial (Environmental Assessment) and federal (Aquatic Invasive species) permits will be issued in the coming days. Both levels of government are acutely aware of the lead time of the proponent and ASF necessary to complete the eradication in August and September of this year. If there is any further delay in issuing permits, the entire eradication is at risk of not proceeding. ASF continues to apply for other various and required permits, and we have been made aware that Canada has approved the proponent's funding request for a 5-year post-eradication monitoring program. The working group (all supporting groups) assisting the proponent have started the operations

planning to deliver the eradication program, with a presentation scheduled at the Board meeting on 6 May 2021.

### Miramichi Program

Smallmouth bass and Miramichi Lake – See brief overview above.

Smolt estimates – ASF, Miramichi Salmon Association (MSA), and NSMDC (Anqotum Natural Resources) undertook smolt captures in the LSW and NW Miramichi rivers in May 2020 to perform a mark-recapture estimate of smolt abundance in the spring smolt run. The smolt estimate for the LSW Miramichi river in 2019 was 66,000, very much on par with estimates from 2005 to 2011 that ranged from a low of 48,000 to as high as 138,000. For 2020 the estimate for the LSW Miramichi was problematic to calculate given the high number of smolt captured, the low trap efficiency, and the possibility of mis-identified tagged smolts. The estimate of 200,500 is unreliable and needs to be interpreted with caution due to high sensitivity to number of recaptures in the sample. Results for the NW Miramichi were very good with a high trap efficiency and high precision of the estimate. The estimated smolt run from the NW was 20200.

Commented [RO2]: How does this compare to previously?

Striped Bass – Recreational angling regulations for striped bass for 2021 contain no changes from previous years. As in previous years ASF has advocated for increasing the slot limit to 80cm maximum size, and allowing the retention of all striped bass, regardless of size, angled above head of tide. We expect no changes to the First Nations fishery (slot size increased to 50-80 cm in 2019). The latest (2019) estimate of the spawning striped bass population is 314,000, down from an estimate of 335,000 in 2018 and 995,000 in 2017. Due to Covid-19 and limitations on DFO's field program in 2020, they were unable to estimate striped bass numbers for 2020. ASF has already begun discussions with DFO on needed changes to the 2021 recreational management program for stripers.

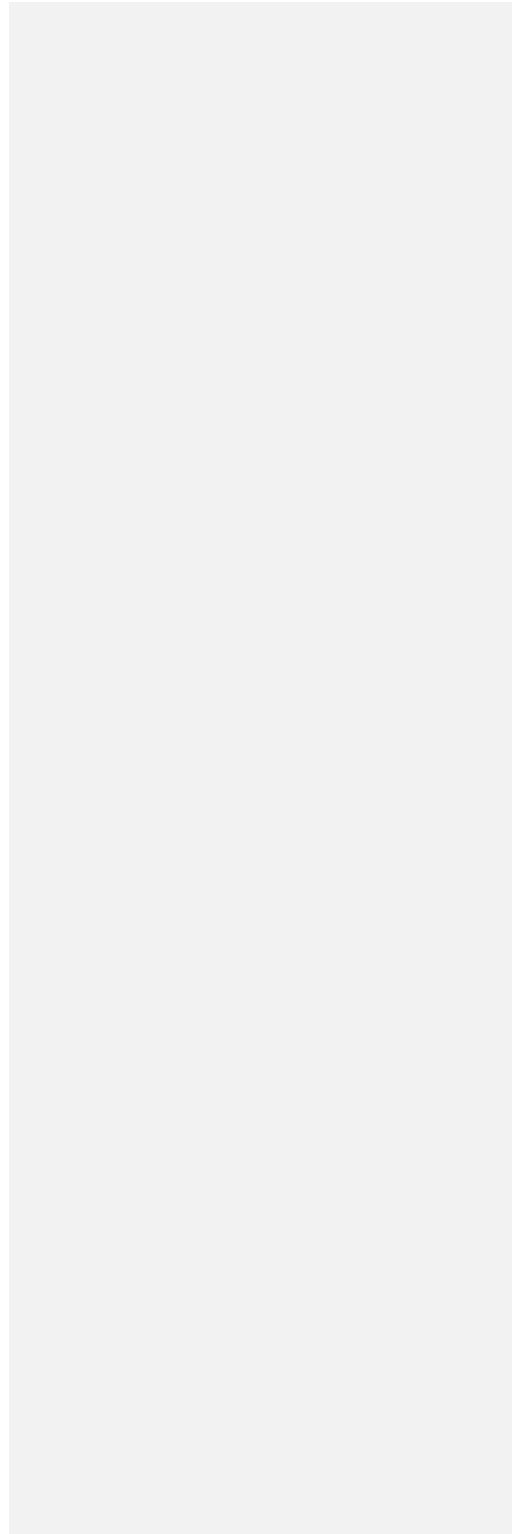
Cold-water Refugia - ASF, MSA, the North Shore Micmac District Council, Anqotum, and the University of New Brunswick have teamed up to enhance cold water pools to provide better thermal refugia for salmon during warm summer periods. Over the next 3 years, 9-11 sites will be enhanced. This is a \$1 million, multi-year program and we have been successful in receiving significant federal grant funding. The project has begun in 2020 with the first 3 sites surveyed and designed: Wildcat Brook (NW Miramichi), McKenzie Brook (SW Miramichi), and Sutherland Brook (NW Miramichi).

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Wildcat Brook and McKenzie Brook were completed in 2020. A rare plant found at the Sutherland Brook site precluded the construction. Two sites underwent initial survey in autumn 2020 and are scheduled for completion in 2021 (Morse Brook and Grey Rapids both on SW Miramichi), with another to be identified, surveyed, and completed in 2021. In addition to

Canada Nature Fund primary funding, the project received \$20k from Atlantic Salmon Conservation Foundation to help with construction costs.



## Appendix 1 – Assessment of 2018-19 Strategic Mileposts in Support of ASF Blueprint

A “stoplight” approach is being used to monitor and report on progress of the Blueprint:

- **Green** – On track; good progress being made consistent with plan
- **Yellow** – Some progress being made; needs attention to avoid falling behind planned targets
- **Red** – Little progress; requires focused effort to get back on planned track

The reporting structure below within each of the four goals in the Blueprint follows this example:

### Blueprint Activity

*Blueprint Outcome/Output*

#### Milepost

Each Activity of the Strategic Plan (SP) is included in the assessment below. We gauged progress against each of the Outcomes / Outputs associated with the various Activities from the Strategic Plan (multi-year) by determining Mileposts for the 2019-20 ASF fiscal year (annual) that move us substantially toward our targets. Each Milepost was included in at least one of the Operations Departments (Regional Programs, Research and Environment, Communications, and Outreach and Engagement) workplans for 2019-20 and will be for 2020-21.

### Goal #1 – Ensure Fisheries are Sustainable

- **Pursue and maintain conservation agreements for Greenland and Faroes commercial WAS fishery.**

*Signed agreement to suspend commercial fisheries.*

**COMPLETED**

- **Advocate to Canada, USA, and Greenland to set a low annual subsistence quota for Greenland through NASCO that is consistent with scientific advice (ICES), including reliable monitoring and reporting systems.**

*Greenland implements an annual limit on their subsistence fishery and introduces effective monitoring/reporting of catch for the Greenland subsistence harvest.*

**Good Progress**

- **ASF actively engages communities and fishers in Greenland in salmon research.**

*Build sense of cooperation with other WAS conservation partners.*

**Good Progress**

- **Establish and develop strong and productive working relationships with leading First Nations (FN) as partners in conservation.**

*A well-established network of contacts in select FN communities and aboriginal groups throughout the regions through which ASF can regularly connect and share information;*

Good Progress

*FNs have the opportunity to showcase how they value the resource.* Some Progress

*Invitations to attend meetings on WAS conservation as a trusted partner, including First Nations, DFO, and the Province of Quebec.* Good Progress

- **Increased engagement and direct involvement of FN in salmon research, including joint research projects that bring real benefits to FN communities.**

*Develop a sense of partnership in defining and understanding salmon conservation issues of mutual interest through the application of both traditional knowledge and scientific methods of understanding.* Some Progress

*Direct and meaningful inclusion of Indigenous people (e.g., placements, cooperative work and training opportunities) in ASF research and conservation activities.*

Good Progress

- **Actively advocate for, where abundance permits and is agreeable by FN communities, alternative species (e.g., striped bass, snow crab, lobster) substitution for salmon in FN fisheries.**

*Increasing FN harvest of alternate fish species with a corresponding decrease in salmon harvest.* Little Progress

Adjustment / Pivot: Continue to support FN harvests in other fisheries, but ASF cannot effectively advocate for corresponding decreases in FSC salmon fisheries.

- **Actively participate in DFO's Working Group to develop implementation plans for the recently (2017) revised WAS Conservation Policy. These plans must respect new inputs available since the WASCP was first drafted in 2009 (MAC recommendations, DFO Forward Plan, Standing Committee recommendations and Minister's response).**

*A clearly defined policy and regionally based and focused implementation plans for conservation and restoration of WAS based on the Precautionary Approach.*

COMPLETED



*A single policy document with detailed implementation plans that will be presented to ASAC in spring 2019 and reviewed every two years going forward; number of ideas and suggestions adopted by Working Group* **Good Progress**

- **Advocate to and work with the appropriate management agencies to institute river-specific recreational angling through the Precautionary Approach (PA) framework in all WAS recreational fishery regions.**

*Sustainable, abundance-based harvest levels and fishery management plans based on the Precautionary Approach;* **Some Progress**

*Increased sustainability in other fisheries (i.e., First Nations, Greenland, SPM).* **Good Progress**

*Additional rivers and regions selected for use of Precautionary Approach in Gulf Region, as well as Maritimes and Newfoundland and Labrador.* **Little Progress**

Adjustment / Pivot: DFO has selected the Miramichi as a pilot site for establishing the PA. Until that project is completed and implemented (ASF is part of that working group with DFO) this outcome, and work in support of it, is paused.

- **Advocate for and participate as appropriate with management agencies to expand river-specific monitoring, stock assessment, in-season review(s) and fishery/harvest management.**

*Abundance-based harvest levels (Precautionary Approach); Expand existing index river monitoring;* **Some Progress**

*Increased accuracy and precision of assessments through new approaches, partnerships, and technologies;* **Little Progress**

*New index rivers established in key/under-represented areas;* **Little Progress**

*Improved catch reporting and statistics in all Provinces, including expansion of electronic systems* **Little Progress**

Adjustment / Pivot: DFO is limited at least by budget and will not on their own expand the number of index rivers or monitoring sites. Covid has resulted in DFO struggling to maintain their existing portfolio of sites. ASF will work through our Wild Salmon Watersheds program to achieve these outcomes.

## **Goal #2 – Understand Salmon Mortality - Tracking Programs**

- **Expand tracking within GoSL, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Greenland, both in types and numbers of tags and receiver arrays / positions through ASF and partnered programs.**

*Determine specific spatial distributions in the marine environment throughout their residency (i.e. from the time they leave freshwater to their return from Labrador Sea and Greenland); Determine migration success through defined stages of the marine migration.*

Some Progress

- **Preparation and publication of peer-reviewed manuscripts and technical reports through in-house research staff and other partnerships; ensure circulation to Councils, affiliates, partners and other interested groups and availability of all materials on the ASF website.**

*Peer-reviewed publications; presentations at conferences and symposia; internal / field report series established.*

Good Progress

- **Analyze results from tracking programs with known patterns of oceanographic and environmental conditions.**

*Determine why fish are detected where they are and when they are there. We do this by comparing/contrasting biotic and abiotic variables from locations where fish are and where fish aren't to infer what type of factors determine their marine distribution; Determine how annual variation in identified biotic and abiotic predictors of the marine distribution of Atlantic salmon covary with migration success through different migration stages.*

Engage with various institutions to scope out next steps for linking ASF tracking data with physical and biological oceanographic features.

Good Progress

- **Advocate to the relevant management agencies in Canada and the USA, as well as NASCO to implement effective mitigation measures to protect and conserve WAS in coastal and marine ecosystems.**

*Minimize unintended population-level impacts on WAS.*

Seek out partnerships and R&D opportunities for novel technologies that will advance our understanding of spatial and temporal distribution of salmon in the marine environment.

Good Progress

Advising on policy development to conserve and protect wild Atlantic salmon.

Some Progress

Respond to ASF science needs. Conduct reviews and assessments, work with councils and affiliates, speaking engagements.

Good Progress

### Goal #3 – Contain and Reduce Impacts of Open Net-Pen Salmon Aquaculture

- **Engage with appropriate partners to ensure ASF contributes to the potential development of a federal Aquaculture Act, and to the strengthening of the Fisheries Act and associated regulations and policies resulting in an appropriate legislative framework to better protect WAS from impacts of the salmon aquaculture industry.**

*Any development of an Aquaculture Act contains provisions to protect WAS populations and focuses on industry best practices and strong regulation and enforcement.*

Some Progress

*Inclusion of protections from aquaculture industry in Fisheries Act legislation and associated regulations, policies and codes of practice.*

Good Progress

- **Advocate for the creation of ONP salmon aquaculture-free zones based on current distribution of aquaculture sites, areas suitable for industry expansion, and WAS rivers; integrate with efforts to establish protected WAS watersheds.**

*Agreement and support from appropriate management authorities on concept of aquaculture free zones.*

Little Progress

Adjustment / Pivot: ASF will continue to work to eliminate impacts of ONP aquaculture through our advocacy and legal options as necessary, but we should not continue expending any money and time to establish aquaculture-free zones in collaboration with provincial governments in Atlantic Canada.

Commented [R05]: fix wording

### Goal #4 – Improve Freshwater Connectivity and Productivity

- **Advocate for and support establishment of wild WAS watersheds where WAS populations can flourish.**

*Identify candidate watersheds; Identify stakeholders and prepare communication plan.*

Good Progress

*Introduce concept to stakeholders; Determine levels of support and main challenges; Collaborate with stakeholders to achieve as many common targets as possible.*

Good Progress

- **Work in coalitions to address the impacts of hydropower and non-hydropower dams through removals, better upstream and downstream fish passes, and improved policy, regulations and license requirements that improve flows for fish.**

*Further progress to eliminate barriers to fish passage, particularly in N.E. USA;*

Good Progress

*Update inventory of barriers to fish passage in Atlantic Canada and Quebec, coordinated with Councils and local affiliates.*

Little Progress

Adjustment / Pivot: This is a huge effort to complete and is currently not a high priority to complete. ASF and partners will work to remove any barriers, as necessary.

*Improved access to river and lake habitats;*

Good Progress

*Increased knowledge of barriers limiting freshwater production of WAS;*

Good Progress

*Increased production potential of WAS in high quality habitat where fish passage is improved;*

Good Progress

*Increased resilience of watersheds to climate change;*

Good Progress

*Increased populations of other species salmon depend on such as river herring and shad.*

Good Progress

- **Advocate to the appropriate agencies for stricter licensing processes and consultations during planning and design phases of new hydro dams.**

*Intervention in license, legal, and regulatory procedures.*

Good Progress

*ASF, Councils, and affiliates play key collaborative role in all discussions regarding new licensing for proposed and existing hydro dams, ensuring that the needs of functional fish passage facilities for WAS are a top priority to be addressed by proponents and regulators.*

Good Progress

- **Further develop and promote the content in ASF's WAS Freshwater Recovery Strategy to make it more consumable by affiliates, watershed and FN groups conducting habitat restoration programs.**

*Materials and documentation readily available and updated as needed on ASF's website to assist and guide groups that are planning WAS restoration work in their watershed(s); Meetings with, presentations to Councils, Affiliates and other conservation groups to highlight value of the Strategy; Expert advice given to groups and collaborative efforts to restore and improve freshwater productivity based on the tenets of the Strategy.*

Some Progress

*WAS freshwater conservation and restoration activities follow guidance provided by the Strategy.*

Good Progress

- **Encourage and actively support identifying land-use issues in all regions that impact WAS and use results to guide focused, collaborative regional advocacy and restoration efforts.**

*Regional advocacy plans to address prioritized land-use impacts on WAS.* **Little Progress**

Adjustment / Pivot: Developing these plans is currently not a high priority to complete. ASF and partners will continue to work and solve land use impacts on WAS as they become known to us.

- **Support and undertake baseline requirements, help to secure funding sources, and ensure all permitting is completed for smallmouth bass (SMB) eradication from Miramichi Lake by 2019, and similarly for any other invasive species threats that arise.**

*Proponent is identified for eradication program;* **COMPLETED**

*Permits obtained, consultations undertaken, funding secured;* **Some Progress**

*Physical infrastructure for eradication activities in place.* **Some Progress**

*SMB eradication completed by September 2020.* **NOT POSSIBLE**