

SOUTH WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Tuesday, 30 September 2014 – Coulin Lodge, Kinlochewe, 10:30

MINUTES

Present:

Philip Smith (Chair), Mark Pattinson (Treasurer), Diana Jordan (Secretary), Gillian Pattinson, Richard Curzon, Shaun MacDonald, Tom Chetwynd, Richard Munday, Neil Morrison, Mary Gibson (SNH), Sinclair Coghill (SNH), Andrew Simpson, Jeremy Stephenson, David Mackenzie, Archie Maclellan, Colin Murdoch, Hugh Tollemache, Rosie Tollemache, Maj Tom Wills, Judge Alison Raeside, Willie Fraser, Prof Rory Putman.

1. Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, acknowledging the large attendance. He introduced new group secretary, Diana Jordan of CKD Galbraith (Inverness), and thanked Sinclair Coghill (SNH) and Prof Rory Putman for being present to discuss the new Deer Management Benchmark Assessment and the revision of the Deer Management Plan respectively.

He explained that a new members' list had been produced and would be circulated at the end of the meeting. Amended lists should be submitted to the Secretary who would circulate an updated list to the Group in due course.

Mr Smith advised that he had been provided with maps from SNH showing individual marches, and asked that members could check these and advise him of any amendments or additions.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Andrew Cope, Mark Adams, Kurt Larson and Russell Cooper (FCS).

3. Minutes of previous meeting

- i. **Spring Deer Count Figures:** The collation and submission of deer counts will be essential going forward due to the DMG Benchmark Assessment process, and plans should be made to share counts. It was noted that the word 'Stages' should be corrected to read 'Stags' in the previous Minutes.
- ii. **Signage:** This will now be incorporated into the Benchmark Assessment process.
- iii. **Chairmanship:** Mr Smith reported that he had now held the Chairman's position for circa 5 years, and highlighted the benefit of the Chairmanship being rotated within the DMG in order to achieve different perspectives and fresh ideas. He asked that if anyone felt willing and able to take on the role of Chairman they should advise him.

4. Spring Deer Count Figures

The importance of deer count figures being returned to both SNH and the group Secretary was stressed to ensure thorough recording. It was considered sensible to delay stag counting until the end of the stag season.

5. Finance

The Treasurer provided a brief resume of the 2013/2014 accounts.

An opening balance of £1,560 was reported, with receipts of £2,212 (incorporating subscriptions of £1,212 and a donation of £1,000 from the Mountain Marathon event).

Expenditure of the annual ADMG subscription (£873) and secretarial fees (£600) resulted in a closing balance of £2,298. This represented an increase of £700 on the previous year's opening balance.

Anticipated future expenditure will involve increased secretarial costs (circa £800 + expenses), together with the cost of the new Deer Management Plan. The cost of a new DMP could reach circa £12,500, although funding of 50% towards the cost of the plan can be applied for from SNH. Prof Putman advised that the net cost to the DMG after the SNH grant would be in the region of £6,000.

6. Deer Management Group Benchmark Assessment

Sinclair Coghill provided a detailed explanation of the DMG Benchmark Assessment and Delivering Public Interest exercise, and how it was initiated following a Rural Affairs Committee request for evidence. The outcome was that voluntary deer management could work, but that targets and expectations should be set for DMGs to achieve. The Scottish Government agreed with this recommendation.

SNH are working closely with DMGs to identify their current and possible future positions on deer management. The DMG can choose how much they are able/willing to deliver, and how many elements they can meet. However, there is the concern that if DMGs are seen as unable to deliver, it is likely that a more regulated environment will be implemented.

SNH have been awarded £100,000 over the next two years (£50,000 each financial year) to assist with development costs for the 48 voluntary DMGs to meet the new Benchmark Assessment standards. SNH can offer 50% towards a DMG's costs of developing/revising a DMP, with the DMG matching that funding.

It is unlikely that the £100,000 for the 2014/15 financial year will be called upon fully, which provides an opportunity to apply early for available funds. It is envisaged most groups will call upon the funds in the 2015/16 financial year.

Mr Coghill stressed that in order to qualify for such funding, the DMG would require to be a constituted group with a bank balance. It is therefore necessary for the group to action this, by sourcing an appropriate constitution template to adapt to its own needs, in order to meet this requirement.

Prof Rory Putman pointed out that there are areas which don't have a DMG or where estates are not members of a DMG. Therefore, simply upgrading standards in 48 groups does not necessarily improve deer management across the board, and the Assessment targets areas where Scottish Government has interest, ie designated sites. He continued that whilst upland DMGs are doing well, lowland areas are not necessarily managed and there may be gaps in coverage. This may increase the risk of the Scottish Government deciding that voluntary management is not delivering and ineffective. He is aware that the Rural Affairs Committee

may already be taking advice or seeking information on alternative methods of deer management.

Mr Coghill explained that the Benchmark Assessment matrix has now been completed following a previous meeting with the Chairman and Secretary, and that the assessment outcomes have been colour-coded to reflect their current status:

- Green illustrates that the DMG has delivered on an objective;
- Yellow illustrates that the objective has been partially met or variable in quality;
- Red indicates that the DMG is not yet seen to be delivering upon an objective/element.

It was pointed out, however, that following the revision and update of the group's DMP, many of the yellow or red coded outcomes are likely to be upgraded to yellow/green, as the plan will be developed with the new benchmark standards and objectives in mind.

The Benchmark Assessment matrix was explained to the group. The assessment focuses on the operation of the DMG, and elements involved include:

- Areas and boundaries, including identification of boundaries and definition of sub-populations.
- Membership: This should not only include private/public landowners, but should, where possible, include agricultural occupiers, crofters, forest owners, etc. Inclusion is seen to be key. The Chairman asked that if anyone knew any landowners, crofting representatives, or members of the Lochcarron Community Council, they should advise him.
- Meetings: Regular attendance is encouraged with at least two meetings per year, with potential sub-group meetings.
- Self-Assessment, whereby the DMG audits and polices itself internally.
- Deer Management Plans, to cover land management objectives, population modelling, the use of maps, illustrative data and public access. The plan can be made available to the public by whichever arrangements are determined by the DMG. It is an objective that members should be inclusive in the plan development process.
- The endorsement of the Code of Practice.
- Collaboration with ADMG and their principles.
- Best practice.
- Accurate deer counting to be incorporated into data management. Prof Putman generously offered to donate one day a year to the group to assess the implications of the counts and undertake any population modelling that is required. This was accepted and agreed.
- Habitat Monitoring, involving a standardised method. A training day in habitat assessment will be offered to members by SNH in the spring, on a date to be agreed and advised to Mr Coghill in due course. Mr Coghill explained that resource availability made it difficult for SNH to visit individual estates.
- Competence, whereby it is recommended that in addition to DSC1 as a basic standard, deer managers should also work towards attaining DSC2 or equivalent.
- Training: A training policy should be in place and competence demonstrated, though it was noted that a brief statement within the DMP outlining this area should be sufficient.
- Membership of Scottish Quality Wild Venison scheme (SQWV) is recommended.
- Communication, again encouraging the accessibility of the DMP and active communication to external parties, ie Community Council, MSP, interest groups, etc.

Mr Coghill went on to discuss the various elements incorporated within the Delivering Public Interest matrix. These include:

- Developing a mechanism to manage deer, including the carrying out of the Benchmark Assessment, production of an effective DMP and developing a series of actions for implementation.
- Actions for the delivery of designated features into favourable condition.
- Actions to manage deer to retain existing native woodland cover and improve woodland condition.
- Demonstrating contribution to the Scottish Government woodland expansion target, ie what has been done to quantify the current position and what is planned in the future?
- Managing deer impacts in the wider countryside.
- Actions for ability to store carbon.
- Reducing or mitigating the risk of invasive species.
- Protecting historic and cultural features.
- Delivering higher standards of competence in deer management (ie identifying training and development, promoting training and ensuring standards of competence).

It was queried whether the Assessment was mandatory and that the DMG was obliged to sign up to it. It was generally agreed that if the voluntary process was not gone through, there may be heavier regulation in the future. It was also considered useful as a self-assessment process.

Prof Putman advised that much of the foregoing will be achieved within the Deer Management Plan and in collaboration with individual estate owners. He advised that DMGs should provide the best model that they are able, but that, politically, the future of deer management is outwith DMG control. He stressed, however, that to have a good plan in place will mean a lighter hand from the Scottish Government.

Prof Putman will devise and circulate a more user-friendly version of the assessment matrices to the group for their future reference, and requested that he see the completed assessment prior to wider circulation within the group. This was agreed, and will be passed to him by Mr Coghill.

He will also develop a simple checklist of questions to assist in the collation of information for the DMG. This will be circulate to individual estate members and coordinate by Prof Putman and the Secretary.

7. Deer Management Plan

Prof Rory Putman outlined the way forward for the group's Deer Management Plan (DMP).

The current DMP expires this year, and therefore a new 10 year plan will be required. He anticipates that this will combine a detailed plan for the first five years together with an indicative plan for the latter five years.

Whilst the exercise will be a revision to the existing plan (which was fit for purpose at the time of its creation), producing the new plan will be a more complex process, rather than a simple update. Property ownerships will have changed and, in light of the DMG Benchmark Assessment, there will be more standards to meet and additional requirements to embrace,

although some will be higher priority than others. There is now, however, clearer instruction as to what is required of a DMP.

It is envisaged that individual deer management elements of existing individual estate management plans could be combined into one plan to maximise benefit and minimise conflicts. This will involve talking to owners on an individual basis and convening meetings of smaller sub-groups in certain locales. It will require a great deal of commitment and will make demands upon people's time. The exercise will not, however, require as much inspection and survey work as the previous plan, as Prof Putman is familiar with much of the ground.

He will include mapping wherever possible and prepared tables of action points/targets for each estate, which will provide an audit tool for each estate.

He stressed the importance that the DMP is fit for purpose in order to not only satisfy SNH and the Scottish Government, but to inform collective management going forward.

Prof Putman outlined anticipated timetable whereby the plan would be produced by late February/early March 2015, with meetings with individual estates from now until the end of January 2015.

8. Pony Paths & Mountain Bikes

Mr Duncan Gray highlighted the increasing issue of mountain biking on stalking paths in the area and the resultant damage. Such damage is not restricted to the paths, but also extends beyond the path line by cyclists avoiding obstructions, such as bogs or rocks.

With the authority of the Scottish Government's Right of Access rules, there is increasing mountain bike traffic on estate paths, often with paths referred to as 'trails' by biking enthusiasts. Some paths in the Torridon area are advertised as "the finest wild trails in the UK" and therefore attract a high volume of traffic. Mountain biking is an evolving sport and it is important that paths are protected and managed appropriately when used for a sport which is growing exponentially.

It was suggested that SNH and/or the Access Forum should collaborate with DMGs to develop plans for management of these paths, and discern whether they are suitable or indeed economic for public use. It was also questioned as to where the responsibility for such built heritage lies.

Mary Gibson confirmed that this was an issue that had been identified elsewhere and raised through the National Access Forum, and that the use of advisory signage, management agreements or the Listing process could be answers to resolving the issue. She advised that landowners should monitor their paths to identify which are being used, and by whom.

Organisations can be enthusiastic to contribute to the costs of path upkeep. For example, the Wester Ross Footpath Trust has costs met by The Highland Council, SNH and the Mountain Trust, all contributing a third of the funds. It should be noted that although there may be income from mountain bike traffic, this should be looked at in context of income lost from walkers no longer wishing to use the paths due to increased bike traffic.

It was decided that some form of consultation should be instigated.

Archie Maclellan advised that the Ross-shire Access Group would be meeting on Thursday, 16 October, and that he could feed any comments in to that meeting on behalf of the DMG.

Each Estate is to monitor the use of and impact upon their paths and report back. This information can then be collated on behalf of the group.

9. AOCB

There was no other business. However, acknowledgement and thanks were offered to Prof Putman for the work and advice he will be providing in relation to the DMP and group activities.

10. Date of the next meeting

The date of the next meeting will be Friday, 29 May 2015, at a venue to be decided. Potential venues are Lochcarron Village Hall or at Kishorn.