

**SOUTH WEST ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP
MEETING
Friday, 29 May 2015 – Lochcarron Village Hall, Ross-shire, 10:30**

MINUTES

Present:

Philip Smith (Chairman), Mark Pattinson (Treasurer), Diana Jordan (Secretary), David Abraham, Russell Cooper, Andrew Cope, Richard Curzon, Nick Dalgety, Mary Gibson, Charlie Hill, Chris Mackenzie, David Mackenzie, Archie McLellan, Neil Morrison, Richard Munday, Colin Murdoch, Gillian Pattinson, Rory Putman, Mark Raeside, Alex Raeside, Mary Smith, Simon Stewart

1. Welcome

The Chairman opened the meeting at 10:30 and welcomed those in attendance.

2. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Hugh Tollemache, Mark Adams, Kurt Larson, Richard Wills, Shaun Macdonald, Sinclair Coghill, Tom Chetwynd and Duncan Gray.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 30 September 2014

Richard Curzon has been added to the list of attendees at the meeting, having been previously omitted.

4. Spring Deer Count

Although it is encouraging that there appears to be a higher number of stags, the overall picture is depressed by a significant drop in numbers of hinds and calves counted, and an indication of high winter mortality. Weather has been an issue with counts across the board.

Gillian Pattinson undertook a count on a particularly wet day and deer were difficult to count, with the majority counted in Kinlochdamph woodlands, and low numbers of hinds/calves noted.

Richard Munday reported that the count had to be called off due to weather, though a proper count is hoped for. He reported a rise in the number of stags, though not necessarily in good condition.

Coulin Estate had counted over three days. Their numbers included 20 dead hinds, not just on hill ground, but also in woodland areas. It is suspected that the level of mortality is due to the hard winter and the particularly heavy rains during March, together with nasal bot fly also being identified in some carcasses.

Applecross also reported that weather prevented a count being undertaken.

5. Fire Service

The Chairman welcomed Alistair Jupp and Martin Butcher of Fire Scotland. Mr Jupp oversees the 14 fire stations in the area, from Kyle to Gairloch, including Skye and Lochalsh.

Fire Scotland are keen to collate estate plans so that they can be scanned electronically for immediate access via the on-board computers now present on fire engines in case of an incident. It would also be helpful for Fire Scotland to hold a list of 'assets' for each estate, ie available personnel, beaters, details of argos/ATVs, contact names, and availability of helicopter access. Essentially this will provide up-to-date plans and resources related to vulnerable woodlands in the area. Any information can be forwarded to Fire Scotland via the DMG secretary.

Prof Putman advised that much of the required information would be produced as part of the DMP, which is due for completion in the near future and which would show all woodlands (native, amenity and commercial), together with designated sites. He could co-ordinate this for Fire Scotland, together with knowledge of available water courses, access to vehicles, etc.

It was pointed out that many estates have their own fire plans submitted to Fire Scotland outlining such information/resources, and which are reviewed on a regular basis. Such plans should be encouraged, and, at least, an 'in the event of fire' contact should be provided.

Mr Jupp also advised that where controlled burns are carried out, these should be phoned through to Inverness Control, on 01463 240999.

6. Cull Returns

The Chairman reminded all present to submit their annual returns to SNH, if not already done so, and to provide the DMG secretary with a copy of cull figures to collate for ADMG.

7. Finances

The Treasurer reported a current balance of £1,456.54.

He advised that the cost of the Deer Management Plan (DMP) will be £12,500. A contribution of £6,250 is anticipated from SNH, whilst the remaining £6,250 will be met by DMG member contributions. The Chairman had kindly settled Prof Putman's interim fee direct.

He reported that a breakdown of stag cull numbers had been provided by SNH for the past five years and that this had been used as the basis for calculating an average contribution from each estate. At present, this does not include an FES contribution, which would subsequently reduce the costs to all estates. The Chairman reported that FES are now to contribute direct to the DMG within which they have an interest, rather than to the ADMG, and that he would discuss the level of contribution with Russell Cooper.

The Treasurer advised that once calculations had been finalised, invoices would be issued to the estates over the coming months and prior to the AGM.

8. ADMG AGM & Seminar

The Treasurer attended the ADMG AGM in March and reported no major issues. He also attended a subsequent seminar at which deer management plans were discussed, and reported that South West Ross DMG appear well ahead of schedule compared to other DMGs, with some groups having not yet started work on their plans.

9. Deer Management Plan and Associated Issues

Following his circulation of the draft DMP, Prof Putman provided a further progress report.

He explained that funding goalposts had changed from that originally set out by the Government. Originally it was proposed that £100,000 would be made available to DMGs in the 2014/2015 financial year for preparation of DMPs, followed by a further tranche of £100,000 in the 2015/16 financial year. However, SNH did not actually get the application procedure for access to funding completed in time and few DMGs commenced their plans in 2014/15, with most now falling into the 2015/16 bracket. Therefore, the monies set aside for 2014/15 have been rolled forward to that financial year. South West Ross DMG started before many groups and are reasonably well ahead in the production of their plan.

Within SW Ross, the bulk of negotiation with individual estates had now been completed, though there are some areas of the plan still to complete in both the sections relating to individual estates and the Group sections. In particular, there is still some collation of information to undertake, (eg area of commercial and native woodland on each estate). Therefore, for those who still have information to provide to Prof Putman, they should do so as soon as possible, and to fill in any gaps in the draft plan for their respective estates, especially in relation to the summary tables circulated.

Prof Putman stressed that any comments/additions/amendments should be advised to him as soon as possible, as the plan, though not yet submitted, is in its final draft stages.

He also explained the much larger component for group collaborative initiatives and public interest elements within the scope of the new Benchmark DMP. He has written a draft outline summarising public benefits delivered by the DMG, and also listing actions which must be taken by the group (and individual group members) to deliver those additional requirements now demanded by Scottish Government. He stressed that this was not a mere paper exercise and would commit members to deliver those actions and undertakings. Therefore, it is crucial for all to comment on the Group sections of the draft Plan (notably Section D) as well as sections on individual Estates (Sections B and C) and offer any additions or amendments, as it is important to get right at the outset. All should be aware of what they are being signed up to.

Mary Gibson reiterated the need to ensure demonstration of public interest actions and show evidence of progressing their delivery. She advised that there is support available from SNH and that the organisation can assist with delivering group actions via the Environmental Collaboration Action Fund.

Comment was made that DMP was an essential tool for estate management, and that, irrespective of politics, it is not simply a Government exercise, as it informs future estate management.

It is accepted that the public interest benchmarks won't necessarily be delivered overnight, but that it is about the DMG members being seen as working towards achieving those benchmarks.

Inclusiveness is also a key element, with representatives of community organisations being invited to meetings, and collaboration with local schools, for example. The Chairman confirmed that the chair of the local Community Council had been invited to the meeting, but had been unable to attend.

It was also noted that the community forester for Kirkton woodlands should be contacted and approached for future attendance, input and liaison.

The issue of an owner not agreeing to plan was broached and what might be the actual implications if Groups failed to deliver an acceptable Plan by August 2016. The meeting also discussed how, even within the context of an agreed plan, wider neighbour issues could be dealt with. Prof Putman commented that the essence of deer management being in the voluntary sector is that issues should largely be settled in a gentlemanly fashion via discussion in an environment such as the DMG.

There was subsequent discussion as to how to deal with deer in woodlands and the investment in keeping deer fences in good condition. In reference to Kirkton woodlands, where it was commented that there should be a priority to improve fencing, it is understood that re-fencing was planned after felling and harvesting had taken place. FES are 100% in agreement with signing-up to DMPs at all levels and plans would not be disregarded.

On the raised subject of deer incursion, FES had produced a policy and that, whilst historically deer may have been shot having strayed into FES land, there is now a more enlightened approach with every attempt made to drive out deer from these areas. Where there is a boundary fence, they would look for it to be a shared resource. The extremes are where fences are removed by one neighbour. It is rarely an FCS fence, being usually defined legally as a 50:50 stock fence. If a boundary is to be 'deer fenced' there should be negotiation as to responsibilities and should be an indication of responsibility within the title deeds.

In areas of recently established native woodlands, zero tolerance might also be the appropriate deer management strategy, but, even here, goodwill and regular communication with neighbours about incursions could often result in mutually acceptable solutions.

It was asked who would assess the DMP benchmarks and plans. Originally it was to be an independent party, but now ultimately SNH will assess these areas. Prof Putman will devise an 'audit' sheet for each

estate of annual actions and expectations, itemised year by year, to help adherence to the benchmarks and outcomes.

Andrew Cope asked if there was a definition of 'good' within the benchmark assessment, and what the expected level would be. Prof Putman advised that estates can only be assessed against their own self-appointed/approved goals and that he would be available help in the assessment of delivery of those goals.

Mr Cope further asked if there was a consequence of doing nothing. It was felt that there was an unspecified threat of what may happen in such circumstances, but it should be considered that an important reason for the DMP is future proofing estates, as well as being a shop window of what is already being achieved.

Mr Curzon added that he had attended a meeting where SNH spoke to landowners/stalkers and there was significant frustration in the room with SNH unable to answer many questions posed on the subject.

Mary Gibson highlighted that key areas within the plan remain, such as adherence to muirburn, dealing with RTAs, etc, and that SNH were happy to organise habitat training days to inform/meet benchmark expectations. It would be useful to organise a programme so that a representative from every estate has attended such a training day, and Neil Morrison of Coulin reported that he had attended such a day, and had found it useful and informative.

The concern was raised that if one DMG fails the process, it would have a knock-on effect to other groups long-term with more stringent regulations being imposed. However, Prof Putman believes that the exercise will flush out the DMGS trying to deliver and identify those who are not engaging. It was also noted that Scotland remains far less regulated in the area than much of Europe.

Following comment as to whether lack of attendance at DMG 'lets the side down', it was stressed that under the benchmark assessment, if an estate owner is unable to attend a meeting, then a representative of the estate should.

Mark Raeside commented that, when he is unable to attend a meeting, his stalker, or his wife, attend on his behalf, and that, in summary, if the DMG has a plan in place, each estate needs to do its best in delivering it, and that is all that can be done; anything beyond that is outwith the DMG's control.

10. Any Other Business

Wester Ross Biosphere

Mary Gibson reported on the consultation undertaken for Wester Ross to progress towards becoming a biosphere reserve under the UNESCO concept, and how it could link in with the DMG. The concept involves a core of conservation value (sites of high nature conservation valuation) and a surrounding buffer being a broader transitional zone (there remains discussion as to the specific buffer criteria). She advised that it would be seen as very collaborative to sign up to taking this concept forward and would benefit the group by adding content to the DMP, with the assurance that no threats are involved, but that it is a way in which an organisation can show what it is undertaking.

Mountain Biking

Charlie Hill provided an update on behalf of Duncan Gray regarding the issue of mountain bike use on estate pony paths, previously reported to the DMG at the meeting on 30 September 2014.

A meeting was held in Kinlochewe in January 2015, attended largely by professionals and mountain bikers, together with a representative of SLE, to discuss the issue. In the 1990s circa £1.3m was contributed for repair of footpaths, but there was no significant wheeled traffic at that time and no-one anticipated the future traffic levels and consequent impact on the paths. Future considerations should be a survey of paths and whether the use of paths should be paid for.

It was proposed at the meeting that a Torridon Paths Trust be established by relevant interested parties, and suggested that estates such as Coulin, Achnashellach and Fionnariaich, meet to discuss if this is something worth taking forward.

There was discussion as to whether ultimately there would be public rights of way issues involved and, as such, the first step would be to approach The Highland Council to establish rights and responsibilities before progressing.

11. Date of next meeting

The Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday, 25 September, 2015, at Lochcarron Village Hall. Time to be confirmed.