

MINUTES

of the MID TERM MEETING of the NORTH ROSS DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP held on FRIDAY 7TH JUNE 2019 at 2pm at SNH, GREAT GLEN HOUSE, INVERNESS

Present:	Mr P Creasey	Strathvaich (Chairman)
	Ms C Gilfillan	Bell Ingram
	(Standing in for Rob Whitson)	
	Ms M Scobie	East Rhidorroch
	Mr J Whitteridge	Inverlael Estate
	Mr J Legrand	East Rhidorroch
	Mr H Bulmer	Ledmore
	Mr A Campbell	Ledmore
	Mr H O'Donnell	Wyvis & Clach Liath
	Mr G Beattie	Wyvis
	Mr J Chalmers	Wyvis
	Mr I Duncan	Kildermorie
	Mrs C Duncan	Kildermorie
	Mr D Macaskill	FLS
	Mr W Grant	Braemore
	Ms L Seivwright	Alladale/Caroann
	Mr I Macneill	Alladale
	Mr J Buckthorp	Inverlael Deer Forest
	Mr A Sutherland	Glencalvie
	Mr F McCulloch	Braelangwell
	Mr D Macrae	Strathvaich
	Mr A Sutherland	Croick
	Mr A Harrington	Glencalvie
	Mr A Davidson	Corriemulzie
	Mr A Mackenzie	Corriemulzie
	Mr D Campbell	Langwell / Croick
	Mr C Harrison	Rhidorroch
In Attendance:	Mr S Coghill	SNH
	Mr C Donald	SNH
	Ms T Lawton	SNH
By Conference call:	Mr J Hall	Croick
By Skype:	Mr S Colvin	Corriemulzie
Apologies:	Mr P Dacre	Langwell
	Mr H Van Beuningen	Inverlael Deer Forest
	Mr R Whitson	Bell Ingram

1. WELCOME

The Chairman welcomed members to the meeting.

The Chairman thanked David Campbell for his hard work in writing our latest Deer Management Plan, and James Hall and Rob Whitson for their contribution to the process.

SNH have reviewed it as part of their work leading to the Government's autumn review of Deer Management across Scotland

Their scoring on approximately 80 separate criteria has improved from 2016, with no red (delivery is poor) grades. Our delivery was seen as good for 62 criteria, but 18 criteria were graded amber (only partial delivery).

Our weak areas are in engagement from group members through sub committees and the integration of habitat assessments into a coherent population and cull model. The Group needs to take these matters forward, especially in setting up the various sub groups and the Chairman asked Bell Ingram to help facilitate this.

The meeting will be split. The first half will be dedicated to the normal function of the group and the matters arising, the second half to the proposed S7 Agreement from SNH for Beinn Dearg.

The Chairman asked that the proposal be left to the second half for debate but explained that the existing S7 agreement for Beinn Dearg has delivered its population targets.

SNH do not possess up to date habitat information for the designated site, and without it cannot have confidence that the habitat is recovering. They wish to remain closely involved in monitoring and supervising the area until they are sure, and so have asked estates to sign a new S7 agreement over a larger 200,000 acre area.

Family problems prevented our contractor Dr Bodles from carrying out last year's crucial work for our first professional group wide habitat survey and have prevented him from responding to requests for assistance this year. Our secretary has obtained a quote from Angus Davidson to perform the work this summer.

2. APOLOGIES

The apologies were intimated to the meeting.

3. MINUTES OF MEETING ON 9TH JANUARY 2019

Members considered and approved the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting on the 8th January. Proposer, David Campbell, Seconder, Johnny Whitteridge.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Whilst there were no specific matters arising, any issues relating to the minutes would be discussed during the course of the meeting.

5. FINANCIAL POSITION

Charlotte Gilfillan presented the statement and advised that subscription invoices would be sent to Members shortly.

The quote received from Angus Davidson for the HIA was for up to 40 - 44 days of survey work at £360 per day. If Estates help Angus and his team by taking them to the sampling points, it will reduce the time required to undertake the surveys and hence Angus's fee.

It was agreed that David Campbell's fee of £6,000 for the Deer Management Plan be paid.

SNH's funding of the February helicopter count allows us to release the sum set aside last year and that which would have been earmarked this year for future helicopter counts, and so cover the cost of the impact assessment.

6. SNH ASSESSEMENT AND DMP UPDATE

The SNH final assessment for 2019 had been circulated to all members prior to the meeting.

Our score was impaired by our HIA being delayed, and the implementation of sub group working having to be put on hold whilst we waited for SNH to decide on the extent of the impending S7 agreement.

The information regarding professional competence needed to be updated and it was agreed that the Secretary would circulate an e-mail to all Members asking for further details.

The Chairman then asked Sinclair Coghill to comment on the SNH assessment.

Sinclair advised that more discussion and collaboration between Estates would be important going forward, especially over improving knowledge of deer movements. More work is required to ensure more effective and regular liaison at a sub groups level.

The Chairman asked that all estates should be represented at the set up meeting for their sub groups and at subsequent meetings, suggesting that although the sub group boundaries might change later it made sense to start by mirroring the three sub groups already in place for deer counts and monitoring.

Each sub group will identify and appoint its own Chairman and Secretary and agree a work programme include population modelling and habitat appraisal culminating in setting cull targets. Bell Ingram will assist in starting this process.

The Chairman then asked the Group for comments on the Deer Management Plan:

Shane Colvin expressed strong support in setting cull targets at a sub group level but commented that the NRDMG Deer Management Plan population targets need to be compatible with those in the proposed S7 agreement.

The Chairman suggested that it is better for the group to work through its own population models using its best knowledge, even if the results of this process differ from the models supplied by SNH for the S7.

If so the S7 targets should be adaptable if sub groups provide sufficient evidence to justify a change, and in turn our own modelling can and will adapt following fresh information and evidenced advice from SNH.

Sinclair Coghill recognises that not all of SNH's S7 population models have yet been discussed in detail or agreed with Members, but in his view the models are robust, fair and designed to allow sporting culls to continue, whilst allowing improvements in habitat and deer condition.

Ian Duncan stated that despite a lot of discussion, there had been no progress on the establishment of sub groups. He suggested that SNH should provide possible boundaries to use as a foundation.

David Campbell explained that proposed sub group boundaries had already been circulated as part of the Deer Management Planning process.

Sinclair Coghill advised that the proposed boundaries looked acceptable, although there will be further discussion as to the proper home for outlying estates such as Croick, Ledmore and Langwell as there will be deer movement across sub group boundaries however they might be set.

David Campbell took the opportunity to stress the real progress that had been made by the Group through the commitment shown from Members. He urged the Group not to be shy in taking credit for their very real achievements. The Chairman shared his sentiment but advised that Members still had more work to do.

It was agreed, following advice from Sinclair, that the Group's own professional HIAs would be carried out at 5 year intervals, unless significant management changes justified an earlier repeat assessment.

7. 2018/19 HIND CULL AND PROJECTED RECRUITMENT

Only a small number of Members have yet completed this year's recruitment counts.

David Campbell has calculated this year's recruitment rate across the Group of 29.5% using the February 2019 helicopter count statistics, and suggested that, as we had detailed count information, recruitment counts this year might not be necessary

The Chairman asked that every estate carry out recruitment counts this summer. It is possible that errors might have crept into the helicopter assessment in separating hinds from calves, so it makes sense to check the recruitment percentage which is the critical factor in preparing population models. It is also important that we set a precedent for future years.

Angus Davidson concurred. Recruitment counts are often more effective than foot counts as only sample groups and not the whole population need be assessed. Undertaking them across the Group would be beneficial.

The Secretary will write to all Members with a template for three sample recruitment counts on each Estate, which should be completed and returned by end of June.

8. TARGET POPULATION AND PROJECTED CULLS

This year's target population and projected culls will be discussed as part of the separate S7 meeting, which will follow the main meeting.

9. SECRETARY GOING FORWARD-PROPOSALS

The Chairman advised that Rob Whitson will delegate day to responsibility for the Group to his Bell Ingram colleague Charlotte Gilfillan. Any other proposals for the role would be considered at the AGM in November.

He invited Charlotte Gilfillan to comment on Bell Ingram's proposals for work over the next few months.

Charlotte advised that now the Deer Management Plan was in place, the recommendations within the plan could be driven forward, with the HIA being undertaken, further population modelling being carried out and crucially the sub groups being set up, all of which Bell Ingram will facilitate.

10. HABITAT MONITORING

The Chairman introduced Angus Davidson and invited him to give a summary of his proposal.

Angus Davidson has quoted to undertake an HIA of 180 sampling points across the Group, to include 90 sampling points for dwarf shrub heath and 90 for blanket bog. Information will be collected at SNH's best practice guidelines standard which gathers less information than the advanced level of sampling used in SNH commissioned reports on designated sites.

(30 points per habitat within each sub group allows a statistically robust appraisal of the overall condition of the sub group, but not of constituent estates. Their smaller sample sizes give too high a risk that a single anomalous impact reading will distort the calculated average for each estate. Once this 30 plot threshold is reached for any evaluated area there is little advantage from increasing sample sizes as the information is already robust)

Members expressed concerns that this limited number of plots might only have value as a "box ticking" exercise and questioned the point of spending money if the only result was improving an amber review mark to green.

The Chairman's view was that an HIA for each sub group would provide NRDMG with invaluable reassurance as to the condition of its two key habitat types and so allow it to enhance its own management strategy. This is far from just being a box ticking exercise in that it would provide the group with its own information at the same detailed level as our regulator SNH's own surveys.

Individual estates should assess if unexpectedly unfavourable indications recorded in the group wide exercise on the few plots on their land are significant by carrying out their own follow up and more intensive local monitoring.

Johnny Whitteridge emphasised the importance of the Group having an HIA carried out by an independent body, and the importance of SNH accepting the methodology.

Sinclair Coghill advised that the 30 points per habitat for each management unit had already been accepted by SNH. Linzi Seivwright added that the proposed HIA would provide a good foundation for the Group, with Estates to be encouraged to undertake individual HIA's as well to help inform their own management decisions.

The quote had been prepared on the basis of using the Best Practice methodology. It is possible to upgrade this to the advanced level methodology that SNH uses for their designated sites at the cost of twenty minutes per plot.

The Chairman recommended that the group opt for advanced level. He argued that as most of the surveyor's time would be spent travelling between plots and not recording information, the group might as well allow more time at each site to gather comprehensive information.

SNH suggested that if members wished to increase their spending on impact assessments then it might be preferable to increase sample sizes, than upgrade the original 30 to advanced level.

Using the estimates provided at the meeting by Angus Davidson, assessing all 60 plots in a sub group area can be expected to take up to twenty days of surveyor time. An extra 20 minutes per plot recording time upgrading this to advanced level adds four days, increasing the overall cost by 20%.

The cost of assessing 30 plots at advanced level is broadly the same as assessing 36 at basic level. Both will provide an overall assessment of overall site condition at similar statistical "confidence" levels. The main difference is that an advanced level survey will allow the group to counter arguments that whilst a best practice survey might show acceptable habitat, more detailed analysis gives a different picture)

The Group rejected the Chairman's proposal to upgrade to advanced level, whereupon the Chairman stated that he thought the more detailed information to be of such potential value that Strathvaich would pay the extra costs for its nineteen plots.

Glencalvie, Alladale, Croick and Wyvis plan to continue with the monitoring that they have undertaken for the past four years and see benefits in using the same contractor as previously in order to ensure continuity. They were concerned that they might pay twice over. Ledmore is to confirm commission of their own surveys.

Following further discussion, these points were agreed:

1. Angus Davidson to be instructed to carry out the HIA across the Group, excluding Glencalvie, Alladale, Croick, Wyvis and Ledmore.
2. Glencalvie, Alladale, Croick, Wyvis & Ledmore, will share with the Group the data from the relevant sampling points they obtain during their own surveys in 2019 and the Group will reimburse them for the fair cost of the survey of the NRDMG plots.
3. All Estates included in the Group HIA will be subject to the Best Practice methodology, with the exception of Strathvaich, Corriemulzie and Kildermorie who will be subject to the upgraded methodology and will bear the cost of the additional work.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There were no further matters arising from the meeting.

12. NEXT MEETING

The mid-term meeting will be held at the Macphail Centre, Ullapool on Tuesday 5th November at 1:30pm.

S7 MEETING MINUTES (Following The Main Meeting)

The Chairman invited Chris Donald to assume control of the meeting and suggested he start by providing a summary of the current proposed S7 agreement for Beinn Dearg.

Chris Donald reported that the existing S7 agreement for Beinn Dearg is now in its ninth year.

SNH are still looking to expand the control scheme area under a new agreement, with the aim of redressing the problem of immigration from higher density areas outside the control of the original signatories.

SNH believed these deer movements had complicated the reduction cull and caused the four year delay in meeting population targets.

SNH had spoken to Estates since that time and a new S7 agreement, ready for signature, was circulated to estates on 28 May. Signatories were given until 26 June to sign and warned that S8 control measures would be enforced without delay on any estates failing to sign by that deadline.

Group members pointed out that the agreement still needs to be worked up (with Linzi drawing attention to inconsistencies affecting proposed target densities shown variously in different places within the legal document as 9.4 and 10.0 per square kilometre).

The Group felt that it would be better to invest in the time needed to allow its prescribed measures to be tested and agreed, than to sign in a hurry only to find that some measures were inappropriate. The Group pointed out that there are far more than 19 days before the autumn deer review and even longer before hind culls can start.

SNH has not yet consulted with all affected Estates on the significant changes, most particularly to the population models, even though those drafting the document assumed that not only had consultation taken place, but each estate had agreed its own model.

Chris Donald responded by saying that this forum was an opportunity for discussion, although Sinclair Coghill would be aiming to speak to each potential signatory before the deadline. He extended the deadline to 28 days from the meeting date, suggesting that SNH might have difficulty in agreeing any further extension.

Linzi Seivwright suggested that the S7 Agreement was overly heavy handed. The difference in the actual and original target deer populations were already only marginal and the Group has shown its commitment to addressing population hotspots outside the SAC and is delivering on those commitments.

Chris Donald advised that the S7 agreement should be viewed as a supporting mechanism for the Group and not primarily as a mechanism for increasing its control.

A new Section 7 agreement would release funding for SNH helicopter counts and regular commissioned impact reports within the designated site. He went on to say that SNH need to see a S7 agreement in place to give them reassurance that the Group is committed to any deer population changes needed for the benefit of the designated sites.

SNH are as eager as estates to reach the stage where a S7 can be released and are as eager as anyone to ensure agreements do not run on for years longer than necessary.

The Chairman then asked for individual feedback from the Members in response to the proposed S7 agreement and is summarised as follows:

- Members are open to a collaborative discussion but ask that the wording in the proposed agreement on cull targets needs to be changed to allow for greater flexibility, particularly in cases where adverse weather or deer movements make it impossible for an estate to achieve its prescribed cull the any year.
- There is a clear need for the new steering group to have the power to adjust the figures each year to respond to habitat condition assessments as they come in, so allowance for this should be built in now.
- The 28-day signing period is insufficient to allow consultation with each proposed signatory, given that the timetabling of the Deer Management Plan reviews left SNH without the time to engage prior to presenting the proposed agreement.
- There was concern that the S7 in its current form might not be the 'supportive' measure intended by SNH given its lack of flexibility and the somewhat punitive measures which might follow any technical but unavoidable breach.
- It would be constructive to for all to discuss and review the terms, then amend to an agreement which recognises any real problems not anticipated by the draftsman. Asking estates to sign an agreement now containing terms without consultation can only lead to operational difficulties and misunderstandings later on.
- The 2015 assessment, irrespective of the controversial and possible unjustifiable interpretation placed on its recorded impacts, is out of date in that it was taken when deer densities were higher, and so gives no grounds to revise Professor Puttman's population targets for the original S7 signatories which are now met.
- Up to date impact data might suggest that Professor Puttman's targets should be revised but the time for this revision is when current SNH commissioned data becomes available, or when professional monitoring results commissioned by NRDMG come in.

Until that time it seems more appropriate to set maintenance and not reduction culls for estates within the designated site and for those outside the site and already complying with DMP targets, and appropriate reduction culls already agreed by estates with numbers agreed to be too high.

The population models can then be adjusted as and when impact assessments become available.

- There is concern that as the HIA targets banning any medium high or high appear unachievable these targets alone will discourage estates signing the agreement.
- The targets are not taken from MacDonald's Upland habitats, in which part 6 " Predicting the future state of habitats" indicates that rather higher impacts might be consistent with maintaining favourable condition in tandem with maintaining maximum diversity of flora and fauna.
- The argument that rather lower impacts than the Macdonald predictions are desirable in the short term to kick start habitats in unfavourable has merit. If this is the reasoning behind the agreement targets they should be recognised as an aspiration, and not an inflexible criteria for judging success or failure.
- Estates also fear of signing up to an ongoing commitment which as drafted might lock them in without any clear mechanism for them to escape.
- It seems imperative to have an up to date opening survey of habitat condition. The Group requested that SNH bring forward their planned commissioned survey of the SAC.
- Trampling was one of the biggest impacts on the designated sites, but due to the location of various Munros within the Group and the number of walkers, trampling due to disturbance would be an ongoing problem irrespective deer numbers.
- There was concern that a further reduction in deer numbers will start to impact jobs and the local economy.

Chris Donald concluded the meeting by asking Members to speak to Sinclair Coghill as soon as possible regarding individual concerns, if they had not done so already. The Chairman advised the Group that he would circulate feedback shortly.