

NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

SPRING MEETING

at LAIRG COMMUNITY CENTRE

23rd May 2018 at 10am

DRAFT MINUTES

Present: George Woods (GW) (Merkland, Chair), Pieter Bakker (PB) (Altnaharra, Vice-Chair), Derick MacAskill (DM) (FES), Michelle Allsopp (FES), Annette Parrott (AP) (West Shinness), David Allison (DA) (Reay Forest), Sophie Clark (SC) (Gualin), Duncan Shaw (DSh) (Gualin), Roddy Watt (RW) (Merkland), Georgie Woods (Merkland), Seumas Nairn (Reay Forest), Don O'Driscoll (DoD) (Sandwood), Derick Sutherland (DS) (Shinness)

In attendance: Kirsty MacLeod (KGM) (Secretary), Victor Clements (VC) (DMP Author), Valerie Wilson (VW) (SNH), Holly Deary (HD) (SNH), Tom Chetwynd (TC) (ADMG)

1. Chairman's Welcome

The Chair (GW) thanked those present for attending and welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies received from:

David Elliot (Rhigolter), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Ross Peters (Achnabourin), Iain Robertson (MOD Cape Wrath)

3. Election of Office Bearers

George Woods was proposed by Pieter Bakker, seconded by David Allison

PB did not want to continue as Vice-Chair, but in the absence of anyone else willing to take on the role agreed to continue for a further six months. Proposed by GW, seconded by DM.

GW then asked everyone present to introduce themselves.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 1st November 2017

The minutes were proposed by GW, seconded by DA.

5. Deer Management Plan Update was deferred until point 10.

6. 2017/18 Season Review

Altnaharra: (PB) Season went well, got 62/3 stags as planned. Seeing deer in places previously not seen, populations moving. February count probably out of touch as there have been mortalities through to late spring.

Borgie: (DM) FES has different objectives to other members. Culled 65 more than normal due to under-culling in previous years as a result of staffing levels etc. No count in February as had not been aware of proposal. Comments had been made about the fencing – some deer may be getting in but the fence has been checked and money spent on repairs so should not impact the group overall. DM had no knowledge of deer being shot by contractors outwith FCS property.

West Shinness: (AP) 20 beasts shot, mostly Sika. Count 15 red stags, 12 Sika stags, 30 Sika hinds and calves. All numbers same as usual. Recruitment count est. 3% (Sika only).

Reay Forest Estate: (DA) Good start to season. Densities not what they had been in some places. Hinds were not looking the best, high calving % so culled quite hard early on. Not so much mortality as inland areas. Hinds looking a bit hard up and may not produce calves. There was the possibility of encouraging someone to consider taking a Stalking interest in the Kinlochbervie area, following concerns about local deer density in and around the village and Crofts at Kinlochbervie. This has since been suggested to a local crofting community member, and may be considered in due course.

Gualin: (DSh) Stags ok. There was a shortage of mature stags on Keodale. Struggled with adverse weather during hind season.

Merkland: (RW) More mortality than normal. Not as much as other areas. Road kills increased, seem to be more deer on the road this year. Could be due to weather. Lower calving % expected this year.

Shinness: (DS) 4 stags shot. Struggled to cull hinds due to bad weather.

Sandwood: (DoD) No count due to weather and time constraints. Lower than expected mortality, less than on Quinag.

UPDATED CULL TABLE ATTACHED [including Wildland properties – figures were provided by Thomas MacDonnell on his arrival after the meeting]

7. 2018 Count

A table was circulated. GW commented on the gap in numbers, and the largest organisation having failed to provide count data.

Altnaharra – PB referred to the northern boundary with Wildland and that the % may be optimistic. FES Borgie – Achnabourin/Poole/Borgie need to be counted together for it to be meaningful. Little change expected for Borgie. PB asked if contractors shoot deer outside of the fence, DM said this happened only very occasionally.

West Shinness – Only 12 red deer seen, numbers same as usual

Reay – overall density 4-12%, in line with expectations. Expected mortalities since the count.

Gualin – hind numbers down quite a bit. Movement affected the count. Stags do not tend to overwinter on Keodale.

Merkland – Stags slightly down. Fiag N&W - 12.

Shinness – DS had passed cull figures to DA, who will send on to Secretary. 11 stags, 28 hinds, 19 calves.

Sandwood – Held back on stag cull last season. Hind cull upped as there is a tendency to cross the road into croft land at Kinlochbervie, and an increase in hinds had been observed.

UPDATED COUNT DATA TABLE ATTACHED

8. Matters Arising

PB reiterated a point made at the last meeting about a major landowner not contributing to the group with figures. VW had tried to telephone Thomas MacDonnell. HD stated that SNH are able to provide figures for Wildland properties if they have them, however no statutory returns received as yet.

DM brought up the significant fire at Borgie and Poole. VW produced a satellite map showing over 3000ha were affected. Area includes the southern end of West Strathnaver SSSI, Syre Peatlands SSSI. It was thought to be muirburn but this was not confirmed, started at Strathnaver away from the road. Significant impact on site condition and capacity on the ground to carry livestock and deer. If a fire spreads quickly the ground can recover quickly, but if it is deep it can take years and be susceptible to erosion. This fire had continued for 3 days. DM said the fire had been put out on Sunday, but had re-ignited on Monday. FE had used helicopters to put the fire out, at a cost of

£30,000. Fires seem to occur mainly in crofting areas, and DM felt the police should be knocking on doors. The south end of native woodland at the east end of Loch Loyal, which is under grant conditions, was affected. Should NWSDMG or ADMG be talking to police Scotland? TC was happy to raise it as a general point with ADMG but not individual areas/incidents.

VW felt that a crofting presence would be useful. VC reported that they had seemed enthusiastic when he first spoke to crofting groups as part of the DMP process. It was agreed that Crofting groups should be added to the contact list. VC to provide contact details to the Secretary.

ACTION VC/KGM

DA said he had heard about the fire on the radio, but there was an opportunity to inform members. A fire plan is required. VW asked if estates had sprayers. DA/RW confirmed that Reay Forest has a fogging unit. Resource List and Fire Plan required.

ACTION KGM

9. Accounts

A summary of Accounts was circulated (*ATTACHED*)

KGM reported that the ADMG levy for last year was still outstanding. Now that bank signatories were updated this can be paid, and ADMG were thanked for being patient.

10. DMP Working Plan

The Working Plan was in place a year before others and had been updated four times, but not since November 2016. VC went through the Working Plan and will provide an updated version [*ATTACHED - this will be uploaded to the website*]

Recruitment counts to be requested when minutes sent out, and provided to VC with count data and cull figures.

ACTION KGM

HIA – some estates have data, others need support. £1800 grant from SNH received, and this needs to be progressed quickly with 2019 assessment looming.

ACTION DA/Steering Group

There was discussion on issuing a questionnaire asking what data people currently have, in order to collate information centrally. The message is to keep it simple, i.e. shade a map with main areas of impact.

Training – should have been on agenda, to be added to November agenda.

ACTION KGM

Website to be updated re. contact details.

ACTION KGM

VC went through various designated sites with HD and VW. There was discussion on West Strathnaver. Secretary to ask SNH for backdated information for the whole area.

ACTION KGM

VW and HD felt that the group was doing really well in general, in terms of designated site status.

There was discussion around woodland, there was a big question going forward on what the impacts are on non-designated native woodland. If there are new proposals for larger areas of woodland it is important to share with the wider group as well as neighbours.

DoD mentioned the high level of RTCs last winter around Eddrachillis/Kinlochbervie/Assynt, there seemed to be more deer nearer the road. There is an online reporting facility, HD to send link to Secretary for circulation. Community Councils could also be asked for information.

ACTION KGM

11. SNH Report

HD referred to the 2019 Assessment of DMGs and delivery of their DMPs, and build up to that review. SNH had provided feedback recently to all DMGs, and it was important to make sure it is used to inform the group what needs to be addressed before the assessment, and make sure the Deer Management Plan is moving forward and being implemented. HD asked if everyone had seen that feedback. SNH and ADMG have been working together to agree a number of priority criteria

and targets for these criteria prior to the 2018 reassessments. From the benchmark these relate to the fundamentals of deer management -counting, culling and habitat monitoring. SNH emphasised the importance of recruitment and mortality counting in this regard.

HD and DoD left the meeting at 12:10pm to attend another meeting in Lochinver.

VC went through the SNH feedback report, which suggests that the group is not working well in a lot of areas. This was felt to be partly due to the changes in Secretary. However it is reasonable to expect voluntary members to provide information so it can be presented ahead of meetings.

Meetings must look at modelling, HIA etc. not just administrative matters. GW pointed out that the group as a whole is judged when one member does not attend and provide data.

SNH Review to be circulated to all members, with updated review to follow.

ACTION KGM

12. ADMG Report

The Deer Working Group, appointed in 2017 by the Scottish Government, was still collecting information, and would be reporting in 2019 (same time as SNH review).

Venison contaminations – if FSS identified substandard practices at a processing plant, it could shut it down with potentially catastrophic consequences for the industry.

Sporting Rates. 10-15,000 notices had been issued out of 45-50,000 assessments. Valuation officer inundated with appeals. Small Business Bonus Relief is being applied fairly quickly when requested. You do not get it unless you apply for it. Most estates are eligible, unless they have high value hotels/holiday let properties etc. SBBR might be scrapped or changed in future. Important to lodge appeal within 6 months.

TC mentioned the Stalking Rent Survey. Previous one was in 2011. Data gathering this summer, with an interim report in 2019.

Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV) are offering pre-assessments of larder facilities.

ADMG holding workshops, one on 6th June after the Regional Meeting at Birnam, and on 7th June in Inverness. For Chairs and Secretaries but open to other interested parties.

In summary – there is more pressure on DMGs to perform. TC, who is also Chair of the East Sutherland DMG, is here to help if he can – please direct queries to the Secretary in the first instance, who will forward to him.

Scottish Wild Venison PGI (Protected Geographical Indicator) Consultation closed on 16th May 2018. This could lead to similar marketing strategy as Stornoway black pudding and Scotch Lamb, which would be hugely beneficial to the deer sector.

13. A.O.C.B.

Main Actions from the meeting:

Onus on the Steering Group to deliver grant from SNH towards HIA [Steering Group members: PB, RW, TM, DA, HD and VW]

ACTION STEERING GROUP

Victor's review of the DMP Working Plan

ACTION VC

Consider SNH critique – VC will do this fairly quickly and liaise with HD

ACTION VC

Recruitment Count deadline 1st June [*delayed to co-incide with circulation of minutes*] ACTION KGM

14. Date of Next Meeting

Wednesday 7th November at 10am

DA proposed a vote of thanks for the Chair

Meeting ended at 12:25