

NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

SPRING MEETING

LAIRG HALL

24TH MAY 2017 AT 2PM

MINUTES DRAFT

1. Welcome

Present: George Woods (Merkland, Chair), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra, Vice-Chair), Maaikie Silcock (Secretary), Duncan Shaw (Gualin), Sophie Clark (Gualin), Annette Parrott (West Shinness), David Allison (Reay Forest), Roddy Watt (Merkland), Georgina Woods (Merkland), Thomas MacDonell (Wildlands Ltd.), Holly Deary (SNH), Valerie Wilson (SNH).

2. Apologies:

Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Iain Robertson (MoD), David Elliot (Rhigolter), Derick Macaskill (Forest Enterprise), Peter Voy (Sutherland).

3. Previous Minutes

The minutes were taken as read, allowing for two changes of wording made by Thomas MacDonell of Wildlands Ltd.

The minutes were proposed by George Woods, seconded by David Allison.

The minutes were approved.

4. Matters Arising (office bearers)

George Woods was proposed as Chairman by Roddy Watt and seconded by Annette Parrott.

Pieter Bakker was proposed as Vice-Chairman by George Woods and seconded by Annette Parrott. PB agreed to this appointment on the understanding that he would more than likely step down and the position would be reviewed in six months. Also, it was asked, that all members would take a more active role in the support and co-operation in the running of the DMG.

The formation of a Steering Committee was proposed, consisting of:

David Allison (Reay Forest) Chairman

Roddy Watt (Merkland)

Holly Deary (SNH)

Valerie Wilson (SNH)

The Steering Committee would aim to enhance communication within the DMG.

George Woods agreed to write a letter to all members highlighting the poor attendance to meetings and poor communication in general.

5. DMG Finances

All payments are up to date.

ADMG invoice has been payed.

There are still two invoices outstanding from the MoD for last year.

The NWSDMG bank account has a balance of £5081.52

The ADMG levy next year is to increase by £0.50 per stag.

It was proposed that the NWSDMG levy should also increase to remain financially healthy.

David Allison suggested that building up a fund to help finance aerial deer counts.

Provisionally, the NWSDMG is to be included in the 2018-2019 SNH helicopter count, depending on a certain amount of financial contribution.

6. 2016-2017 Season

West Shinness - A few stags were taken, and several Sika.

Gualin – There have been fewer stags and hinds around this winter. There is concern over the high numbers of deer taken by poachers.

Merkland – Less than normal, with 13 hinds and 4 calves. They were in good physical condition.

Reay Forest – Cull targets all achieved. Targeted culling in Foinaven SSSI to alleviate trampling impacts took place. 2017 deer count suggested a 40% calving over the northern beats of Reay Forest, which would suggest that we will need to work as hard this season to keep the population at a standstill.

Wildlands Ltd. – Target culls were achieved on Eribol, Kinloch and Melness. Hope didn't quite achieve target cull numbers. Improvement in the condition of the hinds was noted. Some 'catch-up' is needed on Eribol and Strathmore to take the deer concentration down to 5 per sq.km. The response to habitats will then be assessed before new targets are proposed. Numbers have already been reduced from 18 per sq.km to 5 per sq.km. Wildlands conducts its own helicopter counts to keep track of numbers. At present, they have chosen not to reduce stag numbers, but to keep them for sporting.

Altnaharra – 125 hinds and calves were taken. The deer population seems to be fluctuating and deer movement seems to be changing, making it harder to predict numbers. There are concerns that the severe culling on Strathmore will affect deer concentrations on Altnaharra as they are adjoining estates.

7. 2017 Foot Count

West Shinness – Numbers may be slightly down.

14 stags, 15 sika stags, 30 sika hinds+calves

Gualin – 50 stags. Very few hinds. Numbers on the Cape were not counted due to staffing issues. 47 stags, 49 hinds, 28 calves

Merkland – Overall, numbers seem to be similar to last year, though calf numbers appear to be up. 237 stags, 181 hinds, 54 calves

Reay Forest – Calving was 40% higher than expected and the Hinds are in good condition. 722 stags, 785 hinds, 318 calves

Wildlands Ltd. – Melness - 37 stags, 64 hinds, 16 calves

Southerland Estates – 14 stags, 34 hinds, 9 calves

Rispond and Polla - 1 stag, 16 hinds, 6 calves

Ben Loyal - 182+ stags, 240 hinds and calves

Hope - 25 stags, 232 Hinds, 58 calves

Kinloch - 64 stags, 83 hinds, 26 calves

Strathmore - 157 stags, 182 hinds, 61 calves

Eriboll - 63 stags, 143 hinds, 45 calves

Altnaharra - too large an area for the foot count to be taken seriously.

Discussions were conducted concerning the commitment of the Group Members to carry out thorough foot counts. Some estates really work hard at getting accurate numbers, whereas others seem to be disinterested.

The Deer Management Plan is based on deer counts, and the modelling is based on deer counts. It was stressed that to get the modelling right, the deer count needs to be right.

Helicopter counts are too expensive to carry out regularly. Using drones is not legal. The hiring of a light aircraft with imaging equipment may be a cost-effective alternative to get accurate deer counts.

Wildlands Ltd. conducts regular helicopter counts to have accurate figures for its analysis. It therefore doesn't need to carry out foot counts. Thomas MacDonnel stated that deer numbers from his helicopter counts would be available to the rest of the Group a month after the count and anyone wanting the numbers should email him.

It was agreed that, generally, foot counting is flawed and that there needs to be other monitoring techniques.

Melness Crofters Estate doesn't pay the levy. They have a legal obligation to pay. Thomas MacDonnel will make inquiries to see if this issue can be resolved.

8. Deer Management Plan.

The importance of focussing on and implementing the Deer Management Plan was stressed. Only by doing so would sensible cull figures be able to be set.

SNH require that the Group members work together collectively and not individually.

So that this can be achieved, it was proposed that a Steering Group be appointed:

David Allison – Reay Forest, Chairman

Roddy Watt - Merkland

Holly Deary – SNH

Valerie Wilson – SNH

The Steering Group will also try to increase attendance to meetings and encourage Members to actively participate with the delivery of the Deer Management Plan.

9. SNH Comment.

The main priority is the monitoring of habitats. In particular, the SSSI sites.

The Eriboll SSSI – the open ground is in an unfavourable condition. It requires grazing, but not too much. The woodland is too heavily grazed by sheep as well as deer. These issues will be discussed with Wildlands Ltd.

Foinaven SSSI. The 2015 monitoring was disappointing. Works are in progress to manage the deer differently.

West Strathnaver SSSI. The Blanket Bog is in unfavourable condition as is the Borgie Forest. However, some drain blocking is taking place, there has been no recent burning but trampling is still considered to be taking place. Significant numbers of deer were seen during the last visit in 2015.

Different approaches to carrying out habitat assessments were discussed at a property and DMG scale.

Proposed cull figures 2017/2018

West Shinness – up to 3 stags, 0 hinds, as many sika as possible

Gualin - 8 stags, 14 hinds

Merkland - 16-20 stags, 14-15 hinds

Reay Forest - 110 stags, 160 hinds+calves

Wildlands Ltd. -

Meness – 9 Stags, 32 hinds

Rispond & Polla, 1 stag, 23 hinds

Ben Loyal – 16 stags, 91 hinds

Hope - 62 stags, 130 hinds

Kinloch – 26 stags, 33 hinds

Strathmore – 286 stags, 143 hinds

Eriboll – 109 stags, 233 hinds (stags to be kept for sporting)

Altnaharra - Can't give figures at this time due to the large cull on neighbouring estate.

Discussions need to take place between neighbouring estates before culling takes place, taking into consideration the impact sheep have on habitats.

10. ADMG Comment

It was stressed that the Deer Management Plan needs to be actioned.
Its delivery must be monitored.
Good practise events should be shared.

11. AOCB

George Woods agreed to write to all Group Members stressing that the key function of the Group would be greatly improved by their active involvement with the delivery of the Deer Management Plan.

12. Date of next meeting Wednesday, 1st November 2017 at 2pm in the Lairg Hall