

NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER  
MANAGEMENT GROUP

**MAY 2018 UPDATE**

**DEER MANAGEMENT  
PLAN**

**2015 – 2025**

**Working Plan**

**PREFACE**

This Deer Management Plan has been developed for the North West Sutherland Deer Management Group (NWS DMG) and also includes issues relating to domestic livestock. The Plan is funded both by the deer group and by Scottish Natural Heritage. It replaces a previous DMP that was partially drawn up in 2006, aiming to take account of changing circumstances with the group area. The Plan runs from 2015 until 2025 and has been formally endorsed by all the Members of the Group. It has been designed to be readily updated as needs arise and will be reviewed on a six-monthly basis or as required, with a systematic review taking place at the end of the first five year period in 2020.

This Plan has been compiled by:

Victor Clements: Native Woodland Advice, Mamie's Cottage, Taybridge Terrace,  
Aberfeldy, PH15 2BS

Tel (01887) 829 361 [victor@nativewoods.co.uk](mailto:victor@nativewoods.co.uk)

## THE WORKING PLAN

The following actions will be delivered by the Group during the period of this plan, in conjunction with SNH, ADMG and others. The actions will be reviewed and updated on an annual basis, and others added, as appropriate. These action points are taken from the previous two sections of the plan, covering both the Operation of the Group and the Public Interest Assessment. Wider background information on the current situation can be found in those sections.

Noted below in red are comments and actions collated from 4 X previous reviews on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2015, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2015, April 2016 and October 2016.

Updated in blue are comments and actions updated after May 2018 review.

### OPERATION OF THE GROUP

#### Area & Boundaries

##### Action Point

*1.1 Monitor the operation and accuracy of the three population models during the course of this plan, and review as required.*

The population models did not appear to be working well at present, and it was thought that this was because of a combination of an uncertain starting population, and a higher recruitment rate than anticipated. It is not thought that group or sub- areas boundaries are a significant issue in this.

Updated sub- areas population models are give later in this document.

Population models would be created using the 2016 foot and helicopter count information and distributed after meeting.

Models to be updated following 2018 cull and count data. There is likely to be a helicopter count across the whole group in 2019, and if this happens, then it will be a very considerable boost for this particular group.

#### Membership

##### Action Points

*2.1 Before the end of 2016, look to recruit all landholdings as full members of the Group. It is likely that several will be paying a minimum subscription only.*

The small woodland properties that do not participate in the DMG will be approached again over the coming winter with a view to recruiting them in to the Group, initially as non-paying members.

It was agreed at the meeting that these properties would be invited to join NWSDMG as reporting members, reporting culls once a year, but with no need to pay subscriptions. This approach would also be used for a number of the smaller group members who are only shooting very small numbers of animals.

Although several smaller properties were not members of the Group, the majority of members were still contributing either via meetings or contribution of information and payment of subscriptions. Deer were marginal to the interests of several potential members, and it is notable that with deer populations effectively controlled by others, that several

small properties no longer thought it worthwhile attending meetings.

*2.2 During 2015, devise a suitable arrangement whereby the grazing committees can input in to the deer group, and where information on deer culled on crofters ground can be gathered to better inform Group management decisions.*

All grazing committees to be contacted before the end of December 2015.

Contact has been made, advising committees and community councils of both the website, and the spring meeting. No response to date, which was disappointing, and no presence at the meeting. The Group will persevere with this.

Contact details on Group email circulation.

Contact details to be added in again to group contacts, and Agenda of November 2018 meeting to be structured to encourage wider community input, perhaps looking at deer issues around Kinlochbervie.

## **Meetings**

### Action Points

*3.1 Look to encourage wider community participation, including invitations to community councils and grazing committees. All such groups to be given the opportunity to contribute to the agenda of meetings.*

Invitations to all community organizations and wider stakeholders for the group spring meeting. Some of these groups have not yet been consulted properly on the DMP, and will be asked to comment before the spring meeting, and the DMP updated as necessary.

All groups invited to comment on DMP and new website resource this spring, but no response to date.

There had been a contact from Scourie CC about deer on the roads, although Scourie CC lies in the neighbouring West Sutherland DMG area.

See above re grazing committees/ community councils.

*3.2 Minutes to be structured to include Action Points.*

Already actioned.

## **Constitution & Finances**

### Action Points

*4.1 A constitution to be adopted at Spring 2015 group meeting.*

Already actioned.

*4.2 The group will produce annual budgets, and look to increase member subscription rates so that a buffer can be built up in bank account. A realistic aim would be to have the equivalent of one year's subscription to ADMG in reserve at all times.*

Budget for 2016-17 presented at meeting. NWS had a healthy bank balance, and no requirement to change subscription rates for upcoming year. All invoices had been paid. It was advised that a small number of unpaid invoices be written off so that the Group could start the year with a solid reporting position.

A budget would be prepared for the Spring 2017 meeting.

The change-over of several secretaries in recent years mean't that the group had almost lost control of its finances, but this had now been recovered and the group does have reserve funds now in place. The Group would benefit from setting a proper budget for 2019 onwards again.

## **Deer Management Plan**

### Action Points

*5.1 Endorse DMP at spring 2015 meeting*

Already actioned.

*5.2 Ensure a system of communications is in place whereby local interests have access to the plan, and can input to future development of it. This is especially important as many of these interests will only be seeing the document for the first time after endorsement by group members themselves. The DMP will be copied to all local interests after adoption. Feedback will be invited, and any necessary changes will be made to the Plan at autumn 2015 meeting.*

DMP has been published on ADMG website in June 2015, and can be accessed here: <http://www.deer-management.co.uk/dmgs/deer-management-groups/deer-management-group-map/north-west-sutherland-dmg/>. A stand alone DMG website is being provided by ADMG, and this will be operational in December this year. A link to this site will be copied to all group members, agency staff and wider community interests when ready.

Draft website now produced, and ready for making available online for Group communications and consultation process.

Website address is [www.nwsutherlanddmg.deer-management.co.uk](http://www.nwsutherlanddmg.deer-management.co.uk)

Website is being maintained and updated.

## **Code of Practice on Deer Management**

### Action Point

*6.1 Ensure adherence to code at all times, both by the Group, and by individual members.*

No points of concern where raised at the meeting.

No points of concern where raised at this meeting. The Chair is chasing up one issue on which he had been informed prior to the meeting, but he had not had time to check up on the background or context of this.

The Chair had formed the opinion that there was no case to answer on this, with no evidence available to pursue.

Concern was expressed by several members at Wildland Ltd not forwarding count or cull data in advance of meetings, so that the information presented was incomplete and not therefore possible to discuss or analyse properly. There was no Wildland presence at the meeting, although they were represented at following Steering Group meeting..

## **Data & Evidence gathering- Deer Counts**

### Action Points

*9.1 It is highly recommended that a helicopter count is carried out in 2016 to establish a solid population baseline for the area. Such a baseline should then provide an appropriate degree of confidence to rely on population modelling over the subsequent five year period.*

SNH are now unable to provide a helicopter count for 2016.

2 X Group members are likely to be undertaking their own helicopter counts. A Steering Group meeting has been organized for early December to explore costs and logistics of extending these counts to other areas of the Group, and a break down of costs per property will be available for all Group members.

As a fall- back position, it may be that some properties may have to be counted on foot and the logistics of this will also need to be carefully considered.

There was expertise within the Group of satellite imagery, and the Group will explore the possibility with SNH/ ADMG of using such technology in a pilot study in 2016, using the 2 X helicopter count areas as a comparison for accuracy. Steering Group to report back to other members after meeting.

After 2 X Steering Group meetings, it was decided to organize a co-ordinated helicopter/ Ground count , concentrating on the eastern sub- area. It is not yet clear whether this count will be in spring of 2016, or later in the year, probably in August.

A NWS Group count took place in February this year. Reay Forest paid for a helicopter count, with other properties counting on foot in the same week. Good coverage of the Group area was achieved, although it was felt that the foot counts will have been an underestimate. Most Group members had doubts about the true population levels within the area, which seem to be higher than the 2012 helicopter count suggested. It is anticipated that another helicopter count will take place in 2018, with NWS provisionally having to pay 50% of this. Group members undertook to produce estimated culls for this year, subject to the limited data available.

It was agreed that NWS DMG would foot count in spring 2017. Peter Voy to co-ordinate and set up pre- count meeting of stalkers to organize.

Wildland Ltd and Reay Forest had conducted helicopter counts in spring 2018, and the majority of other members had carried out foot counts. The data will be analysed early summer and population models updated.

*9.2 It is recommended that beyond 2016, that the Group undertakes a helicopter count every five years, relying on population modelling in between to set cull targets on an annual basis. Such counts may involve a degree of private or SRDP funding.*

It is likely that an SNH funded count will be available towards the end of this time period as part of their national counting cycle, but this is subject to available funding.

As above, NWS will plan for a helicopter count in 2018, and 50% reserves need to be built up to allow for this.

SNH suggest there will be a helicopter count in spring 2019, to be confirmed.

*9.3 It is recommended that spring foot counts, if they are to take place at all, are integrated with recruitment counting each year in late April/ early May, with the priority consideration at that point being to assess recruitment from the previous year, and to form a broad overview of the deer population and general health after the winter. There is a strong case to be made for abandoning spring counts if regular helicopter counts can be organized in their place, with the caveat that recruitment & mortality counts and population modelling are used and information used updated on an annual basis.*

It is likely that an integrated foot count will be required in at least some parts of the Group

A more complete level of recruitment counting will be required in late April/ May 2016 to properly inform the population model. Information was sketchy for 2015, and may not have captured variance across the area.

February foot count took place. All members will undertake a separate recruitment count as well.

Recruitment count efforts in 2016 were very poor. It is important to rectify this as this is one of the key bits of information that goes in to the population models.

Recruitment count data has been poor for 2018. Several members are to forward their details to secretary following meeting.

### **Data & Evidence Gathering- Culls**

#### Action Point

*10.1 Update the population models and target culls on an annual basis, using recruitment and mortality data collected, as well as actual culls from the previous year.*

Updated population models are provided later in this document.

Cull data for 2015-16 has been collated, with just 2/3 details to be clarified.

Data set now complete.

Cull data to be collated by secretary to include Wildland data and several other small properties.

### **Data & Evidence Gathering- Habitat Monitoring**

#### Action Points

*11.1 A schedule of habitat and designated site monitoring will be devised in conjunction with SNH during 2015, and will be included in this Working Plan part of this document.*

This schedule has not yet been developed for the Group as a whole, and would be best delivered by a facilitator through ECAF funding. SNH, in conjunction with estates, have undertaken monitoring of the Foinaven site and also the Southern parphe during summer 2015. These are the 2 X priority areas in the Group at present. Habitat monitoring is ongoing across the Wildland Ltd properties, and a number of estates are undertaking their own private monitoring. This complex picture requires to be pulled together and any gaps addressed.

The Group have undertaken to produce a draft habitat monitoring plan for the autumn 2016 meeting. Reay Forest have offered to help train and tutor any of their neighbouring properties who wish to undertake habitat monitoring this summer. David Allison to lead.

This has not yet been done, and the confusion surrounding ECAF and public support suggests that firm decisions on this cannot be made at present. In the short term, good habitat information exists for designated sites, and their extent and distribution across the Group suggests that they could be used as a proxy for wider habitat quality.

Following the meeting, the NWS Steering Group convened to agree how a habitat monitoring plan would be agreed for 2018. All members to be canvassed via Survey Monkey within 10 days, with information gathered used to engage a consultant to summarize current habitat information and capacity within the group, and to organize training as required this summer. Report and training to be produced and delivered by

*11.2 The DMG will co-operate with government agencies and provide or access sufficient resources to ensure that this programme is implemented over the ten year period of this plan.*

The Steering Group is to investigate the feasibility of an ECAF funding application before the January 2016 deadline. Advice from ADMG and others is being taken on this, as it is not yet apparent how the criteria will work in practice. It is likely that an application will be delayed until the next funding window. Steering Group to report back.

The Steering Group have approached a suitable contractor to advise on an ECAF application before January 2015 this year. This should be a suitable mechanism for delivering future count an habitat monitoring activity, but there are some misgivings about the process, and these need to be better evaluated.

It was decided NOT to proceed with an ECAF application until more was known about the process.

See above. Wildland monitoring was continuing, and Merkland were now habitat monitoring as well.

*As above, contractor to be engaged to summarize current situation.*

*11.3 Updated sheep information will be attained from SGRIPD for 2018 and 2023, in line with the data gathered on a five-year basis since 1993.*

Sheep have been removed from South Achnabourin. This amounts to several hundred animals, and will significantly reduce the overall browsing pressure on the designated site in that area.

To be updated later in year when 2018 information is available.

*11.4 The DMG will liaise with grazing committees on an ongoing basis so that they are aware of any significant changes in sheep numbers or hill usage at a more local level.*

Grazing committees are being contacted, as above.

No significant feedback from grazing committees.

As above, details to be added in to email circulation lists again.

## **Competence**

### Action Point

*12.1 DMG members will seek to ensure that DMQ Level 1 and Trained Hunter status are delivered as the now accepted industry standard within the area, and encouragement will be given to professional stalkers to achieve DMQ level 2.*

Current levels of training are good within the Group. No additional training is being planned as yet.

*12.2 Questionnaire results suggest some confusion as to how “trained hunter” status is actually defined. NWS DMG to provide this clarification to all members, and to facilitate any necessary training to give all employees this status by the end of 2016.*

ADMG to clarify this point in next addition of Scope.

*12.3 Training or support in higher level qualifications will be encouraged where that is appropriate.*

*12.4 The DMG will work with crofters and grazing committees to ensure that deer culling carried out on crofting ground meets with all appropriate industry standards.*

*12.5 Training and support will also be sought from ADMG where that is required to help with running of the Deer Management group.*

Several Group members will be attending Birnam training workshop on 25<sup>th</sup> November, and ADMG have given support to the Group since Plan was published.

## **Training**

### Action Points

*13.1 Promote and facilitate the uptake of appropriate deer management qualifications, and specifically address the issue over how trained hunter status is defined.*

Good training ethos within the Group.

*13.2 Be aware of the ongoing development of Best Practice Guidance and any new techniques or standards that arise from that.*

*13.3 Review training needs on an annual basis.*

Review to take place at spring 2016 meeting.

This point was not actioned due to shortage of time for the Agenda.

On Agenda for Spring 2017 meeting.

## **Venison Marketing**

### Action Points

*14.1 The DMG will work with ADMG to promote uptake of SQWV within the area.*

No specific actions at present. No additional members to SQWV.

The autumn 2015 E-coli case in venison is likely to result in increased interest in SQWV accreditation.

An industry working group has been set up to provide recommendations on this.

There was a discussion about copper bullets, as an alternative to lead, now being used by Wildland Ltd.

All members aware of the new pressures on achieving high levels of quality and cleanliness in production of venison.

*14.2 In the medium term, beyond the settling in period for this Plan, the DMG will explore options to market venison from the area in a more collaborative manner.*

Group discussion reflected the view that infra-structure within the group was generally very good, and with the distances involved between properties, that significant additional sharing of facilities was impractical for most people.

## **Communications**

Action Point

*15.1 Implement the communications strategy as agreed, and ensure a mechanism is in place for dealing with business and issues between meetings.*

Strategy is being implemented as agreed, with stand alone website to be available in December This will provide wider options for the Group. Draft website now in place.

The NWS Steering Group is being retained, and is due to meet week beginning 30<sup>th</sup> May to discuss a number of items discussed in this plan at the April 2016 meeting.

A meeting to discuss the Foinavon SSSI/ SAC took place. Action points and agreed cull levels were agreed.

Website being maintained and updated. Although the Steeing Group was not meeting as regularly, the Foinaven cull levels were in line with expectations, and SNH generally positive about the site.

**Develop Mechanisms to manage deer**Action Points

*PIA 1.1 Publish and endorse the new NWS Deer Management Plan in spring 2015.*

*Already actioned.*

*PIA 1.2 Re-assess the Group against both the Benchmark and the Public Interest criteria once DMP has been endorsed, and then annually thereafter.*

*ADMG/ SNH to formally re-assess in spring 2016. Informal re-assessment by DMP author indicates very strong improvements across a number of key areas.*

*Assessment took place on 13<sup>th</sup> April with SNH and Steering Group reps.. This was a very useful exercise for all concerned. Provisional, informal scores were 82% for Group Operation and 68% for delivery of public benefit.*

*The assessment compared well to other DMG areas.*

*VC to complete ADMG health check for NWS in conjunction with SNH in June 2018, in advance of 2019 review.*

*PIA 1.3 Review the working plan on an annual basis and minute progress and changes.*

*Review of plan took place at 28<sup>th</sup> October meeting. Working Plan updated to reflect that review.*

*Working Plan reviewed again at 13<sup>th</sup> April meeting, with comments recorded in red here.*

*Plan reviewed at NWS meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2018.*

**Delivering Designated Features in to Favourable condition**Action

*PIA 2.1 Implement actions outlined in Working Plan re: designated sites.*

- *Druim na Coibe, Ben Loyal, Loch Meadie Peatlands and Bad na Gallaig are all now under an approved management regime, and it is considered that this will deliver Favourable condition in the medium term. Appropriate monitoring has been agreed. **These sites were progressing as hoped.***
- *Cape Wrath and the Southern Parphe are also considered to be in Recovering condition, with appropriate levels of herbivores, but a better system of monitoring requires to be implemented there. **Cape Wrath was monitored by SNH in summer 2015, with features now moving in to favourable condition.** As above, direction of travel here is in line with expectations.*
- *Invernaver is in Recovering condition, but the required management prescription there involves active shepherding of sheep, and deer densities are considered to be appropriate to the site.*

*These sites are all progressing. The Cape Wrath area was monitored in summer 2015 by MoD/ SNH. Results are yet to be collated.*

*The West Strathnaver and Syre Peatlands were serious affected by a 3000 ha wildfire in May 2018, the full impact of which was yet to be determined, but it has certainly been very detrimental to these two sites. There has also been a smaller fire reported on Ben Hutig.*

*Six sites are in Unfavourable condition, and the action required for each is given here*

below:

- Durness  
*One of three major landholdings has yet to agree a suitable arrangement for managing sheep. No impacts are currently attributed to deer.*  
 SNH report that progress is now being made on this site.
  
- A'Mhoine  
*Assured management is now in place on the major ownership, and deer densities are now likely to be appropriate across the whole. Agreement with crofters in relation to the northern part of the site would allow the whole area of nearly 6000 ha to move in to Recovering condition.*  
 Agreement still required over one small area of the site. The issue is not related to deer management. No change at this site.  
  
 Still no change to report.  
 No change May 2018
  
- Ben Hope  
*Measures currently in place should allow for restoration of all open ground features. Prescriptions currently being progressed for woodland area in conjunction with SNH, and once implemented, the whole site can be considered to be in Recovering condition.*  
 Agreed work has recently begun on this site under an SNH Management Agreement. This work has now been completed.  
 Site now in ownership of Wildland Ltd, with a significant deer cull now implemented. Existing fenced areas will be reviewed.
  
- Eriboll  
*As with Ben Hope, the main concerns are associated with the woodland area, and with bracken in particular. Open ground habitats are in assured management and recovering. The woodland remnant here is particularly badly degraded.*  
 Options are still being pursued at this site. No progress on actual works to date.  
  
 Eriboll had now been purchased by Wildland Ltd, and options for progressing issues there where being evaluated and discussed with SNH. There were significant sheep numbers on the site, and the Strathbeg woodland site was shared with Reay Forest.
  
- Foinaven  
*Positive progress with deer management has been made with most landowners, and the expectation is that Foinaven as a whole will move towards Recovering status in the near future. There requires to be a focus maintained on addressing regeneration of the woods at Strathbeg.*  
 HIA impact assessments were completed this summer. Currently awaiting results which will inform deer densities going forwards. Results of 2015 monitoring were disappointing. SNH to meet with estates in late May to discuss and agree cull targets for the coming year.  
  
 Meeting took place as agreed. Actions agreed and cull levels advised for 2016/17 and beyond. Cull levels in line with or beyond cull targets. Eriboll and Polla were now owned by Wildland Ltd.

- West Strathnaver

*The main issue is burning, leading to ground vegetation which is not very resilient and prone to trampling damage, although overall deer numbers are in line with densities on similar habitats which are in favourable or recovering condition. Drainage on part of the site is also an issue. The main management action here is to try and prevent any further fires across the site.*

**No fires reported on this site during 2015.**

**Large fire reported above in May 2018.**

- River Borgie SSSI/ SAC

*This site is designated for freshwater pearl mussels. There is little direct relevance to deer.*

*PIA 2.2 Also in Working Plan, implement the series of actions required to monitor designated sites over the ten year period of this plan.*

**Monitoring schedule yet to be devised. This will be a key objective of a subsequent ECAF application.**

**Draft habitat monitoring programme to be presented at autumn 2016 meeting.**

**Not yet produced, as mechanism for forwarding not established. Postponed to spring meeting.**

**Steering Group to put habitat monitoring plan in place summer 2018, to report September 2018, along with necessary training.**

### **Manage Deer to retain existing Native Woodland cover and improve woodland condition in the medium to long term.**

#### Actions

*PIA 3.1 Achieve a reduction in browsing pressure using fencing in the Strathbeg Woods and Ben Hope Woodlands, by the end of the first five year period of this plan, 2020.*

**Suitable arrangements have been agreed and implemented over part of Strathbeg and the Hope woodlands.**

**The Hope woodlands and part of Strathbeg were now in ownership of Wildland, and it is expected that suitable deer management will be put in place to deal with these, yet TBC.**

*PIA 3.2 Monitor the browsing levels within the Loyal Estate and Hope Estate woodlands over the next 2-3 years to determine whether impacts have been reduced to low or medium.*

**This work is ongoing from Wildland Ltd, who have also commissioned and implemented 2 X additional helicopter counts of this area in 2015. Ongoing. Deer culls have been adjusted to compensate for higher deer densities than anticipated in spring 2015.**

**Wildland Ltd reported that regeneration of birch and willow was now starting to become evident on Loyal.**

**Wildland Ltd to forward data summer 2018. Progress on these sites would increase % of woodland at suitable grazing pressure from 57- 81%.**

### **Demonstrate DMG contribution to woodland expansion target**

Actions

*PIA 4.1 NWS DMG members will not be asked to deliver a particular level of woodland creation over the period of this plan, but encouragement will be given to any proposals that increase regeneration and connectivity in and around designated and ancient woodland areas. In terms of mitigation of climate change, by far the greater contribution can be made by ensuring appropriate management of blanket bogs which extend to over 51,000 ha across the DMG.*

**This remains the single most important habitat objective within the Group area. Almost all of the resource is either now in favourable condition, or under a form of assured management which is likely to deliver this in the medium term.**

*PIA 4.2 It is anticipated that within the first 2-3 years of this plan that Wildland Ltd will outline the extent of woodland creation that they would like to undertake.*

**Plans are still in preparation.**

**Wildland to be asked to confirm current position.**

*PIA 4.3 NWS DMG to assess the impact on deer populations of any proposals that come forwards from Wildland Ltd. It may be that the reduction cull already undertaken will result in a significant extension of low density woodland habitat across the 3 X properties and that no further action is required.*

**Plans are still in preparation.**

**On hold, see above.**

**Assessment to be made summer 2018.**

**Monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside**Action Points

*PIA 5.1 An agreed monitoring programme for these habitats will be devised during the summer of 2015, to be endorsed and included in this plan by autumn 2015.*

**This plan to be taken forwards by a facilitator in 2016.**

**See above.**

**Improve Scotland's ability to store carbon**Actions

*PIA 6.1 Achieve and maintain a broad target deer density of 5 deer per sq km or less across the DMG area. This should now broadly be the case already.*

**Population models indicate lower deer numbers across most of the DMG area, with the exception of Ben Loyal, and parts of the Foinaven area. Both are subject to extensive habitat monitoring activity.**

**Overall densities now expected to be much lower than this, hopefully to be confirmed by helicopter count, spring 2019.**

*PIA 6.2 Achieve the reduction in herbivore impacts to woodland sites suggested earlier in this section of the document by the end of the first five year period of the plan.*

**Progress on this has been noted above.**

**Data to be provided by Wildland Ltd, summer 2018.**

*PIA 6.3 Discourage any burning that might impact on peatland sites.*

No known wildfire incidents in 2015.

*A large peatland fire took place on the Melness Crofters Estate in spring 2015, outwith designated areas. It is not known how the fire started. NWS member personnel helped put the fire out.*

*As above, one large fire west of Strathnaver May 2018, one small fire on Ben Hutig. Fire risk this spring has been recorded as “extreme”.*

*PIA 6.4 Contribute to River Basin Management Planning as appropriate when requests to do so are forthcoming.*

*No requests have been made.*

## **Reduce or mitigate the risk of invasive, non- native species**

### Action

*PIA 7.1 Cull spreading sika deer in order to contain the current population in the southern part of the group.*

*Spreading Sika deer have been culled on Merkland, Reay Forest and Altnaharra over the last year. Important not to under-estimate their ability to spread.*

*Sika culls in the Group have been in line with previous years, with no obvious evidence of expansion.*

*A mature sika stag was spotted on Altnaharra hill, the first in 17 years.*

*No evidence of expansion, May 2018, with only Sika culled being towards the South of Group in areas of resident populations.*

*PIA 7.2 Monitor woodland habitats in the south of the Group to establish if there is any evidence for sika numbers increasing there to unsustainable levels. This to be achieved by Group members, with advice from SNH as required. In practice, it is likely that an increasing population will export individuals to be culled in migration corridors to the west and to the north.*

*No evidence of increased pressure, but extensive felling and restocking efforts in FE Dalchork requires very heavy culling of Sika in that area.*

## **Protection of Historic and Cultural Features**

### Actions

*PIA 8.1 The DMG will maintain communication with the local community and look to address any issues that are identified with regards to sites of cultural interest and herbivore grazing.*

*No agency communications made.*

*No comments made.*

*PIA 8.2 As required by Forestry Commission, all potential woodland creation projects, including natural regeneration schemes, will be assessed by the applicants for any negative impacts on cultural or archaeological sites.*

*No new woodland projects in the area. FCS are to update their planning systems so that a group such as NWS DMG can register to be notified of any new forestry proposals within the area.*

**Delivering higher standards of competence in deer management**

Action Points

*PIA 9.1 Clarify the definitions of “trained hunter” status and Fit & Competent register for all Group personnel, and look to ensure that all personnel hold trained hunter status by the end of 2016.*

*As above. In hand.*

*PIA 9.2 Maintain communication with Community Councils and Grazing committees in relation to any concerns that they may have in relation to unregulated deer culling activities, involving the local police where necessary.*

*There have been a number of reported incidents of poaching recently, with dead animals recovered, and bags containing heads located in several areas to the eastern side of the Group. Group members were made aware of local initiatives to collate intelligence on this. No additional poaching over the winter period.*

*Some limited activity in NW part of Group area.*

*As noted above, emails to be re-added to distribution list.*

**Contribute to Public Health and wellbeing**

Action Points

*PIA 10.1 Maintain communication with local Community Councils re: DVCs and look to implement any mitigation which may be deemed helpful in reducing local risk, particularly at Kinlochbervie.*

*No additional communications on this.*

*Situation at Kinlochbervie to be added to November 2018 meeting agenda, and effort made to attract community input on this.*

*PIA 10.2 DMG to clarify “Trained Hunter” status and ensure that all have attained this by end of 2016.*

*In hand.*

*PIA 10.3 Remind DMG members on an annual basis about the dangers of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and individual members to ensure safety precautions are taken by anyone who has had recent contact with deer or habitats in North America.*

*Subject raised at this meeting and minuted.*

*A case had recently been found in reindeer in Norway, so the threat level had increased. All members with Scandinavian guests to emphasize the need for added hygiene control, in particular to equipment, boots and clothing. ADMG, BDS and others have circulated information sheets on the subject, and these have been circulated to members via e- Scope.*

*Five cases had now been established in Scandinavia. This was a very significant issue that all Group members needed to be aware off.*

*Issue raised again May 2018.*

*PIA 10.4 DMG to highlight the risks of ticks and Lyme’s Disease to their guests and the public more generally through all appropriate channels.*

*Subject raised at this meeting and minuted.*

*PIA 10.5 DMG to work with SNH and Highland Council re: improving access track at Ben*

Hope.

No action yet taken.

Nothing to report.

*PIA10.6 Group members and DMG to all promote a positive and welcoming message to all those visiting the area throughout the year.*

Access provision is good within the area.

### **Maximize Economic benefits associated with deer**

#### Action Points

*PIA 11.1 Increase awareness of the value of deer in and around areas of population, to emphasize the point that deer in these areas provide positive outcomes as well as some negative ones.*

Link to new website will be distributed to community groups, B & B premises etc when it is ready. Link already distributed. All members to forward further as they deem appropriate.

*PIA 11.2 Investigate the possibility for a local means of advertising sporting opportunities within the area, during the first 2-3 years of this plan.*

New website can potentially be used for this.

*PIA 11.3 Investigate the potential for joint venison/ lamb use of larders during the first 2-3 years of this plan. If appropriate, DMG to consider SRDP funding to help deliver.*

No action yet taken on this. Clarification provided at meeting that shared use of larders is permissible, as long as deer and other species do not occupy the premises at the same time.

### **Minimize the economic costs of deer management**

#### Action Points

*PIA 12.1 DMG to assess the current PACEC survey in to the value/ costs of deer management and extract information from NWS in order to inform more fully the above narrative. Complete and adapt if necessary by spring 2016.*

PACEC report not yet available. This report does not produce enough information at an individual DMG level to be practical or useful.

*PIA 12.2 Engage with Grazing Committees to collate deer culls on lower ground, and see what management action might be employed to mitigate against unnecessary expense to crofters, and loss of deer to the deer management group as a whole. Set up communication and reporting structures by spring 2016.*

To be undertaken before Spring 2016 meeting. Communications initiated, but little feedback as yet. See above comments.

### **Ensure effective communication in deer management issues**

#### Action Point

*PIA 13.1 Take forwards those actions outlined in the Communications Policy/ Working Plan by spring 2016*

Actions being taken forwards.

### **Ensure Deer welfare at individual and population level**

Action Points

*PIA 14.1 Engage grazing committees and help support training where appropriate to do so. Try to close down opportunities for unregulated stalking activity through peer pressure.*

Ongoing activity. Group to strengthen communications with grazing committees/ community councils.

Little significant poaching activity at present.

*PIA 14.2 Focus on bringing natural habitats in to favourable condition status.*

By far the greater part of the area is now in favourable/ satisfactory condition, and deer densities less than 5 per sq km will help make sure that this remains the case.

*PIA 14.3 Liaise locally on significant woodland management operations where these affect shelter for deer.*

No current issues. All members to contact DMG re: any plans to clear fell areas of trees.

No new schemes of relevance to the Group.

No new schemes coming forward. Progress with regeneration on Wildland Ltd estates was noted.

*PIA 14.4 Collect deer information within the Group as per agreed recommendations. This will provide animal- specific data which can be monitored and compared to identify potential welfare issues within the area.*

Information will be gathered from spring 2016 onwards. There was not sufficient time within the Agenda to address this item. Postponed to spring 2017 meeting. It is not thought that there are any density- dependent issues within the Group at present, with deer populations being relatively low throughout, among the lowest in Scotland.

NWS DMG would look to take forwards a common reporting system from 2017 onwards. Draft culling record sheets are available on NWS DMG website.

Not yet implemented. NWS to try and identify some-one who might be willing to do this in 2019. All DMG areas struggle with this item, although the inclination to do it is always there.

The following model is the agreed deer management model to be followed by the group during the period of this plan. The main objective of this management regime is to *actively maintain the habitats, forage and shelter required to sustain a healthy, resilient and productive deer herd*, capable of supporting an ongoing stag cull of 487 animals, and also be in keeping with the main natural heritage and woodland & croft protection objectives within the area. An agreed apportionment by Deer Management Unit of the cull for 2016-17, is also provided for each of the three sub-groups within NWSDMG as a separate document, confidential to Group members only. An Excel spreadsheet version of these models is provided as [Appendix 7, NWS Five Year Population model](#).

**The population model for NWSDMG will be updated in early summer to reflect 2018 count information.**

### **North West Group**

In this area, the projected culls going forward have been changed (October 2016) to allow for an agreement reached with SNH to manage habitats within and around the Foinaven SSSI/ SAC area, and also for the proposed reduction culls on Eriboll Estate, Polla and the west part of Strathmore, now all purchased by Wildland Ltd. It is likely that other properties within the sub- area may decrease their hind culls to allow for this, and the overall situation will have to be monitored.

### **North East Group**

The population model allows for this area allows that the significant reduction culls on Loyal, Kinloch and Hope & Melness Estates are almost complete (October 2016), but that reduction culls on the eastern side of Strathmore have yet to take place. These reduction culls dominate the group area, with numbers under considerable pressure in peripheral properties.

### **South Group**

The deer population in the south of the group is believed to be fairly stable, with a stable cull having been taken from this for a number of years. The 2012 helicopter count was considered to be a serious under-estimate in this area, and requires to be regarded with some caution. The population model suggests that the sustainable cull in the South Group is lower than that actually taken. A reliable baseline count needs to be established to rectify this. Otherwise, designated features in this area are in favourable condition, the cull is stable and sporting requirements are being met, all suggesting that little change to current practice is required in this area.

**As per other areas, a significant reduction in hind cull is required for 2015-16 and 2016- 17.**

<b>North west sub group</b>				
	<b>Stags</b>	<b>Hinds</b>	<b>Calves</b>	<b>Density</b>
<b>March 2016 Population</b>	1329	1778	627	5.4
<b>2016 summer Population</b>	1643	2092	753	6.5
<b>2016/17 Proposed Cull</b>	322	550	208	
<b>2017 Mortality</b>	33	42	45	
<b>2017 Spring Population</b>	1288	1500	500	4.7
<b>2017 Summer Population</b>	1538	1750	630	5.6
<b>2017/18 Proposed Cull</b>	178	250	85	
<b>2018 Mortality</b>	31	35	38	
<b>2018 Spring Population</b>	1329	1465	507	4.8
<b>2018 Summer Population</b>	1582	1718	619	5.6
<b>2018/19 Proposed Cull</b>	178	200	67	
<b>2019 Mortality</b>	79	86	37	
<b>2019 Spring Population</b>	1325	1432	315	4.4
<b>2019 Summer Population</b>	1483	1590	572	5.3
<b>2019/20 Proposed Cull</b>	178	200	67	
<b>2020 Mortality</b>	30	32	34	
<b>2020 Spring Population</b>	1275	1358	471	4.5
<b>2020 Summer Population</b>	1511	1593	574	5.3
<b>2020/21 Proposed Cull</b>	178	200	67	
<b>2021 Mortality</b>	30	32	34	
<b>2021 Spring Population</b>	1302	1362	472	4.5
<b>2021 Summer Population</b>	1538	1598	575	5.3
<b>2021/22 Proposed Cull</b>	178	200	67	
<b>2022 Mortality</b>	31	32	35	
<b>2022 Spring Population</b>	1330	1366	474	4.6
<b>2022 Summer Population</b>	1567	1603	577	5.4
<b>2022/23 Proposed Cull</b>	178	200	67	
<b>2023 Mortality</b>	31	32	35	
<b>2023 Spring Population</b>	1357	1370	475	4.6
<b>2023 Summer Population</b>	1595	1608	579	5.4

<b>North east sub group</b>				
	<b>Stags</b>	<b>Hinds</b>	<b>Calves</b>	<b>Density</b>
<b>March 2016 Population</b>	581	1172	373	3.4
<b>2016 summer Population</b>	768	1359	421	4.0
<b>2016/17 Proposed Cull</b>	223	372	122	
<b>2017 Mortality</b>	15	27	25	
<b>2017 Spring Population</b>	529	959	274	2.8
<b>2017 Summer Population</b>	666	1096	340	3.3
<b>2017/18 Proposed Cull</b>	89	50	18	
<b>2018 Mortality</b>	13	22	20	
<b>2018 Spring Population</b>	564	1024	301	3.0
<b>2018 Summer Population</b>	714	1175	364	3.6
<b>2018/19 Proposed Cull</b>	89	100	33	
<b>2019 Mortality</b>	36	59	36	
<b>2019 Spring Population</b>	590	1016	224	2.9
<b>2019 Summer Population</b>	702	1128	350	3.5
<b>2019/20 Proposed Cull</b>	89	100	33	
<b>2020 Mortality</b>	14	23	21	
<b>2020 Spring Population</b>	599	1006	296	3.0
<b>2020 Summer Population</b>	746	1153	358	3.6
<b>2020/21 Proposed Cull</b>	89	100	33	
<b>2021 Mortality</b>	15	23	21	
<b>2021 Spring Population</b>	642	1030	303	3.1
<b>2021 Summer Population</b>	794	1182	366	3.7
<b>2021/22 Proposed Cull</b>	89	100	33	
<b>2022 Mortality</b>	16	24	22	
<b>2022 Spring Population</b>	689	1058	311	3.3
<b>2022 Summer Population</b>	845	1214	376	3.9
<b>2022/23 Proposed Cull</b>	89	100	33	
<b>2023 Mortality</b>	17	24	23	
<b>2023 Spring Population</b>	739	1090	321	3.4
<b>2023 Summer Population</b>	899	1250	388	4.0

<b>South sub group</b>				
	<b>Stags</b>	<b>Hinds</b>	<b>Calves</b>	<b>Density</b>
<b>March 2016 Population</b>	430	624	224	4.1
<b>2016 summer Population</b>	542	736	221	4.8
<b>2016/17 Proposed Cull</b>	115	75	25	
<b>2017 Mortality</b>	11	15	13	
<b>2017 Spring Population</b>	416	646	183	4.0
<b>2017 Summer Population</b>	507	738	258	4.8
<b>2017/18 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2018 Mortality</b>	10	15	15	
<b>2018 Spring Population</b>	422	648	218	4.1
<b>2018 Summer Population</b>	531	757	227	4.8
<b>2018/19 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2019 Mortality</b>	11	15	14	
<b>2019 Spring Population</b>	445	667	147	4.0
<b>2019 Summer Population</b>	519	740	222	4.7
<b>2019/20 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2020 Mortality</b>	10	15	13	
<b>2020 Spring Population</b>	433	650	184	4.0
<b>2020 Summer Population</b>	525	742	223	4.7
<b>2020/21 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2021 Mortality</b>	11	15	13	
<b>2021 Spring Population</b>	440	652	184	4.1
<b>2021 Summer Population</b>	532	744	223	4.8
<b>2021/22 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2022 Mortality</b>	11	15	13	
<b>2022 Spring Population</b>	446	654	185	4.1
<b>2022 Summer Population</b>	539	747	224	4.8
<b>2022/23 Proposed Cull</b>	75	75	25	
<b>2023 Mortality</b>	11	15	13	
<b>2023 Spring Population</b>	453	657	186	4.1
<b>2023 Summer Population</b>	546	749	225	4.8

There is some doubt over the actual deer population at present within the southern area of the group. Of the three population models, there is currently a lesser degree of confidence in this southern model.

*The property- specific culls are outlined in [Appendix 5. NWS Target Culls 2015- 16](#). These are confidential to Group members and to SNH.*

## Habitat Monitoring

A key part of this plan will be to agree, fund and implement a comprehensive programme of habitat monitoring across the DMG, both on designated sites and in the wider countryside.

Such a programme will consist of a combination of statutory Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) by SNH, and private habitat impact assessments (HIA), a proportion of which may be carried out by contractor, or where training may be required to bring estate staff up to the necessary level of ability to do this themselves. A key part of any programme will be agency support in identifying sample plots, and storage and upkeep of information.

ADMG are currently working with SNH to deliver a mechanism for helping support habitat assessment and information storage. This programme is known as SWARD, it has been piloted over the past 18 months or so, and should be available for use in the near future.

Such a mechanism is required to allow the Group to quantify the resources needed to carry out monitoring over the ten year period of this plan. It is not considered that the Group are in a position to do this at the moment.

It is suggested that such a programme of monitoring is established by the Group in conjunction with SNH by April 2016, with sufficient information being available to allow an SRDP application to be submitted on behalf of the Group. It is suggested that between the Collaboration Fund, the Agro Environment Scheme and support from SNH, that it will be possible to cover the cost of development of such a habitat monitoring programme, which is expected to include provision for training as well as the potential use of contractors.

Options have been explored by the NWS DMG Steering Group, but it is felt that support mechanisms are not yet fit for purpose at present.

Habitat monitoring proposals being developed in summer 2018.

One interesting question going forwards will be the degree to which habitat monitoring should take place in the wider countryside, outwith designated sites. The extent and distribution of designated features across the group is such that assessment of the designated features could almost certainly be used as a proxy for the whole area.

There may be some exceptions to this, and this will have to be looked at in some detail, but the mixture of habitat types is relatively straightforward across the group area, the the condition of the designated habitats is likely to give a good indication of the condition of the habitat resources as a whole.

## NWS DMG Rural Development Contracts

The following group members have ongoing RDC contracts which include an element of deer management planning' focused mainly on restoration and maintenance of peatland habitats. In addition to these, a number of common grazing committees also have RDC contracts, again focused on peatlands/ moorland management. In most cases, these are important to the income of each committee, and include monitoring requirements as well as sheep stocking densities and a commitment not to burn heather. In almost all these latter cases, the grazing committees have very little information on deer numbers, let alone any input to management decisions regarding them.

In general, the applications have been individually applied for, albeit with some SNH encouragement. Monitoring requirements vary, and, as a whole, the contracts appear relatively disjointed. Going forwards, there is a strong argument for entering in to a larger, collaborative SRDP application, covering a number of key properties.

Most of these contracts are now coming to an end, or have just recently come to the end of their five year period. It would be beneficial for the Group, for individual applicants and for the habitats they wish to protect if there was a better co-ordination of contracts going forwards, and this should be possibly through the new mechanisms which are understood to be coming forwards under SRDP. **These mechanisms are proving to be unsatisfactory in practice.**

*Altnaharra*

*Keodale*

*Rhigolter Farms*

*Rispond/ Durness*

*Strathmore*

*Eriboll*

*Syre/ North Loch Naver*

A number of individual properties have their own deer management plans although, in general, these are of limited value as they do not really link to adjacent properties, and this current DMG plan should be of greater use and interest to them. Several of these plans amount to policy statements only.

*Reay Forest*

*Sandwood*

*MoD*

*Tongue estate*

*Achnabourin.*

A partial attempt was made to devise a Group DMP in 2006, and more recently, SNH tried to begin a management planning process, with a partial return of questionnaires.

There are a number of management agreements in place as well with SNH, particularly with common grazing committees, but also with Gualin Estate.

Reay Forest Estate and Syre/ North Loch Naver have long term forest plans in place, which include an element of felling/ fencing/ restocking of mature conifer plantations. A number of group members, as well as grazing committees, have entered in to woodland creation schemes in the past five years, and these will have maintenance obligations.

## Potential Schemes within the period of this Plan

A number of existing schemes will have lapsed, or are about to lapse, and some of these should be renewed going forwards.

It is likely to be more beneficial to all concerned if a single co-ordinated application is developed, and the new SRDP scheme should certainly allow for that. **(This appears not to be the case in practice.)** That would allow for better oversight of the whole, and reduce overall administrative and application costs, although it is likely that many properties will simply decide to deliver their individual deer culls through their own resources, and retain flexibility in that way.

In the preparation of this plan, no group members came forwards with any significant plans for woodland creation, or changes in livestock numbers which would include grant scheme input.

The proposals by Wildland Ltd to create/ maintain a range of habitat types are still in development, and it is likely that the deer cull already achieved will satisfy many of these. It will be a number of years before any woodland regeneration can be assessed and quantified, and it be the case that a formal SRDP application is applicable at that point. The scale and nature of that is not possible to determine at this time, but there may be deer management implications arising from that, and the DMG will be an important consultee in that process.