

North West Sutherland Deer Management Group

Held at Lairg Community Centre, Lairg

Wednesday 29th October 2014 at 2pm

MINUTES

Present:

David Allison (DA) – Reay and Acting Chair

Pieter Bakker (PB) – Altnaharra & Vice-Chair

Heather Gow (HG) - Strathmore

Peter Voy (PV) - Sutherland Estates

Annette Parrott (AP) – West Shinness

Derick Macaskill (DM) – FCS

Ian Smart (IS) – Ben Loyal (Wildland Ltd)

Craig Rigby (CR) – North Loch Naver

Stephen March (SM) – Gobernuisgach (Reay Forest)

Colin Campbell (CC) – Altnaharra

David Horsburgh (DH) – Syre

Iain McDonald (IM) – Hope Estate (Wildland Ltd)

Hugh Montgomery (HM) – Kinloch (Wildland Ltd)

Roddy Watt (RW) – Merkland

George Woods (GW) – Merkland

Richard Osborne (RO) – Rhiconich

Duncan Shaw (DS) – Gualin

Thomas MacDonell (TM) – Wildland Ltd

In attendance:

Linzi Seivwright (LS) – SNH/ADMG

Valerie Wilson (VW) – SNH

Victor Clements (VC) – Plan Author

1. The Acting Chairman opened the meeting and thanked everyone for coming.
DA explained that he was taking on the role of the proxy chair to stand in for AM at short notice who was unable to attend due to personal reasons.

2. **Apologies**

Andrew Marsham (Chair)

Sebastian Green (Syre)

Ross Peters (Achnabourin)

Don O'Driscol (JMT)

3. **Minutes**

These were agreed as an accurate record of the meeting (TM proposed and PB seconded).

4. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arsing.

5. **Chairman's Report**

DA explained that all the Deer Management Groups in Scotland have been going through an Assessment process – which is a two tiered process assessing groups against the ADMG Benchmark and how the group is contributing to delivering sustainable deer management and the Public Interest. LS would be providing more information later in the meeting.

6. **Election of Office Bearers**

DA explained that regrettably Anne Mackay had decided to stand down from the Secretarial role, largely due to the difficulties in getting members to cooperate. DA took the opportunity to thank AM for all her hard work. PB/AM to send a letter of thanks on behalf of the group.

Action: PB/AM

There were no nominations for Secretary but DA suggested that members come forward with suggestions for a replacement. The current remunerations would be £1000 per year with approximately 8 hours per month but recent issues with the plan suggested that there might be a little more work required. **Action All Members**

DA proposed that AM and PB carry through until the Deer Management Plan is past to get over an unsettled period with the additional pressure from the development of the plan and will allow time to find a replacement. The group agreed this approach.

Action: AM & PB

Chair and Vice Chair – there were no additional nominations. DA proposed AM be re-elected as Chair (HG seconded), DA proposed PB be re-elected as Vice-Chair (TM seconded).

Treasurers report – there have been on-going difficulties trying to access the Group's Bank Account details but hopefully this will be resolved soon. DA proposed that a fresh account be created to solve these issues but it was recognised it might be difficult to get members to change their standing orders. HG explained that she sends statements to AM and provided the latest to the meeting. HG to work with AM and PB to try and resolve.

Action HG, AM & PB

7. ADMG's Benchmark and Delivering the Public Interest

LS explained that as a result of the RACCE Committee Enquiry in November, all 48 DMGs in Scotland were expected to have an effective deer management plan (DMP) in place by 2016. In order for a DMP to be effective, it would have to demonstrate how the group were delivering the public interest relevant to local circumstances. The Public Interest is set out in the Code of Deer Management and covers not just environmental elements but also economic and social issues.

In order to measure progress in 2016, SNH were going through an Assessment process with all 48 DMGs across Scotland to look at how well groups were currently functioning according the guidelines set out in the ADMG Benchmark and to see what Public Interest is currently being delivered.

LS explained that because the group were currently going through the process of developing a Deer Management Plan – this was a great opportunity for the DMG to ensure that the final would plan would meet the expected requirements.

8. Presentation of Draft Deer Management Plan by Victor Clements

VC provided an update to the group about the DMP planning process that he had been conducting over the summer. He reported a good level of participation but that there were still a number of outstanding properties still to provide input. There were still 4/5 small woodland properties he needed contact details for.

VC was currently concentrating on the functional aspects of the plan – the population model and the individual objectives. He indicated that sub-populations required to be discussed and agreed.

VC went on to report on some feedback he has received from Members:

1. It was perceived to be a fragmented group and difficult to make work due to size
2. There was a need to clarify the main contacts and chain of commands- and general communication issues.
3. It was difficult to get enough people to make group work. Personnel from grazing committees could possibly provide some of this function –there were 38/40 around the periphery of the group.
4. There had been a drift or expansion of deer range from the centre of the group to the periphery – possibly because of sheep reductions and crofters not being as active. Crofters were perhaps not shooting as many deer – hence deer were resident now where they maybe weren't 10 years ago. There were also issues identified with DVCs, poaching and deer in gardens. But B&B owners were happy to see deer - so some positives.

5. Wild Land proposals in the middle of the group – but only two properties identified that this was a major issue. Most of the group agreed that they would just get along with whatever actions were being implemented.
6. Designated sites (25% of the whole area).
7. Public safety – reports of unregulated discharge of firearms/ deer culling.
8. Smaller issues: better larder provision, better advertising of sporting opportunities i.e. through hotels. Opportunities for sporting marketing (not just deer but also fishing etc). Grazing committees have SRDP on peat land /designated sites with large amounts of money involved – livestock important but deer information missing.
9. Woodland expansion on in-bye land – planting schemes.
10. Plantations felled due to needle blight and proposals for other plantations in the future to be felled so need to take all this into consideration
11. Frequency of large fires and their scale over the last 10 years is significant.
12. Lack of general enforcement of things due to police staffing issues.

VW gave a progress report on behalf of the Steering group which comprises AM, PB, DA, TM, RW, DS as well as VW, LS and VC). Group had met twice since the last DMG meeting and had also gone through the SNH assessment. Steering Group had looked at population models and divisions for the sub-populations which has been a difficult subject to resolve. End of March is the deadline for the draft plan– so need to get feedback from the group to help the development of the plan. The group were asked to provide feedback by the 21st of November and VC will use this to update plan before Christmas. Going in the right direction but have had to include the PIO from the assessment – so some additional work but VC making good progress.

Action All Members

VC outlined a number of aspects to the plan –maps, population model for 5 years (still very much in progress) and text of the document (currently 50% of total). Public benefit elements still to be included but VC will complete over the winter. VC talked the group through the maps.

Maps should be small and easy to distribute by email. They have been kept purposefully simple. Location map shows boundaries but kept simple. Group asked if they would like different markers. Members map again kept simple.

Reporting Units and sub-populations map – important as group identified that group too big to think about as one population. Group broken down into three sub-populations (but one DMG). VC has used the boundaries for the sub-populations as the basis for the population modelling but pointed out that may not yet be quite right – VC asked group to comment.

Management Units map -50 management units overall, and made provisions for some of the smaller woodland properties (some of which do not wish to be part of the group).

Livestock map - Members asked about sheep and historic numbers in order to get a feel for total herbivore pressure on the ground. Information also included from RPID on Parish basis. Bright green is land with sheep, very light green insignificant numbers on the ground and yellow areas with no sheep at all. It was pointed out that this map may be slightly misleading as neighbours sheep might impact on your ground. VC suggested that it must be considered if the impacts are significant and whether action is required. In Tongue sheep populations are rising possibly due to younger crofters coming on board. Headline message is sheep numbers are relatively low overall.

Range of Designated sites over the DMG map. SSSIs and SACs on same map. Lots of designations across the DMGs. A map has also been produced that highlights the condition of the various sites based on a Red/Amber/Green approach which will require to be updated based on the latest information available. SPAs and Ramsar (EU Wetland designation) Sites Map – all overlapping with SSSIs and SACs. Landscape designation (National Scenic Areas) and Wildland (non-designated) category.

Management objectives map – tried to show what the main objectives of each Deer management Unit are. The group discussed that this current map may be slightly misleading as the objectives of the group might be quite broad. Group discussed that it might be an alternative approach to discuss representing the map as land-use or as aspirational densities to deliver individual objectives. The group was urged to provide feedback as how they might like the issues to be captured. Other maps may be required.

VC emphasised that the heart of the plan was the forward looking aspect of the plan and the three population models which look forward 5 years. VC looked to the most recent population information from 2012. It was accepted that whilst there was strong feeling that this helicopter count information was deemed to be inaccurate, it was the most recent complete information the group had (although some members helicopter count regularly). VC highlighted the need for a good baseline (possibility for the group to do a helicopter count in 2016 to provide a better baseline). VC talked the group through the population models and how they work. He also highlighted that they depend on a range of information, and it is important to get this information as accurate as possible. VC also highlighted that even small inaccuracies in the likes of the recruitment rate may have a significant knock-on effect to the model over a number of years.

VC reported that a relatively small change in the North West sub-population could provide a stable population deer. Probably don't have to change too much but doesn't take into account any deer being culled outwith the group i.e. on croft ground – this figure is unknown.

North East Group, if carry on will have a bigger impact over 5 years. VC highlighted that there may be amendments to this model based on latest feedback.

South group demonstrated the problem with population models in that the figures would appear to be unsustainable over time and would crash the population despite the fact that the estates involved have been carrying out this cull for the last number of years. This could highlight that either the starting figures are not right or that there is significant immigration from elsewhere. Hence the need to have accurate figures right from the start and the need to have the boundaries of the group right.

The group agreed that a helicopter count would be needed to help inform the models and provide a good starting point that would provide some confidence to the group. This could be complemented with recruitment counts on the ground.

For the purposes of population modelling at this stage, the 2008 deer count information would be used for the South Group in preference to the 2012 data, the former being deemed to be more accurate.

It was agreed that members carry on with culls as per the status quo for next year but with a view to seeking funding for the helicopter count in spring 2016. **Action LS**

VC commented that he would be adding to the text of the DMP and fine tuning it over the next few months. The important aspect is to ensure that the contact details and chain of command for all individual group members is correct and that the objectives of the deer

management unit are accurately reflected.
Members

Action All DMG

VC asked the Group to consider five questions

1. Do you want to include grazing committees? The Group agreed through the production of the plan, that the group extends invitations to the appropriate local organisations and invite input. The group voted on the principle of being inclusive and inviting input from appropriate interests such as grazing committees.
2. Helicopter count in 2016 or sooner. **Action PB and AM to discuss with Steering Group following discussion with SNH about funding.**
3. Is there a need to build up financial reserves to make cash flow easier?
4. Public Interest Questionnaire may need to be circulated to capture some missing information.
5. Members to come back/respond with information more promptly. Information on the DMP is required by 21st November.

Action All Members

The Group thanked VC for his hard work so far.

9. Constitution Vote “Does the NWSDMG accept the Constitution put before them?”

VC explained that he had drafted a Group constitution but since then ADMG had come up with a draft template. The Group agreed that the Steering Group take responsibility for drafting the Constitution for acceptance at the next meeting. **Action Steering Group**

10. AOCB

TM indicated that Wildland Ltd were intended to shoot 380 hinds this season and that they may ask for an out of season authorisation to deliver this.

The issue about levies was raised and that individual estates should pay directly to the groups rather than paying a rate through ADMG. There is a problem with MOD who have arranged to pay ADMG centrally thus cutting out the local DMG. However, this had been resolved with FE who will now be paying direct to the Group. There may be an issue where FE are having to shoot greater numbers of Sika and whether they should pay the levy rate or whether this could be negotiated. DA had written to ADMG for clarification.

Action DA

11. Date of the next meeting

Lairg Community Centre Wednesday 25th March 2014 at 2pm. VC to circulate the Plan.

Action VC

