**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Annual General Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Thursday 26th May 2022 at 2pm**

*Minutes* ***Draft***

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all present to the meeting. 4 X members attended via Zoom link.

There were two new personnel involved with the DMG; David Campbell representing Gualin, and Megan Bregazzi representing FLS. Welcome to both. Derick MacAskill of FLS was now only working 3 X days a week.

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Thomas MacDonell (Wildland Ltd), David Campbell (Gualin), Annette Parrott (West Shinness), Richard Wright & Stefaan Antheunis (Achnabourin), Roddy Watt & Robert Woods (Merkland), Iain Robertson (MoD), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Derek Sutherland & Clovis Fletcher (Shinness), David Bell (Tongue estate), David Allison (Reay Forest), Ian Thomson (Rhigolter), Megan Bregazzi (FLS), David Shaw (Keoldale), Valerie Wilson (Nature Scot), Victor Clements (Facilitator & minutes).*

1. **Apologies**

*Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Derick MacAskill (FLS), Holly Deary (Nature Scot), Stew Gillies (MoD), Ben Mardell (Reay Forest), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Kirsty MacLeod (Administrator)*

1. **Minutes of the interim meeting held on 18th November 2021**

The minutes were taken as read with no changes or additions.

1. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising

1. **NWS DMG Accounts**

The current bank balance was £6191.68, but there were still £3485 of subscription invoices outstanding from both 2020 and 2021, and outstanding invoices for £5482.20 to be paid to ADMG to include their levy and website hosting.

If all subscriptions were collected in and outstanding bills paid, the balance would be £4194.48.

The outstanding subscriptions were concerning because they represented quite a significant proportion of the DMG finances, and the group had running costs to cover. TC to discuss with KML with a view to approaching those yet to pay, and we could adjust ADMG levy if required.

A budget will be produced to inform AGM in November, including an assessment of current subscription rates from members. It is worth noting that with declining deer populations, member subscriptions will inevitably fall as well, although the ADMG levy is on a five year rolling average, and will fall away more slowly.

Intention is to invoice for 2022 subscriptions relatively quickly now as all cull information has been received.

1. **Election of Office Bearers**

This would be addressed at AGM in November.

Kirsty MacLeod was having to adjust her role to maintaining the finances only, and was willing to accept reduced fee for doing this. VC would be responsible for taking minutes in short term, and happy to do that under existing arrangement and payment.

1. **2021/22 Season Review**

Far NW Area

There were few ongoing issues in this area, although suggested cull was slightly under target for the 3rd year running. MoD had increased their hind cull significantly, and Keoldale had achieved most of their cull early in the season to maximize value of venison and make best use of resources.

We had good input from Kinlochbervie, and Kinlochbervie Estate owner Sara Harkins has recently been in touch re taking a more active role in the deer group. The designated sites in this area were generally in favourable condition.

South Area

There is now a greater focus on this area. Deer numbers from counts are low, but tracking on designated peat has increased, and deer, including sika deer, are presumed to be hiding in forestry or passing through the area. Nature Scot had circulated some satellite imagery which showed deer tracking around the Fiag woodland block. A cull target for red hinds was set this year, and this was not achieved.

It was proposed to have a site meeting on Thurs 11th August, details TBC, but this would be a good opportunity to increase our understanding of the South sub area.

North East - West side of Strathnaver

DMG members had delivered a significant increase in hind cull this past season, but there were still very real issues with deer on low ground grazing in the strath. One of the grazing committees has been investigating the possibility of a 5 mile long deer fence to keep deer off the lower ground, tied in to existing fence on east side of the Naver. However, it appears this fence is not whole and deer can pass, and the project also does not seem to take account of the deer actually hefted to the fields that would inevitably get enclosed. The project seems to be well developed, with potential funding identified and quotes being sought, but there has been no communication until recently with deer group, and the impacts of such a scheme are not being properly assessed yet.

TC to organize meeting of all interested parties asap to try and address the situation. SGRPD need to assess any application for funds against the Joint Agency Guidance on fencing, but there was a concern that they would not do this, and that would create problems.

The situation is complicated by the fact that Scottish Ministers own the adjacent hill land, but that the various watercourses in the area had been retained by Sutherland estates when the property was sold in the past. This may well have implications for any new fence, as permission would be required.

The FGS Co-operation Grant may be one means of paying for the necessary development a project like this might need.

There is no question that the problem is real, and grazing areas are being badly effected. Whatever the outcome, there will be a need for co-ordinated culling along and cross Strathnaver, linking in to the Northern DMG area.

There seems to be a similar issue around the Borgie/ Skerray area, but necessary action in that area appears to be less contentious.

North East- Rest

Megan Bregazzi has recently taken over for FLS, with Derick MacAskill now partly retired.

The Wildland Ltd cull had been much reduced from last year, suggesting numbers using their ground were reduced. Wildland would be completing intensive regeneration monitoring this year.

Altnaharra had vastly increased their hind cull to clear ground and improve their chances of holding on to stags. However, they had now lost 50% of their expected stag cull, and do not see this situation improving. In previous years, their stag cull was very well integrated with fishing and accommodation, peatland was in good condition and they had undertaken extensive native woodland creation. The recent changes were very much beyond their control, and have been extremely harmful to their business with little environmental improvement or acknowledgement of problems caused. They fear changes in policy at Reay Forest will exacerbate the current situation further, making their deer operation unviable.

Foinaven area

A spring helicopter count across Reay Forest and Merkland estates showed many more deer than Reay Forest where expecting, although considerably less than projected from the summer 2019 count.

Reay Forest had commissioned research that suggested that they should be dropping their spring deer density from 9 to 6 deer per sq km to aid a range of open ground habitats, including the main Foinavon SSSI/ SAC site. They now planned to implement a deer reduction plan to achieve this, increasing hind culls to 280 animals and stags to 200 animals for 2 X years. This was a significant project, and Reay Forest appreciate that it will affect management on adjacent ground. There will be slightly different densities on different beats, depending on the natural heritage interests present.

Deer numbers on Merkland where more in line with expectation, and they would like to retain their traditional hind population of 200 animals. They have seen a big reduction in the stags that their ground carries, and hinds have disappeared over part of their estate now. It is not clear whether they will be able to adjust to management practices and objectives on adjacent ground.

David Campbell represented Gualin at the meeting, who were happy to contribute to management efforts in the wider area, as where Rhiconich, Rhigolter and Wildland Ltd. It was suggested that Kinlochbervie was considered as part of the wider area around Foinavon.

Rhigolter would be speaking to Nature Scot and the DMG about their habitat monitoring plans, so that a schedule could be designed to best effect.

It was agreed to arrange at meeting at the Village Hall in Achfary on 16th August, potentially starting at 10am. Details and agenda TBC, but objective was to agree a plan of action for the wider area, and communicate what people were intending to do.

All these proposals for significant changes to deer management practices should be seen in the context of a changing policy environment in Scotland, and many properties were contemplating or delivering significant deer reductions of this type for habitat management purposes.

1. **Recruitment 2022**

A reminder for this had not been sent out this spring, but there was a very significant indication from Reay Forest/ Merkland helicopter count that recruitment was very much lower this year, potentially 25% on Reay Forest, and slightly lower on Merkland. Others in the DMG has reported recruitment of c 25% as well, but the peripheral properties on better ground were likely to have had higher counts, notably Rhiconich on 39%. TC reported recruitment of 35% from east Sutherland, although parts of that DMG were very much more fertile and sheltered than NW Sutherland.

In principle, we will factor in a lower recruitment for 2022, with slightly higher figure for more peripheral properties. In practice, the population models are becoming increasingly difficult to implement, as evidenced by the Reay Forest/ Merkland count.

1. **Habitat Monitoring 2022**

In general, most members will not do any DMG HIA monitoring this year, except for those properties along the eastern side of the DMG who either did not do any blanket bog plots in 2021, or who need to use additional plots. The properties involved are Tongue, Achnabourin, Syre & North Lochnaver, Poole, Altnaharra, Fiag and Shinness. It is acknowledged that several of these properties are leased, and HIA puts an additional burden on personnel who may not have their time covered.

Elsewhere, the 2021 data gives a clear indication of priority areas. Individual members can carry out their own HIA if AECS applications commit them to doing this. Wildland Ltd will be reporting on more extensive regeneration monitoring later in the year.

The plan for 2023 is to look at dry shrub heath across the area, but there should be a discussion at November meeting about whether this is required or not, or is good value for money/ time. The Foinavon meeting should be good for informing this as any changes there will take time to filter through to vegetation growth.

1. **ADMG Update**

*ADMG Comment*

Analysis of drone trials was still ongoing. It is believed there are still issues to resolve in relation to flying permission.

The ADMG AGM has taken place in Inverness. There had been some fairly rigorous questioning of Nature Scot, with the point being made that they needed DMG members to help them deliver strategic objectives.

ScotGov had set up a Strategic Deer Board to take forwards a number of work programmes.

ADMG preferred a more focused upgrading of the existing deer legislation, rather than a more wide ranging environment bill.

A cull approval system was more contentious, and amounted to statutory deer management.

Lorna Slater MSP had taken on the remit for deer.

It was hoped that the venison price would improve this year. All members should check with game dealers what their position on non-lead ammunition was for the current season.

The Scottish Venison Partnership were looking at funding options at the moment.

ADMG were also looking to take forward an assessment/ health check process this summer, they were supporting the Deer Map initiative, a project to investigate CO2 emissions from deer management, the Common Ground initiative, and efforts to design a new ADMG logo.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

All relevant points brought up elsewhere in meeting, or covered in ADMG report.

1. **AOCB**

Reay Forest Estate had recently organized an open day in association with Countryside Learning Scotland, and also a Hill to Grill demonstration day, both events being very well attended and held to be very successful. Other members encouraged to consider similar events, as appropriate.

Valerie Wilson encouraged DMG members to reply to the consultation on the Flow Country World Heritage Site available online at present, particularly on boundaries, and how it might affect them.

David Shaw mentioned the North West 2045 initiative, and ScotGov initiative to set up a regional land use partnership area, based on a natural capital approach. DS would send info to TC as the Natural Partnership manager was keen to liaise with NWS DMG members.

Wildland Ltd confirmed that they would organize a site visit within NWS for DMG members on 17th August, the day after Foinavon meeting. Details TBC.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next full DMG meeting would take place on **Thursday 17th November, at 2 pm in the Lairg Community Centre**. We can look to provide a Zoom option. Please note, because this is well into the hind season, substantive decisions on cull levels will have to be taken at or as a result of sub- area meetings during the summer.

***Summary of additional meetings:***

1. Strathnaver meeting to discuss fencing proposal and the situation more generally. Details yet to be confirmed by Tom Chetwynd, but meeting to take place asap.
2. South sub area meeting on site. Provisional date Thursday 11th August. Details TBC with South area members.
3. Foinavon area meeting, 16th August, 10am at Village Hall, Achfary.
4. Wildland site visit, Wed 17th August. Rendevous and time TBC.