**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Foinavon Sub area meeting**

**10 am**

**Achfary Village Hall**

**Tuesday 16th August 2022**

**MINUTES**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

The Chair and David Allison welcomed everyone to Reay Forest Estate.

Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (NWS Facilitator), David Allison (Reay Forest Estate), Roddy Watt & Jack Ross (Merkland), Thomas McDonell (Wildland Ltd), Adele Beck (Independent ecologist for Wildland Ltd), Tom Turnbull (ADMG), Holly Deary & Valerie Wilson (Nature Scot), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate).

The purpose of the meeting was to try and focus attention on the area in and around the designated Foinavon SSSI/ SAC site, particularly in light of Reay Forest plans to reduce their deer density significantly. An attempt would be made to allocate culls for the season ahead.

1. **Apologies**

Ben Mardell (Reay Forest), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), David Elliot & Ian Thompson (Rhigolter)

1. **Nature Scot take on current situation**

*SSSI/ SAC Monitoring*

Nature Scot (then SNH) had last monitored the SSSI/ SAC open ground features in 2015, when most of them seemed to be in Unfavourable condition, and seemingly declining. The non- vegetation features however were broadly Favourable.

The designated woodland at Strathbeg was found to be Unfavourable in 2002, and this is not expected to have changed. The part on Reay Forest was fenced, The part on Wildland Ltd had sheep removed, and is now subject to deer reductions.

*Other relevant information*

Reay Forest HIA work in 2020 & 21 showed high impacts in the general area, and the 2019 helicopter count showed very high deer numbers in the general area on the highest ground. All information gathered suggests a need to reduce numbers in the wider area.

*Future planned work?*

Nature Scot see no immediate need to monitor again until some action is taken that might make a significant difference. They would however like to look at all features at the same time in 2024.

In the wider area, Nature Scot had monitored Arnaboll Woods this year, which was very likely to be Unfavourable due to bracken and deer impacts. One problem from Wildland perspective is that an adjacent AECS scheme requires sheep grazing, but no fence is present.

1. **Property feedback**

*Reay Forest*

Reay Forest had carried out an independent audit of their hill ground, and the conclusion was that the range of habitats available combined with high % of rock and standing water and lochs could only support a deer population of c 6 per sq km on average across the property, more in some areas, less in others. The estate have decided to reduce their densities to that recommended. Tied in with this are efforts to restore habitat in and around the river catchment to help salmon populations, including trying to provide more shade via native woodland regeneration. The estate are now very focused on this undertaking, from the owner down. Significant deer reductions will be required in the next two years or so. The estate are aware that this may have implications for some neighbours, but what is planned should help deal with the condition of the designated site. Reputation is important to the estate.

*Rhigolter*

Rhigolter has a significant sheep flock, and their impacts within the area tend to be higher than others. The shape of the ground makes it difficult to cull hinds in particular, and culls tend to be more variable than other properties. The owner does take some value from stags, and is happy in principle to take an agreed hind cull, but conditions can often conspire against them doing this.

*Rhiconich*

Deer populations and culls have been very steady for several years. Sheep have been removed over much of the area, and tree regeneration is in evidence. Rhiconich happy in principle to take a higher hind cull this year, to take pressure of croft land.

*Wildland Ltd*

Wildland Ltd were very focused on achieving their own objectives with nativ woodland restoration, which included part of Strathbeg woods. The Reay Forest proposals should help their aspirations.

*Merkland*

Merkland concerned that higher ReayForet culls comined with Wildland operations to the north will leave them with very few animals on the NWS side of their property. They are concerned about undergrazing, and may look at bringing back sheep and/ or cattle to the area if deer numbers go down.

*Gualin*

Gualin had agreed previously to a much mor significant cull this year, having not been very active for three years now. They were a small property, but their impacts were high. Their ground lay almost entirely within the designated site.

*Kinlochbervie*

In recent years, deer capacity on KLB estate had increased, cull numbers were submitted regularly, and owner was present at meeting and had joined DMG as a full member. There were 3 X grazing committee areas on KLB, deer numbers did seem to be increasing, and some negative impacts were associated with this. Eg Car accidents or near misses, and pressure on grazing ground. KLB on the periphery of Foinavon area of influence, but other members felt that input was valuable to this discussion.

There had been changes at the nearby JMT Sandwood property, and not clear how deer management would be undertaken there going forwards. This was a concern to some people within the area. VC would check with JMT what the current situation was.

1. **Analysis**

*Monitoring*

No more helicopter counting was anticipated in near to medium term, although Reay Forest would be looking at a helicopter count in 2024.

On habitat monitoring, there was support from Nature Scot for retaining a cycle of dwarf shrub heath and blanket bog monitoring. This had the advantage of keeping all properties engaged and their skills kept up. Everyone had at least sevral thousand hectares of peatland, and DSH was a good proxy for a suite of other species as well. In confirming plans for 2023, Reay Forest would consult internally in whether they would do this. It was anticipated that Wildland regeneration monitoring would allow for conclusions to be drawn for DSH.

*2022-23 culls*

Reay Forest where proposing to double their stag cull to 200 animals, and to increase their hind cull to 260 animals, an increase of 100. If an increased overall cull was to be obtained, then it was important that other properties held their existing hind cull levels. Wildland Ltd was reluctant to set a cull target as such, but expected a cull that was similar or possibly a bit more than 2021/22.

A target of 25 hinds was suggested for Kinlochbervie, Rhiconich are increasing their cull to 15-18 animals. Gualin had suggested they would take 20 hinds in 2022/23. Rhigolter sometimes found it difficult culling hinds due to the long, narrow shape of part of their property, and cull levels varied considerably from year to year on the back of this, but they are happy in principle to make a contribution to overall plan. Merkland where very concerned about falling deer numbers, and so a minimum allocation will be made to them.

Nature Scot to undertake some modelling independent of DMG, and advise on what they believe an appropriate hind cull to be.

1. **AOCB**

A meeting had been organized the following day to visit Wildland Ltd properties, meeting in Tongue and looking at some regeneration sites. This meeting was subsequently very well attended, and the day was considered to have been a success by those attending from throughout the NWS DMG area.

Another meeting had taken place the week before for the South sub area of NWS (Minuted separately and distributed).

TC was helping set up an initiative to reduce deer population within and around Strathnaver, with a contract being put out to potentially cull 500+ animals. It was a significant undertaking, but local parties were signed up to seeing this implemented.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next main NWS DMG meeting is on Thursday 17th Nov, 2pm in Community Centre in Lairg.

After the meeting, a number of site visits were made along the Laxford river to look at fish counting arrays, the Stack Woods SSSI and some birch regeneration along side the river.