

NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

Via Zoom online meetings
Thursday 22nd April 2021 at 2pm

DRAFT MINUTES

Present:

| | | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Robert Woods (RW) | <i>Merkland</i> | Thomas MacDonnell (TM) | <i>Wildland Ltd</i> |
| Georgie Woods (GW) | <i>Merkland</i> | Dr Phil Ratcliffe (PR) | <i>Wildland Ltd</i> |
| Roddy Watt (RW) | <i>Merkland</i> | David Allison (DA) | <i>Reay Forest</i> |
| Iain Robertson (IR) | <i>MOD Cape Wrath</i> | Annette Parrott (AP) | <i>West Shinness</i> |
| Stewart Gillies (SG) | <i>MOD Cape Wrath</i> | Simon Peters (start only) | <i>Achnabourin</i> |
| Richard Wright (RW) | <i>Achnabourin</i> | Martin Mackay (MM) | <i>Keoldale</i> |
| Christopher Fletcher (CF) | <i>Shinness</i> | David Shaw (DS) | <i>Keoldale</i> |
| David Bell (DB) | <i>Tongue (tenant)</i> | | |

In Attendance:

| | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Tom Chetwynd (TC) | <i>Chair / ADMG</i> | Kirsty MacLeod (KGM) | <i>Secretary</i> |
| Victor Clements (VC) | <i>Facilitator</i> | Valerie Wilson (VW) | <i>NatureScot</i> |
| Tom Turnbull (TT) | <i>Vice Chair of ADMG</i> | Holly Deary (HD) | <i>NatureScot</i> |

1. Chairman's Welcome

TC welcomed everyone to the meeting, and introduced Tom Turnbull, vice Chair of ADMG

2. Apologies

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Pieter Bakker | <i>Altnaharra</i> | Don O'Driscoll | <i>JMT - Sandwood</i> |
| Derick MacAskill | <i>Forestry & Land Scotland</i> | Stefaan Antheunis | <i>Achnabourin</i> |
| Duncan Shaw | <i>Gualin</i> | George Woods | <i>Merkland</i> |
| Natalie Blythe | <i>Poole</i> | | |

3. DMG Administration Proposal

Autumn Meeting will be AGM, with the election of office bearers. It had been agreed previously to alternate Chair and Vice Chair elections for continuity.

Members are encouraged to put themselves forward for election between now and then. There has been no Vice Chair since PB stepped down. New members of the Steering Group are also sought.

Practitioners/Stalkers for both would be especially welcome.

AP1 AP2

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 20th November 2019

This had been the last full face to face meeting of the Group, in Lairg. The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting. Proposed by DA, seconded by SG.

5. Matters Arising – per agenda

6. Steering Group Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held in January had been circulated, with a list of Action Points all of which to be addressed in the meeting today.

7. Deer Management Plan

7.1 2020/21 Season Review

VC reported that there had been a significant cull of deer despite concerns last autumn over whether it would be possible to meet targets. The total cull was over 2500, of which over 1200 stags and approx. 940 hinds. All returns were now in, including from some smaller members that had not engaged much with the DMG before. There was also data on Sika, with more than usual shot. One of the main questions for the group is, are these cull numbers still appropriate? Movement of deer is a big issue in NW Sutherland, and we need to get a good handle on this. Detail is probably less important than overall numbers.

There was a good count in August 2019, and there has been good cull information since, plus low mortalities and recruitment count in 2020. Therefore, if there is a good recruitment count in April/May 2021 we should have a good idea of the overall population. Stag numbers appear to be down by 30%, hinds less so. We know where the deer have been shot, but we do not know where they will be next year. There is probably not a huge movement in and out of the whole area.

Global density is 4.5 deer per km², but ranges from 1 to 14 within that.

Those present each gave a brief summary of their season, and there was discussion about movement and location of deer.

7.2 2021/22 Cull Proposals & Targets

After some discussion it was agreed to review targets once recruitment count information available and set a draft plan, with a further discussion in the autumn to set final targets once HIA information available. AP3

Recruitment counts should be carried out in the next 3-4 weeks – very important to capture variations across the group. A note will be circulated to members, with a brief update meeting online in mid-July. AP4

CF commented that it was useful to have online meetings due to location. KGM said it might be possible to have a video link at face-to-face meetings in future.

7.3 Habitat Monitoring

HD / VW / PR / VC had met to discuss a suitable monitoring programme for the group.

DMG working on a three-year cycle, with Blanket Bog in Year 1, Dwarf Shrub Heath in Year 2, and a year off in Year 3.

Having reviewed monitoring in 2018, VC felt the group's capacity was generally good with some smaller properties perhaps needing guidance, which he could help with. The window for monitoring is quite wide – June to September – and should take two people two days. VC can help with selecting plots, mapping et. TT reminded anyone looking for a refresher that there are tutorial videos on the ADMG website. AP5

There was some discussion about carbon credits, with additionality payment for bringing areas into favourable condition which are not available if plots are already in good condition. Monitoring data will be treated in confidence and people are encouraged not to mark down condition.

7.4 Designated Sites

VW - Same areas remain of concern, i.e. Foinaven, West Strathnaver and Cnoc an Alascaig.

7.5 Deer/Vehicle Collisions

No increase observed, however the roads have been quiet.

8. NatureScot

HD – last season had been challenging with Covid, but positive about culls achieved in NWS – some groups were 10-20% short. The detail is the point of discussion – where deer are, and when. Foinaven still of concern, and areas in the Southern sub group. It is good to see meeting planned for July to look at the fine detail. Low mortality/high recruitment will have a significant impact on maintenance culls. People should be getting on with HIA and reporting results before July meeting to help inform discussions on targets.

ScotGov response to the Deer Working Group Report – focus is now on the priorities coming out of that report. NatureScot will work with ADMG on implementation of the recommendations. Some, like night shooting with thermal imaging has already been worked on, other things need a lot more work and discussions.

9. ADMG Report

TT had been invited to update from an ADMG perspective, and thanked NWSDMG for the invitation. ScotGov response to the DWG Report: almost all of the 99 recommendations had been accepted, with some caveats and nuance. Some of the main ones:

- Phasing out of lead bullets, with non-toxic bullets introduced – this was likely to happen anyway
- Night sights for shooting in darkness – trials have been undertaken
- Closed season – removed for stags, no change for hinds so OOL will still be required there
- More info to be included in cull returns
- Cull database to be publicly available
- Assessment process to end - NatureScot to focus more on damage to habitats and Public Interest. This was a bit disappointing as reviews had demonstrated good progress.
- NatureScot will continue to support collaborative approach (i.e. DMGs)
- 10 deer km² limit on open hill – already below that level
- End to direct counts on open hill areas by NatureScot – looking into use of drones/imaging, testing underway
- Proposal for development of cull approval system – hopefully this does not become a statutory process

The ScotGov response was published the day before Parliament closed.

There is a lot of work for NatureScot in implementing all of this.

Other matters:

- Venison prices down – this should improve with hospitality opening. Funding was provided for marketing of venison, timing was not ideal as during lockdown
- Trophies going to Europe – new regulations following Brexit, health cert. signed by vet now required. BASC has produced guidance.
- Four virtual meetings over last year. AGM 23rd June 2021, hopefully in person in Inverness.

10. Socio Economic Study

This had been discussed over the last 2-3 years, with a draft protocol put forward by SNH. TC proposed that this be shelved in the meantime, with so much going on, to be re-addressed in the future.

11. Accounts

P & L and Balance Sheet were circulated for approval.

It was noted that the main cost is ADMG. ADMG costs vary year to year, and are not based on cull level. TT will take concerns back to ADMG. KGM highlighted that the Group levy will need to be increased to cover ongoing costs, funds built up have mostly been used up. The ADMG levy is fairly

static as based on 5 year average, while NWSDMG bases calculations on previous season only. Budget to be discussed at July meeting, with a proposed adjustment in the levy. AP6

KM to send levy calculation spreadsheet to VC to populate with latest cull figures, so invoices can be issued more quickly. AP7

12. AOCB

SP reflected on BDS (British Deer Society) seminar in January, where views were shared on venison market and game dealer situation (overstocked freezers). Domestic market may be coming back, but traditionally a lot has gone overseas. Meanwhile UK retailers continue to buy from overseas.

TC mentioned Venison Working Group paper, initiatives that can be taken forward Scotland-wide. Looking at alternatives to game dealer route – funding [butchery] apprenticeships, communal larders etc. Report not presented to ScotGov yet. TM said game dealer margins were fairly tight, concern that they are not going to be supported. TC said he expected 75=80% would still go to dealers, this was more about formalising current casual arrangements in local communities. Demand for venison is more in the south/restaurant market.

13. Date of Next Meetings

- Thursday 15th July 2021 at 2pm - interim meeting to discuss 2021/22 targets (online)
- Thursday 16th September 2021 at 2pm - interim meeting to finalise 2021/22 cull targets (online)
- Thursday 18th November at 2pm (AGM, hopefully in person)

The Chair thanked everyone for attending
Meeting closed at 4:20pm

Attachments:

- Cull table
- Accounts – P&L and Balance Sheet to 31 Mar 2021

Action Points agreed: 22nd April 2021

| Ref: | Detail | Action |
|------|--|-------------------------|
| AP 1 | Nominations sought for Vice Chair, election at November meeting | Members |
| AP 2 | Members sought for Steering Group | Members |
| AP 3 | Cull targets to be reviewed, draft targets to be set at autumn meeting | All |
| AP 4 | Note to members asking for recruitment counts to be carried out by late May | Facilitator / Secretary |
| AP 5 | Habitat Monitoring to be carried out between June and September Blanket Bog 2021, Dwarf Heath Shrub 2022 – note to be sent to members | Facilitator/ Secretary |
| AP 6 | Budget paper to be circulation for discussion at July meeting | Chair/Sec |
| AP 7 | KGM to send spreadsheet to VC to add cull figures, the issue levy invoices | Secretary |