**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Annual General Meeting**

**Via Zoom online**

**Thursday 18th November 2021 at 2pm**

*DRAFT MINUTES*

***Present:***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| David Allison (DA) | *Reay Forest* | Thomas MacDonnell (TM) | *Wildland Ltd* |
| David Shaw (DS) | *Keoldale* | Dr Phil Ratcliffe (PR) | *Wildland Ltd* |
| Roddy Watt (RW) | *Merkland* | Ian Thompson (IT) | *Rhigolter* |
| Edward Woods (EW) | *Merkland* | Annette Parrott (AP) | *West Shinness* |
| Clovis Fletcher (CF) | *Shinness* | Richard Wright (RW) | *Achnabourin* |
| Derick MacAskill | *Forestry & Land Scotland* | Charles Worsley (CW) | *Fiag* |
|  | Pieter Bakker | *Altnaharra* |
|  |  | Don O’Driscoll (DoD) | *JMT - Sandwood* |

***In Attendance:***

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tom Chetwynd (TC) | *Chair / ADMG* | Kirsty MacLeod (KGM) | | *Secretary* | |
| Victor Clements (VC) | *Facilitator* | |  | |  | |

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

TC welcomed everyone to the meeting, and advised that the meeting was being recorded for the purpose of preparing minutes.

1. **Apologies**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Christopher Fletcher | *Shinness* | Iain Robertson | *MOD Cape Wrath* |
| David Elliot | *Rhigolter* | Stewart Gillies | *MOD Cape Wrath* |
| George Woods | *Merkland* | Valerie Wilson | *NatureScot* |
| Ben Mardall | *Reay Forest* | Holly Deary | *NatureScot* |
|  |  | Tom Turnbull | *ADMG* |

1. **Minutes of the interim meeting held on 16th September 2021**

Apologies were given for the delay in the minutes being circulated. The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting (AP, DA)

1. **Election of Office Bearers**

TC had hoped Tom Turnbull would be present to handle this section however he was unable to attend. TC has been Chair for nearly 3 years, and was prepared to stand on an annual basis, while also happy to take on nominations for anyone interested in taking on the role. In the absence of anyone coming forward, TM proposed TC as chair, seconded by EW.

It was previously agreed to alternate Chair and Vice Chair elections, so Vice Chair election will be Autumn 2022. TC was hopeful that someone would come forward to take on that role before then, with stalkers/land managers especially welcome. There are some candidates in mind.

KGM informed the meeting that she would be standing down as Secretary. While the administration side is not a problem, she was struggling to issue minutes in good time with more meetings taking place during the summer. TC thanked KGM on behalf of the group, and KGM agreed to continue over the winter until March 2022.

1. **Matters Arising** – per agenda
2. **Deer Management Plan**

**6.1 Habitat Management**

VC reported on blanket bog monitoring carried out this year, window was June-Sept with information due by end of September. He had supported some getting started. Maps had been circulated showing results, and good coverage on the whole - some gaps on the eastern side, Strathnaver area – Tongue estate, Syre, Poole, N Loch Naver, Shinness with fewer plots. Some dwarf shrub heath monitoring in 2020, and some estates did it this year too. Information had come back in different ways, but is good quality data and broadly comparable for mapping purposes. Most have employed external providers to carry out HIA, while some have experienced staff in house. Impacts across much of the DMG area are pretty low, the exception to that being Foinaven area and parts of Altnaharra, as well as Gualin and Rhigolter with higher impacts. Far north west area is quite stable, open ground on Wildand also have low impacts. There may be some issues with methodology and ground types. The overall exercise is to highlight the areas of concern, and where there are gaps in information. Aim to add more plots in the areas where there are gaps next time around.

PB referred to non designated sites which may be able to handle higher deer density than designated ground. VC put the designated sites on the map, which make up around 50% of the ground.

IT asked about timing of monitoring for those in AECS (Agri-Environment Climate Scheme). VC said there was little value in looking at data in isolation, but looking at it all together gives a better picture.

Previously a three year cycle had been agreed – Blanket Bog, Dwarf Shrub Heath then year off. Good data 2020 and 2021 (apart from the eastern/southern area where there are gaps). Instinct is to ask those to repeat Blanket Bog in 2022 and everyone else takes this year off this would get us back into the right cycle again. To be discussed further with East Sub Group.

VC also referred to an issue with the calculation on the spreadsheet some are using. NatureScot are aware and know they need to review the way data is being collected. TC is meeting with HD and Donald Fraser and will bring this up. Another issue with the spreadsheet is extraction of the co-ordinates for mapping, it is not possible to copy and paste them so you have to take them manually and it has therefore taken longer than it should have done. The cost of doing the work is high, and these technical issues need to be resolved.

DA said British Deer Society are offering training to stalkers based on NatureScot protocols, and Holly Deary had indicated the these were being updated. Hopefully the new format would be ready in time for 2023 monitoring.

DA reported that Reay Forest has entered into a new strategy phase, and will be reducing deer numbers from 8 to 6 deer per km2, with northern beats down to 4 or 5, largely based on a report produced for the estate by Dr Alistair Headley. The paper will be shared with the group.

VC, HD, VW and PR had discussed HIA at the start of the year that they would talk again after this year’s monitoring about what was appropriate going forward. This should go ahead.

**6.2 2021/22 Stag Cull Review and Hind Cull Targets**

TC thanked everyone for providing the information timeously, and for the email communication ahead of the meeting as it is always useful to share views.

Those present shared their experiences of the stag season, and hind season to date.

VC reported total of just under 600 stags shot in total for NWSDMG, and just under 200 hinds so far.

**NW Area**

Fairly stable in the NW area, well engaged and meeting targets with decent HIA results, no real woodland issues, so hind cull should be much the same as last year. MOD are increasing by 10-12 to address an area of concern.

**South Area**

A sub group meeting had taken place after the last DMG meeting, and there has been some email communication since. Concern is that although counts are low, SNH picked up fairly significant tracking damage on the SSSI in 2018 so looking to develop understanding of this area. Targets were set this year to focus people’s minds, review in the spring. AP had met Andrew Spence who was new to the area and will pass on contact details.

**North East - West side of Strathnaver**

NatureScot did a count in the summer and picked up 4-500 deer, complaints from crofters, so there is a focus here. DM - FLS have a small piece of ground outside of fence but few deer seen there. Had discussions with tenant at Poole (Robert McHardy), who intends to shoot considerably more hinds than target, in is touch with NatureScot for night-time shooting in and around the crofts. VC will contact Robert McHardy. RW reported that deer seem to move from Achnabourin to Borgie after first shot, although they do come back over the river in the evening. May increase cull there too, but hinds are in four big groups so hopefully they will disperse a bit. David Bell (tenant) going for 40 hinds at Tongue, which is a significant increase vs previous years. PB said Altnaharra slightly detached from Strathnaver, some movement between N Loch Naver and Altnaharra and they tend to deal with those.

**North East / Foinaven**

VC referred to higher hind cull target set for area around Foinaven.

TM reported Wildland continuing as before towards woodland expansion/habitat improvement. Sheep removed from Strathbeg (area between Reay Forest and Foinaven SAC). Tree regeneration is starting to show above the field layer. Six properties covering 33,000 ha managed, and Melness. Have shot 397 deer in total, which is quite low for that area of land. Hard to estimate numbers, it depends how many come in. Extensive monitoring programme is being conducted, to assess woodland expansion. This is expensive and would not be done too soon, but as we believe the gains are being seen they are moving forward with this.

EW – Merkland has found it difficult to have a strategy with what is happening next door. He asked for clarification on the mapping in Dr Ratcliffe’s paper. Is the Wildland target under 2 deer per km2 in woodland and 5 on open land? Will the pressure be taken off culling on open range. TM confirmed that the focus of culling is concentrated on woodland / potential woodland, which is the blue are on the map. The difficulty is when deer come into the woodland areas from open hill.

VC said we are trying to get a feel for the movements and how Wildland activities are affecting others.

TM was happy to have a chat after the meeting. Difficulty is in differing objectives. Three year lag from reaching target densities and seeing the woodland regenerate, and this is perhaps the most difficult point for neighbours. Longer term there will be more habitat and therefore more deer, but that is probably 30 years away. EW was concerned that if the cull has not been successful will the strategy be adjusted. TM said danger of relaxing efforts then it would negate what has been done up until now.

EW felt having read through minutes that Wildland aims of 2 deer per km2 in some areas rather than 5 per km2 had not been fully shared. TC confirmed that they had, and apologised if this was not clearly recorded in the minutes.

RW asked about an open day / site visit to show what is happening. TM suggested a visit to Glenfeshie, RW did not think this was comparing like with like. TM agreed to a point, and said he was happy to show where regeneration was happening on Wildland properties. Detailed habitat monitoring is to be repeated next summer, which would be a good time to do it. TC had been to Glenfeshie and said it would be worthwhile.

PB - Altnaharra neighbours Wildland on three sides, and is continuing to see culling on open hill from these estates, away from designated/woodland areas. Seeing no deer within 2-3 km of these marches. PB felt culling should be concentrated on hinds rather than stags, to reduce breeding while having less impact on neighbours on a shorter term basis. TM said Wildland are not fixated on designated sites as to the areas they wish regeneration/improvements to be made. Designated sites have legal protection, and 80% of Wildland’s designated sites were in unfavourable condition when they took them over. There are potential woodland/habitat improvement areas including Ben Loyal. Some of those deer may be going towards Altnaharra – the stalker is targeting those because they are coming back at night. VC was planning to go up to NW Sutherland on 6th December, and asked if it was OK to look at some Wildland areas to compare some photographs and notes from six years ago. TM confirmed he is welcome to access as is permitted anywhere in Scotland. They do not differentiate between male or female deer doing browsing, and if they hold off shooting stags it will slow down the process of getting where they need to be and everybody comes out the other side. VC said a visit might be helpful for others to envisage what is going on just now. TM said the report does explain that – reduce herbivore impact and at some point the trees start to emerge. Whether they do or not we will have to wait and see, but if we stop [culling] now it will not work.

PB asked about culling somewhere where there is not adverse effects from browsing.

**Foinaven area**

VC asked DA if the reduced deer population would allow neighbours to maintain their objectives and deal with designated site issues. DA said due to the revised objectives for density this actually suits Reay Forest at present. Area of woodland on south shore of Loch Stack fenced off 11 years ago, regeneration was not apparent for the first 7 years and is gradually creeping up, so it does take time – and that is with no mountain. Will they be able to carry 6 deer per km2? Probably more like 4 for Foinaven and Arkle, and 5-6 elsewhere. These figures are arbitrary, and what is more important is improving status in habitat monitoring of blanket bog and dwarf shrub heath. IT reported objective at Rhigolter was to maintain a viable farming business. AECS allowed them to take grazing elsewhere for the last three years which has meant carrying far lower stock at critical times than previously. Reduced grazing, but monitoring results showing browsing pressure quite high, which is difficult to understand. Those results may not reflect the effect of the management changes yet. There is a big change not only in the agricultural sector but in the way the world looks at these issues – more interest in biodiversity, habitat formation and people are putting subjective and now monetary values on these. Management will need to be adapted to take these things into account. TM confirmed that the monetary side (carbon credit) is not at the forefront for Wildland, but habitat restoration. However like any business they will take advantage of schemes available, and would like to see the estates break even, cover running costs. There have been sales of estates far in excess of their values five or six years ago, mainly driven by dioversity habitat improvement carbon sequestration.

EW asked at what point would results prompt a change in deer strategy. TM replied it is all on monitoring results. EW said due to the high collateral cost he would hope that if the strategy was not working that they would reconsider the approach.

TC rounded off by saying this had been a full and useful discussion.

1. **ADMG Update**

First of several meetings with NatureScot took place this week. NatureScot are still very much behind Deer Management Groups as a way of demonstrating collaborative deer management.

ADMG have responded to two Scottish Government consultations recently, one on use of dogs to control foxes and other wild animals, primary concern there was that use of dogs to retrieve wounded deer doesn’t become wrapped up in this. The other response in respect of Forestry & Land Scotland corporate plan consultation. Both of those can be found in the latest E-Scope issue which everyone should receive.

ADMG Regional Meeting due on 24th November, first in person meeting for some time.

1. **NatureScot Report**

No update today

1. **Accounts**

First paper – profit and loss account and balance sheet to 31st March 2021. This had been circulated at the April meeting but was not formally approved. Proposed by RW, seconded AP.

Second paper showed current position. ADMG invoice not received yet but estimated figure shown. Also shown was total amount invoiced by the group each year and net amount to cover DMG expenses.

1. **AOCB**

DA advised that a helicopter count was planned for Reay Forest in March 2022 (both north and south) to census check their deer cull, and asked if anyone wanted to participate. Merkland would participate, Wildland will consider.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

TC proposed holding a Steering Group meeting in Feb/March 2022 followed by a main group meeting in May 2022. Hopefully this will be in person. VC felt the need for steering group meeting was less necessary now, having sorted out HIA cycle in previous discussions, and he will gather figures monthly through the season to keep everyone up to date.

It was agreed to hold a full NWSDMG meeting in May 2022, with a doodle poll in due course to agree the best date for as many attending as possible.

TC encouraged communication. It would be best to hide email addresses for data protection purposes, and the DMG can assist with that. Secretary sends correspondence to members using bcc (blind copy).

The Chair thanked everyone for attending

Meeting closed at 4pm