**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Autumn Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Thursday 17th November 2022 at 2pm**

**MINUTES**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (ADMG, Chair), Victor Clements (Secretary/ Facilitator), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), David Shaw (Keodale), Thomas MacDonell (Wildland Ltd), David Bell & Rachel Sutherland (Tongue Estate), Billy Campbell (Strathnaver crofters), Richard Wright (Achnabourin), Roddy Watt (Merkland), David Alison (Reay Forest), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Megan Bregazzi (FLS), Iain Robertson (MoD), Annette Parrott (West Shinness), Clovis Fletcher (Shinness), Valerie Wilson & Billy Lobban (Nature Scot)*

1. **Apologies**

*David Elliot & Ian Thomson (Rhigolter), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Sian O’Brien (Syre Common Grazings), Holly Deary (Nature Scot), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Ben Mardell (Reay Forest), Lawrence MacLeod (Kinlochbervie Estate), Robert McHardy (Poole)*

1. **Minutes of May 2022 meeting**

The minutes were taken as read, proposed by David Shaw, and seconded by Pieter Bakker.

Minutes had also been produced for summer meetings at Crask Inn and Achfary. DA asked that the words “new Duke” be replaced with “Estate”.

1. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

David Shaw of Keodale and Sophie Clark of UHI had been approached about being vice chairs of the DMG, and were both willing to have their names put forward at the May 2023 AGM meeting.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts**

The current bank balance was £7,236.23 with £4,399 of subscriptions still outstanding, a proportion of which was from previous 2 X years.

Outstanding invoices to be paid were £5,852.60, £1,500 to VC and approx. £900 to Kirsty Macleod. VC would have another £1500 due in March.

There was some concern expressed in that there would be very little buffer left at year end, even allowing that all outstanding subscriptions would be paid. It was agreed that a budget would be drawn up for 2023-24, at a range of subscription rates. The DMG needed to build a buffer, and potentially also needed to be building funds for any future planned helicopter count, potentially in 2024. TC to action, with draft budget options circulated after the meeting.

It was suggested that individual properties are put on a five year rolling average basis for payment, to tie in with ADMG subscriptions.

Reay Forest were planning a helicopter count in spring 2024, and that may well suit the rest of the DMG members as well, being five years on since the last count in 2019. PDG Helicopters would want a single invoice in future, but there would be VAT implications to this, so the payment situation would have to be carefully planned and managed.

1. **2022 Stag Season Review**

Altnaharra had only got 14 stags, with the stock of animals simply not there any more. Very disappointing season, but inevitable with culls elsewhere over several years.

Keodale had got 24 stags, which was their usual number, with 12 hinds and 5 calves to date. They had a licence to take hinds earlier as previous year, and this worked well for them.

Wildland Ltd had a lot of stags on Ben Loyal, but very few hinds on their ground.

West Shinness were concentrating on sika stags.

Tongue had got 15 stags, ten of which were on low ground. There was a lot of work ongoing in Borgie forest, possibly displacing animals from there.

Shinness had 6 red stags and 2 sika stags to date.

Achnabourin had culled 20 stags, a much higher target than recent years.

Merkland had culled 14 stags. The deer were very spread out at present, with more tracking than recent years.

Reay Forest found the season harder as time went on. There were a lot of walkers. Deer were in good condition, although some were left out towards the end, perhaps a carry- over from poorer conditions in previous seasons. The rut was very strong.

FLS had 46 stags.

MoD culled 15 out of their target of 16.

Keodale were also now taking on the deer cull at Gualin.

1. **Area Updates & 2022-23 Cull targets**

*Far NW Area*

The main pressure in this area was deer grazing on croft land and DVCs in and around Kinlochbervie, with few real natural heritage problems. JMT Sandwood where increasing their hind hill to 40 animals. Others to try and maintain culls to provide for a steady population overall, but with activity centred around the KLB area.

*South Area*

The focus in this area was now sika deer, with a thermal drone count expected the following week. Data will be forwarded to DMG. A red deer cull target of 35 hinds had been set.

*North East - West side of Strathnaver*

The crofters in Strathnaver were looking to remove 350 animals from the area, with culls being reported to the DMG. It was important to circulate information so that all properties could see what was going on, both inside and outside the area by others. This cull would be undertaken first, and then a determination made on whether the fence was still required or not.

*North East- Rest*

Wildland areas covered the bulk of this area. Numbers of hinds were very limited, and not clear whether 2021-22 cull could be repeated, but these would be kept as target for the winter.

Tongue Estate would be targeting more hinds on lower ground to help crofters and reduce grazing competition.

Altnaharra would target 100 hinds, to try and clear some ground in which to keep stags, as their stag cull had now reduced to very low numbers.

*Foinaven area*

Reay Forest had an increased cull target of 270 hinds, and all other properties in the area needed to try and maintain their 2021-22 cull, so that a genuine overall increase in hind cull could be attained. Wildland Ltd would be targeting the Strathbeg/ Glengolly area. There were still some sheep in that area, contrary to previous report.

1. **Habitat Monitoring 2022/ 2023 Plan**

Most members had the year off in 2022. It was hoped to have blanket bog data from South & Strathnaver Estates, but only received responses from Altnaharra and Syre/ North Lochnaver. HIA impacts on the latter wherealmost all low, but significant number of moderate and higher impacts on Altnaharra.

The Far NW, South & Strathnaver Estates would look to monitor dwarf shrub heath plots inMarch/ April 2023. VC to forward co-ordinates for plots, and estimation of number of plots required.

It has been judged too early for any meaningful habitat response in the Foinavon area yet to upcoming culls, so DSH monitoring there will be postponed until spring 2024.

Wildland Ltd to update DMG members on their woodland regeneration monitoring work, whichshould also be complete in 2023.

1. **ADMG Update**

There would be a regional meeting by Zoom on 6th December, with AGM taking place in Inverness on 22nd March. Spring workshops would be arranged focused on building capacity, including a possible new DMG healthcheck process. ADMG were also currently developing Deer map, the Common Ground project, and were responding to a range of consultations.

There were some very significant problems with getting venison picked up at the moment, with game dealers struggling for capacity, increased volumes being generated south of the border, and a lot of venison from last year still in storage. However, this did not see to be such a problem in the north of the country. There were few problems with Highland Game, but Argyll in particular was especially reliant on the smaller processors, with some not picking up from some areas at all.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

Nature Scot had ongoing trials related to drone counting and a range of other technical issues associated with the Deer Working Group report.

The Strategic Deer Board were looking to integrate a range of public funding mechanisms and schemes with deer management, with this work ongoing.

Valerie Wilson would be retiring from Nature Scot in December, so this would be her last meeting. All from the DMG wished her well and thanked her for her contribution over many years. Holly Deary was also being promoted within the organization, and would have less direct contact with the DMG. Nature Scot would be reducing their contribution directly to DMG areas across the country, and this was a situation that the DMG would have to adjust to. The DMG sent best wishes to Holly as well.

1. **AOCB**

VC to check DMG website and update with minutes, check main documents. Population model was out of date. Details for Gualin would need to be updated.

DA gave an update on Project Laxford, and progress to date. The estate were looking at riparian woodland and would be fencing off some areas to allow for greater regeneration.

Wildland Ltd were looking at peatland restoration options.

TC to circulate report on Rural Land Use Partnerships, with 5 X case studies in Scotland.

We would have a speaker at the May meeting on the NW25 project initiative that was being developed by the Assynt Development Trust. They would like to hear from FLS and individual estates.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting would be on **Thurs 4th May, 2 pm at Lairg Community Hall**.

Thanks to Annette Parrott for ensuring the hall booking, and providing tea/ coffee for meeting.