**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Annual General Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Thursday 4th May 2023 at 2pm**

*MINUTES*

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all present, especially those attending for the first time.

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (NWS Facilitator & minutes), Derick Sutherland (Shinness), Annette & Wendy Parrott (West Shinness), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Craig Rigby & Michael Murdoch (North Loch Naver & Syre Estate), Rachel Sutherland & David Bell (Tongue Estate), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Roddy Watt (Merkland), Richard Wright (Achnabourin), Thomas MacDonell (Wildland Ltd), Megan Bregazzi and Emily Clayden (FLS), David Allison & Seamus Nairne (Reay Forest), David Shaw (Keodale & Gualin Estates).*

1. **Apologies**

*Charles Worsley (Fiag), Clovis & Chris Fletcher (Shinness), Kirsty MacLeod (Administrator), Laurence Macleod (KLB), Sian O’Brien (Syre Common Grazings), Wilma Robertson (Melness Crofters Estate), Robert McHardy (Poole), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich)*

1. **Minutes of the interim meeting held on 17th November 2022**

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

1. **Matters Arising**

VC had updated website with previous minutes, and checked online documents. The population model was removed as this was misleading, and proving difficult to keep updated in any meaningful way.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts & Budget**

The DMG currently had a bank balance of £5360.23, with £3815 of invoices still outstanding, some of which may need to be written off.

The DMG still had to pay £5721 subscription to ADMG, plus administrative invoices going forwards. The ADMG invoice will not be aid until additional sums are brought in, both by securing outstanding payments, and by 2023 invoicing.

The DMG have operated at a loss for three of the past four seasons, and on top of that, some subscriptions were slow to come in.

After some discussion, the meeting agreed to raise the NWS contribution to bring in addition funds, by approx. 10-20 percent. Chair to investigate and action. Going forwards, it was important from 2024 that options are more clearly outlined before AGM meeting.

1. **Election of Office Bearers**

The meeting unanimously endorsed TC as Chair. Kirsty MacLeod was endorsed as administrator, proposed by David Bell and seconded by Pieter Bakker, and Victor Clements as Facilitator, proposed by David Shaw, and seconded by Craig Rigby.

The meeting endorsed David Shaw (Keodale/ Gualin) and Sophie Clark (UHI) as joint vice- chairs, proposed by Sara Harkins, and seconded by Thomas MacDonell.

1. **2022 - 23 Season Review**

*Far NW Area*

This area was a little under on advised hind cull, but with a greater number of stags culled, JMT culling greater numbers around Kinlochbervie. Useful to see greater activity in the area overall. There had been a couple of DVCs around Rhiconich that had to be dealt with.

At present there were stags coming in to in-bye fields on Keodale which are having to be dealt with.

*South Area*

The drone count in November had been successful in highlighting the numbers of sika deer in the area, with potentially 400+ across the area. The count was funded by 4 X properties, and viewed to be fairly cost effective. Initial population modelling had been attempted, made more difficult because there was no stag/ hind/ stag classification. FLS had suggested a 48% recruitment rate. The area needs a much higher cull if it wants to control numbers, and this will be allocated for 2023-24. There does appear to be greater numbers of sika deer on neighbouring estates, with 25 X sika culled on Ben Loyal, and five sika stags being culled on Reay Forest.

South Group members were looking at repeating the drone count in November again this year.

*North East – Strathnaver*

This initiative had accounted for 200 deer overall. It was too early yet to determine what impact this would have on agricultural ground, but here appeared to be fewer deer there at present, and a couple of the Strathnaver estates now had a lot fewer deer on their ground. There is no information yet on whether this will be carried forward in to 2023-24.

A Nature Scot helicopter count had recorded increased numbers in the Northern DMG area to the east.

The DMG will ask Nature Scot whether they intend to carry out drone or thermal imaging counts to check current situation in the strath.

*North East- Rest*

Tongue estate had culled a significant number of hinds again to try and reduce impacts on croft areas, and the crofters themselves were reporting lesser numbers culled directly. Tongue has done their own count this spring, recording c 2 deer per sq km overall.

FLS still culling consistent numbers in Borgie Forest, at least some of which will be getting in from outside. There was a lot of restructuring activity in that area at present.

Syre/North Lochnaver would now attend meetings on a more regular basis. Their deer numbers were under pressure from Rossal to the east, and Wildland to the west, but this had been the case for several years. Overall impacts on their hill were low, supported by habitat monitoring information.

Ben Loyal had culled a large number of both stags and hinds during March, and there was some discussion about whether they had always been in the general area, or whether they had come from further afield. One suggestion was that snow in March had forced them from more exposed areas. Wildland Ltd felt they had no choice but to remove them, given their objectives.

There was quite a lot of hinds on the Melness Crofters Estate ground. The Wildland lease had been renewed, but they were no longer able to use OOS authorizations as before.

Altnaharra had undertaken a large hind cull now for two years, looking to clear some ground so that they could retain more stags, but they were not being successful in doing this, and were struggling to find any stags now during the season, having previously been able to cull a stable 60 annually. They were extremely despondent in seeing how the present situation could be made to work.

*Foinaven area*

There had been a much higher cull set in this area, partly to address the condition of the designated site, but also for Reay Forest objectives more widely. The cull had been achieved, almost exactly to target, and this would be repeated for another year.

Merkland where now struggling to hold any deer now at all, with pressure from both Wildland and Reay Forest, with the latter also reducing numbers in the West Sutherland DMG area as well.

Both Reay Forest and Merkland would be looking to co-ordinate a helicopter count next spring when the reduction cull was scheduled to be completed. Participation from any other properties in the wider Foinavon area would be welcomed. However, there was no appetite for helicopter counting beyond this area, including from Wildland who where now concentrating on habitat response.

1. **Recruitment – Spring 2023**

It was important to undertake recruitment counting across the area this year as figures were likely to be high, and it is very likely that the DMG have under- estimated this in the past.

Altnaharra had recorded 39% this year, which was very high for them, and many other properties could well show similar results. VC to collate information at end of May. The numbers of hinds/ calves counted is required, not a % figure.

1. **Habitat Monitoring – Spring / Summer 2023**

Monitoring this season would be confined to Far NW area, plus Strathnaver and South estates, all covering dwarf shrub heath. VC to collate and present information for DMG members.

With the reduction cull taking place around Foinavon, monitoring of the impacts of this would be more beneficial in 2024.

Wildland Ltd were to finish their extensive survey work mapping native woodland regeneration across their properties, but the final results of that were unlikely to be available this year. Annual monitoring of key areas would proceed as usual.

1. **ADMG Update**

The ADMG spring report had been circulated to DMG members.

NWS members would be interested to note ADMG trip to Glenfeshie on 28th June, details to be confirmed.

There was a point raised about new zero venison, and whether this could be achieved in practice, given that any animal is going to be a net emitter of CO2, and that energy inevitably had to be expended to render deer in to some-one’s possession. Following such a strategy/ presentation could be counter productive, and a wider focus on this issue might be more beneficial.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

There were no representatives of Nature Scot present.

1. **AOCB**

Reay Forest would be doing a community consultation on their Laxford Project proposals, and are also looking at developing some plans for peatland restoration at the moment.

A suggestion was made that the Chair should be paid. TC confirmed expenses were covered by ADMG at present, and that Committee remuneration would be reviewed once the DMG finances had been restructured.

There was a new HNC Wildlife and Conservation Management course at UHI, and Thurso College would be recruiting new students as well as estates who might be able to provide placements. There was now greater provision for employed people to study at the same time.

Wildland Ltd would be looking to employ a ghillie to help with operations on their northern estates, and where keen to hear from anyone who might be interested.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The autumn meeting will be on **Wed 15th November**, 2pm at Lairg Community Hall.