**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

 **Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Wednesday 15th November 2023 at 2pm**

**MINUTES**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (Facilitator- minutes),Rachel Sutherland & David Bell (Tongue/ Sutherland Estates), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Clovis Fletcher & Derrick Sutherland (Shinness), Annette & Wendy Parrott (West Shinness), Craig Rigby & Michael Murdoch (Syre/ North Loch Naver), David Allison & Calum Fraser (Reay Forest/ Gober), David Shaw (Keodale/ Gualin), Richard Wright (Achnabourin), Roddy Watt & Martin Dignan (Merkland), Beth Lamont & Billy Lobban (NatureScot), Sian O’Brien (Strathnaver Common Grazings), Iain Robertson (MoD Cape Wrath), Romany Garnett & Lynn Munro (JMT), Robert McHardy & Chris Wix (Poole), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate).

1. **Apologies**

Ian Thompson & David Elliot (Rhigolter), Stew Gillies (MoD), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Meghan Bregazzi (FLS), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), Thomas MacDonell (Wildland Ltd), Kirsty MacLeod (Administrator), Geore Woods (Merkland).

1. **Minutes of May 2023 meeting**

The minutes were taken as read, proposed by David Allison, seconded by Annette Parrott.

1. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts**

The DMG currently has £5,360 in bank, with £1,138 still due from some members for previous years, as shown on the attached schedule. Subscriptions had yet to be invoiced this year, and payments to ADMG, administrator and facilitator now due. The DMG had not been invoicing for enough to cover costs in recent years, with the result that the buffer in bank had been decreasing gradually.

It was decided for this year to increase subscription by £1 per animal, and that would get the finances back on track again. Invoices would therefore go out immediately after this meeting.

Looking ahead, the chair would circulate different options for raising funds in advance of spring 2024 meeting. What was being considered was a small minimum member charge, with ADMG and NWS administration payments put on a 5 year average basis to iron out spikes in payments. This would help with better financial planning, and noted that ADMG payments were already collected from NWS on this basis.

1. **2023 Stag Season Review**

Tongue had fewer animals than usual.

Altnaharra had only 4 stags, compared to 50-60 a few years ago. The deer plan doesn’t mean anything, and they could not really say anything else.\* (*There was a discussion around the issue of numbers which is reported below after the individual property comments*).

Shinness had fewer stags than usual.

West Shinness had a very late rut.

Syre had very few deer now, and not many mature stags.

Reay Forest had delivered a higher stag cull again, but they were getting much harder to get now. The rut was mixed, with good and bad periods. Hinds were reported to be in poor condition, with a lot of fluke present. The beat at Gober had fewer animals than previous season, but with a lot of young animals.

Keodale had a good season, shooting more stags than ever before, although this was partly due to culling animals in grass parks for agricultural protection.

Gualin had 12 stags, which had been their target.

Achnabourin had an on- off rut, culling 13 stags, but it had been difficult to get these.

Likewise at Poole, a stop- start season, with numbers of smaller stags, but fewer bigger ones.

Merkland had a much reduced cull of 10 animals, with almost all these on the face above the main road. They had few deer anywhere else on their property within NWS.

JMT Sandwood had fewer deer than previous year, with just 3 culled to date. The crofters had wanted them to take more the year before.

Kinlochbervie had relatively few deer as well.

MoD had got their cull as planned, more or less. Deer were in good condition, but quite a lot of ticks around.

**General stag situation\***

There was a general discussion about how dramatic the fall in stag numbers had been over much of the area, inevitable because of the numbers being culled in recent years. While there were still numbers of younger animals in some areas, the older animals that people were looking for were not in evidence, and this reduced the value that people could take from them.

The deer plan had suggested a deer density of 5 per sq km across much of the area, with a slightly higher density in the Foinavon area. This would have been broadly compatible with blanket bog and a wide range of open range habitats, which were the signature feature of the NWS area. Everyone had these habitats in common, and yet division and conflict had been allowed to dominate discussions regarding a few hundred hectares of native woodland, which was several orders of magnitude less important than the many tens of thousands of hectares of peatland and other carbon rich habitats. Five deer per sq km would still have allowed everyone a level of production that they could work with, but there was no longer any focus on a target deer population or density, making running of the group virtually impossible.

There was a strong feeling that it was too late now, with estate stalking positions already lost.

The Chair asked whether we should be looking at a socio-economic impact study. This had been attempted a number of years previously, but had never been developed fully and fell away.

There were a number of DMG personnel with relevant skill sets, including at North Highland College. Sara Harkins had been working with others in relation to socio-economic issues around Kinlochbervie. It was agreed that a small group would convene to scope out a potential project, to comprise Sara Harkins, David Shaw, Victor Clements and Roddy Watt.

It was suggested that a baseline should be 10 years ago, a period for which we had good information, but the focus needed to be looking forwards, providing for a review of the socio-economics of deer management within the area going forwards.

Consideration would be given to splitting culls going forwards in to sporting and management animals. NatureScot (then SNH) had previously circulated a methodology on how an economic appraisal could be undertaken, but it was considered so complex as to be unworkable.

1. **Area Updates & 2023-24 Cull targets**

*Far NW Area*

The general deer situation in this area was relatively stable, with modest production requirements, and no obvious evidence of damage or threats to natural heritage. Target culls would therefore be as previous seasons.

JMT were looking to introduce community stalking opportunities at Sandwood. Kinlochbervie Estate would continue to provide a stalking presence around the village. Keodale would be looking to increase their target culls a bit, venturing out further towards Sandwood to try and get more hinds. They had to try and balance income from deer against damage to their agricultural interests.

*South Area*

Shinness, West Shinness and Fiag had conducted another drone count across their properties in October, and would forward report to DMG. Shinness are looking to increase their sika hind cull from 25- 60, to try and facilitate their riparian woodland plans, and others were being encouraged to increase their culls as well. Sika deer were the primary consideration in the south sub area, with red deer being more transitory. The sika were densely packed in and around woodland areas towards the south, with reds more common further north in the sub area.

The south area was not really on agency radar at the moment.

*North East - West side of Strathnaver*

Nature Scot had conducted a thermal imaging count shortly before the meeting, down the strath from Bettyhill to Syre, and had found 470 animals, down on previous count, but still a significant number of animals for a low ground situation, and agricultural damage was a problem at the moment,

Nature Scot were looking at introducing a Section 10 (2) scheme to help co-ordinate and support their response to this, covering the main strath as well as Achnabourin, Poole, Syre/ North Lochnaver and Skelpick/ Rhifail estates.

The approach being taken was to reduce deer in and around the strath so that a fence could be erected to protect the low ground on the western side. It was possible that this might take place in the spring. The concern had been that any fence without an appropriate mitigation cull might cause significant animal welfare problems, or exacerbate damage to the natural heritage. Nature Scot input would help inform whether the fence was appropriate. Contracted help was being employed to reduce deer around the strath, this taking place for a second season, with significant numbers of deer being accounted for.

It was very difficult to ascertain how many animals come from the strath itself, how many came from the west, and how many from the east, but a better picture was gradually being established. Any Section 10 (2) agreement would be developed in conjunction with all parties involved. A spring 2024 helicopter or co-ordinated drone count might be employed as part of this.

Dealing with the situation in Strathnaver was a key priority for Nature Scot at the moment,

*North East- Rest*

Tongue Estate would be working with FLS to conduct a thermal imaging count of their properties shortly, the third thermal/ drone count taking place within the area this season, which was good use of technology to try and analyse and understand the deer situation in different areas.

*Foinaven area*

Reay Forest were now in to the second year of their reduction cull, and all other properties within the area would be maintaining their cull numbers so that the overall population could be reduced. Repeating a second year of high hind culls in particular would be challenging. There was general agreement that deer number in and around Reay Forest had been significantly reduced, judging by the reduced numbers visible when driving through the area. Merkland felt that their deer population had been massively reduced, with them bordering both Reay Forest and Wildland Ltd estates.

Reay Forest and Merkland would be conducting a joint helicopter count in spring 2024 to check on numbers against target. No other properties would be taking part. The reduction cull should address problems with the Foinaven SSSI/ SAC, one of the most significant individual designated sites in the north of the country.

1. **Habitat Monitoring 2023/ 2024 Plan**

There had been only 2-3 properties doing HIA this year. It was proposed NOT to do HIA in 2024, but look to have a DMG- wide survey in 2025. Members were aware where the priority locations for action were situated. It is likely that Wildland will probably have some sort of presentation on their regeneration monitoring in 2024, and that would be useful for the DMG to understand.

1. **ADMG Update**

The ADMG autumn report is attached with these minutes. The spring AGM is on the 13th March, not the 20th as suggested.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

Most people were now aware of legislative changes via secondary legislation, with further reforms being developed via primary legislation in the year ahead.

The Strathnaver situation, described above was a priority area for NatureScot.

Beth Lamont was now the deer management officer for this area, supported by Billy Lobban on specific site work.

Mention was made of Deer Online Services, through which stalkers can now register as Fit & Competent.

1. **AOCB**

The meeting consented to emails being left open within email chains.

Reay Forest are having an open day on 20th April 2024 and would also shortly be consulting on their Long Term Forest Plan, details to be circulated via DMG.

Altnaharra were winding down their deer farm due to poor markets/ returns, there being very poor markets for venison from the north..

The Nature Restoration Fund was now taking applications on a rolling basis.

There was a discussion about the very poor price of venison for producers compared to high price to customers. ADMG would be organizing a venison summit in Birnam on Monday 20th November to discuss and update people on a range of current issues.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting would be on Thursday 2nd May, 2 pm at the Lairg Community Hall.

Thank you to Annette & Wendy Parrott for providing tea/ coffee & cakes for this meeting.