**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Annual General Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Thursday 2nd May 2024 at 2pm**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (Secretary/ Facilitator), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Tim Kirkwood, Joe Dunn, Lana Richardson & Donald Reid (all Wildland Ltd), Roddie Watt & Matt Dignan (Merkland), Derick Sutherland (Shinness Estate), Richard Wright (Achnabourin), Billy Lobban & Mark Jamieson (Nature Scot), Rachel Sutherland & David Bell (Sutherland Estates/ Tongue), Annette Parrott (West Shinness).*

1. **Apologies**

 *Iain Robertson & Stew Gillies (MoD), Rich Williams, Romany Garnett & Lynn Munro (John Muir Trust), Megan Bregazzi (FLS), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Craig Rigby (Syre/ North Lochnaver), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), David Allison (Reay Forest), David Shaw (Keodale & Gualin), Robert McHardy (Poole), Sian O’Brien (Strathnaver Common Grazings)*

1. **Minutes of the meeting held in November 2023**

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

1. **Matters Arising**

There had been discussion at previous meeting of initiating an economic appraisal of land use changes within the area. David Shaw and Sara Harkins both thought there were too many moving parts at the moment in terms of changing government policy, and therefore almost impossible to do anything meaningful, a position which Roddy Watt agreed. This issue will therefore not be attempted at present.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts & Budget**

There was currently £2,510.03 in the DMG bank account at 31st March, but with £2,908 in subscriptions still owed, some of which originated from previous years. £120 was due for web hosting, leaving £5,305.03 if all subscriptions could be gathered in. However, this might not be possible, and VC was also owed £1,500 for 2023-24, so maximum balance possible is £3,800, which is less than ADMG subscription. DMG financial policy is to retain the equivalent of one year of ADMG subscription in bank account at all times.

The current rate is based on a headage payment for stags/ hinds/ calves culled, but there were a number of issues that members needed to be aware of going forwards:

1. The rate had been increased last autumn as subscriptions were not covering costs, and buffer in bank account had been eroded.
2. There were a lot fewer deer present in the DMG area now than previously, so sustainable deer culls will inevitably be less going forwards.
3. The ADMG subscription was set on a 5- year rolling average, so the ADMG sub will come down more slowly than DMG income raised on an annual headage basis.

For these reasons, we needed to review the way in which DMG subscriptions were raised. One DMG member wrote before the meeting saying that they were concerned about financial position at the moment, and that action needed to be taken to address this, both in terms of bringing subscriptions in, and to budget more effectively going forwards.

Four subscription options had been presented to members and discussed at the meeting, including the status quo position. It was the unanimous decision of the meeting to move to a hybrid model in which (1) The ADMG subscription should be raised on a rolling five-year average and passed on directly to ADMG, and (2) An agreed cost for running the DMG should be invoiced at a % of DMG area basis. Such a model was used in other DMG areas where a sizeable property had undertaken a significant reduction cull.

The DMG budget of £4,870 is allocated as a % of area to all members.

TC to help chase up long standing invoices for payment.

1. **Election of Office Bearers**

Tom Chetwynd would remain as Chairman, and Victor Clements happy to remain as Secretary/ Facilitator. TC to speak to Treasurer to see whether she wishes to continue in role. The role could be amalgamated with secretary/ facilitator if necessary.

1. **2024 Count Review**

During March, helicopter counts had taken place over Reay Forest/ Merkland, the Wildland properties, and those estates lying adjacent to Strathnaver. Drone counts had previously taken place on Shinness/ West Shinness/ Fiag in October, so one way or another, the DMG now had up to date count information over approx. 65% of the total area.

There was a lot of frustration that the counts had not been better co-ordinated. At the previous meeting, only Reay Forest/ Merkland had been due to count. Wildland only made the decision to count later, and the Strathnaver count was more opportunistic in nature, following a lot of local debate on the back of the Section 10 process in the Strath, and a number of meetings. However, all those involved agreed that the count results were broadly representative of what they felt they had on their properties.

In summary, all areas counted were below 10 deer per sq km. The highest densities were to the west of Strathnaver, with a number of properties on 7-9 per sq km. Reay Forest averaged 5 deer per km, less than expected. The Merkland density was slightly less than this. The Wildland properties showed some very low densities, with the greater part of the area now being < 1 deer per sq km, and the remainder being approx. 2 deer per sq km.

It is very likely that the Far NW will be sitting at c 4-5 deer per sq km, with Altnaharra likely to be similar, or possibly lower.

The deer density and numbers has therefore changed fundamentally since 2019.

1. **2023 - 24 Season Review**

*Far NW Area*

There was no-one from this area present at the meeting. Hind cull figures for season where slightly less than target, but it is not felt that there are any significant issues in that area where numbers are generally low, except perhaps around Kinlochbervie.

*South Area*

The South area had counted back in October, and there was now a significantly higher hind cull taken of both red and sika deer.

*North East – Strathnaver*

The helicopter count provided good information about deer numbers on those properties immediately to the west of the strath. When adjusted for the different time of year, there were more deer on those properties now than there were in 2019, but beyond this, numbers on Wildland had been reduced to less than 1 deer per sq km. It is a very difficult situation to evaluate, but the properties adjacent were engaged in the process, and the crofters in the strath had capacity to take significant numbers.

Nature Scot would be carrying out an additional thermal count later in May, in order to determine a minimum number actually using the grass fields. The DMG will help support a local meeting that can help set a suitable deer cull target for the 2024-25 season.

*North East- Rest*

The deer population on the Wildland properties was now very low, in line with their objectives to regenerate native woodland. Extensive survey of the area had been completed, and it is estimated that there is potentially 6000 ha of woodland that may arise over the next ten years or so. Wildland were currently recruiting for an overall Conservation Director, with local staff acting as points of contact for information until then.

It was now becoming extremely difficult to predict what a suitable cull might be for 2024-25 and beyond, but any resident population on Wildland properties had certainly been reduced very significantly.

The helicopter count on Tongue Estate showed a close alignment with what they had counted themselves earlier in the year. They will continue to cull to reduce pressure on croft land, and for environmental objectives.

*Foinaven area*

The Reay Forest reduction cull, combined with neighbouring properties maintaining their cull levels, had now left a deer density of 5 per sq km on their beats, lower than target.

It was agreed to convene a meeting during May to decide on cull targets for 2024-25.

1. **How to progress?**

A series of meetings would be organized for the Strathnaver and Foinavon areas to discuss targets for the year ahead. VC would contact Wildland re meeting as well to see their current activities and discuss survey report findings. Nature Scot to conduct thermal image survey of Strathnaver to better inform current position there.

1. **Habitat Monitoring – ?**

It was agreed NOT to do any HIA monitoring this year. It was likely that impacts would now be low across most of the area, but likely to be too early to detect any changes from higher impacts in the Foinavon area. Wildland felt they now had good baseline information from which to guide their management interventions going forwards.

1. **ADMG Update**

ADMG were currently very concerned about the proposed Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs) that have been proposed by ScotGov and are currently being consulted on. They are pushing back on this, and had already attained legal opinion.

More positively, there was a venison subsidy being trialled in the Cairngorms National Park area, designed to deal with the very real issue of poor venison prices limiting the cull which is currently being achieved.

The Deer People Work Placement Scheme was open again to stalkers, with Sophie Clark from NWSDMG currently being abroad on a placement.

David Allison had given his apologies for this meeting to attend a Stalkers event at Holyrood.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) were currently undertaking a mountain hare survey, and all are encouraged to contribute.

Leigh Hague, a stalker in ESDMG and a Masters research student, was asking to survey stalkers in NW Sutherland.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

Those present were already aware of ongoing consultation.

Nature Scot putting ongoing time in to developing drone and satellite counting processes, and making good progress with that.

Beth Lamont had left Nature Scot, with position currently being advertised. Mark Jamieson was standing in for this meeting today.

1. **AOCB**

The meeting thanked Annette Parrott for providing coffee and biscuits/ cake as usual.

There was a film just out, The Last Keeper, looking at land use conflicts in Scotland, taking in both sides of the issue. The showing in Inverness is already sold out, but it should become more widely available via a number of streaming services from the end of June.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next main DMG meeting will be on **Wed 13th November**, 2 pm, Lairg Community Hall.