**NORTH WEST SUTHERLAND DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP**

**Annual General Meeting**

**2pm**

**Lairg Community Hall**

**Thursday 15th May 2025 at 2pm**

1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed all to the meeting, which included some people attending for the first time:

*Present: Tom Chetwynd (Chair), Victor Clements (Facilitator/ secretary), Pieter Bakker (Altnaharra), Rachel Sutherland & David Bell (Tongue Estate), Clovis Fletcher (Shinness), Roddy Watt & Martin Dignan (Merkland), Annette & Wendy Parrott (West Shinness), Steven Liddle & Donald Reid (Wildland Ltd), Richard Wright (Achnabourin & Syre Plantation), Callum Fraser (Reay Forest/ Gobernuisgach), Mark Jamieson & Billy Lobban (Nature Scot), Abe Humphries (Gualin), Sara Harkins (Kinlochbervie Estate), Jamie Sutherland (Keodale), Megan Bregazzi (FLS), Rosie Keenan (Strathnaver Common Grazings)*

1. **Apologies**

*Lana Richardson (Wildland Ltd), Stewart Gillies, Damien Handley & Ian Robertson (MoD), Charles Worsley (Fiag), Richard Osborne (Rhiconich), David Elliot, Ian Thomson & Jock Sutherland (Rhigolter), George Woods (Merkland), Andrew Spence (East Overscaig), Harsh Joshi (Gualin), Matthew Coathup (JMT), David Allison (Reay Forest), David Shaw (Keodale), Kirsty MacLeod (Treasurer)*

1. **Minutes of the meeting held in November 2024**

Minutes were taken as read, proposed by Pieter Bakker, seconded by Richard Wright.

1. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

1. **NWS DMG Accounts & Budget**

The DMG account currently had a balance of £8,652.10, with £4,095.53 of invoices outstanding, and £9,063.60 of payments due, including the ADMG invoice for 2024-25. If all invoices could be settled, that would leave a balance of £3,664.03. Outstanding invoices were currently being actively chased up at present, and it is hoped that these will be settled before too long.

Invoices for the current year will be sent out asap after this spring meeting, on the same basis as before. The new invoices will total £11,297.

The accounts were accepted as a true representation of current finances.

1. **Election of Office Bearers**

Tom Chetwynd was returned as Chair of the DMG, proposed by Sara Harkins, and seconded by Abe Humphries.

It was decided to elect 2 X vice Chairs to the DMG to replace David Shaw and Sophie Clark who were both standing down. Sara Harkins was proposed by Tom Chetwynd and seconded by Pieter Bakker. David Allison was proposed by Tom Chetwynd, and seconded by Steven Liddle.

Victor Clements and Kirsty MacLeod were returned as Facilitator/ secretary and Treasurer respectively.

The Chair suggested that office bearers should look to have 2 X Zoom meetings annually to help discuss any business of the DMG that needed to be addressed outwith meetings.

1. **2024 25 Season Review**

*Far NW Area*

There were aa lot of deer in and around the village at Kinlochbervie, with some people wanting to see them, and others not. Like several other Highland villages, it was a complicated and sensitive issue. The DMG would support as required.

Keodale currently had an AECS scheme in place, focused on protecting designated sites, and the peatland/ open moor resource more widely, as well as looking to reduce deer competition on sheep grazing. They had delivered a much larger hind cull this season past, and would be looking to repeat that in 2025-26.

The MoD would be looking to reduce their hind cull a little, based on their own observations on numbers, and habitat monitoring.

It is believed there are relatively few deer on Sandwood at present. JMT are not currently members of the DMG, but are working well with neighbours on the deer front, and they are retained on the DMG email distribution list, and receive all DMG communications.

*South Area*

Shinness have been building up their infrastructure to help them with deer management, including the use of more deer hides.

West Shinness sika cull had been down a bit on previous years.

FLS were increasing their cull. Dalchork had a very large sika deer population. They had spent some time clearing roads for better access to their ground.

Fiag currently had a Long Term Forest Plan out for consultation for their conifer plantation, and neighbours encouraged to respond to this. Details forwarded previously.

Nature Scot would be spending more time speaking to people in the South group, getting to know the issues, and potentially, offering some support where they can.

*North East – Strathnaver*

Nature Scot had undertaken a thermal count a few days before the meeting, with numbers actually up on the previous year, despite cull targets being achieved. A similar level of cull would be required in the following year at least. NS would be in contact with all properties over what might be required. However, there had been a notable reduction in complaints from crofters, so some progress is hopefully being made.

The Strathnaver Common Grazings committee are looking to put out deer control to tender this year coming, which will be a significant change to operations.

Achnabourin had fewer stags now.

It was noted that Skelpick were looking to repair fences on the eastern side of the strath, and that should result in fewer deer coming across to feed on the inbye fields.

*North East- Rest*

Tongue Estate had increased their cull last season, reducing pressure on crofting land. They were co-operating with neighbours re counts, and this would continue going forwards.

Altnaharra had conducted another high hind cull to try and clear land for retaining stags. However, it was very difficult to make this work in practice as one of the Wildland target control zones was just across the boundary on Loyal. Altnaharra stag numbers had now collapsed completely, with little prospect of this changing much.

FLS Borgie had a much higher cull on open ground this year. Deer pressure within the wood itself was still very high, effectively preventing restocking efforts, and more time was required to bring this under control. A single contractor would be working across both areas in 2025-26.

*Foinaven area*

Merkland had a much reduced deer population now due to pressure on adjacent ground. Their hind cull had been reduced to minimal levels, and the stag cull has been halved. Looking forwards, the estate were currently developing a peatland restoration scheme, and it is likely that c 100 ha of new native woodlands will be created. The existing large native woodland scheme was now secure and deer fences would be removed to try and hold some deer on the ground.

Reay Forest had reduced their population over two seasons. Hind culls may be reduced a little in 2025-26 based on counts and recruitment.

Gualin had relatively few deer on their ground, but had made a significant contribution to cull in 2024-25, and would look to repeat this as best they can in the year ahead.

*Wildland presentation*

The Wildland cull over the season past had been more or less as projected. Densities were very low now, and management was focused on trying to maintain that situation to allow for habitat and especially native woodland recovery.

Looking forwards, Wildland have identified their key strategic areas for deer control, where the majority of their efforts would now be concentrated. It was planned to develop their intended higher woodland cover on a rolling basis, starting in the east on Loyal and moving west, with strategic areas of planting to bolster levels of natural regeneration. A working plan was being developed to cover the next 20 years.

SL was currently in the process of developing a Forestry Grant Scheme focused on Loyal, with approx. 500 ha of woodland now envisaged, a proportion of which would be planting. This would provide an opportunity to establish woodland types that would be slower to arise by natural regeneration alone. The planting would be unfenced. Very low deer densities would be required to ensure that these areas became established, so current control efforts would need to be sustained, and potentially increased.

As part of this effort, the 2 X conifer plantations to the south of Ben Loyal would be felled and restructured, partly to bog habitat, partly to native woodland. The opportunity would be taken to provide for more recreational access to the area via a better path network.

Neighbouring estates and the DMG will be consulted on the FGS application when plans have been scoped out more fully. The DMG is happy to co-ordinate comments on the proposed scheme.

Steven Liddle had now taken on the overall land management & restoration role for Wildland Ltd across their various sites.

1. **Season 2025-26**

In terms of hind culls, the Far NW, South and Foinavon areas would broadly try to deliver the hind cull achieved in 2024-25, as would the NE area outwith the Strathnaver area. MoD and Reay Forest would decrease culls a little. It was considered there are not many deer on Sandwood at present, but numbers in and around Kinlochbervie.

Altnaharra would be looking to take 20 stags to increase the cull of 5 taken in 2024, but were concerned that this may not be possible. They are likely to maintain a high hind cull to clear ground that stags might potentially stay in.

Wildland will likely reduce their hind cull a bit on Hope Estate, but maintain it elsewhere.

FLS need to maintain their culls, especially in the woodland area, as numbers are still too high to allow for any restocking in there.

Nature Scot will liaise with Strathnaver members over culls there, to agree totals for the year ahead. When this is complete. VC to forward draft numbers to members for comment, before settling on DMG targets for the year ahead.

1. **Habitat Monitoring – ?**

It had been suggested at the previous autumn meeting that the DMG would look to monitor blanket bog across the area in 2025, looking to see if anything had changed in the Foinavon area, and trying to fill in some of the blank areas from 2021.

It was confirmed at this meeting that we will go ahead with this monitoring across the area. VC would support members with mapping and advice, and it is likely that some external help will be required to help some members. An email will be circulated to all members to try and get a good uptake of this during the summer. The window for survey work is June- mid September.

1. **ADMG Update**

ADMG had circulated spring report to all DMG members which had been circulated to NWS properties.

The majority of their time at present was being spent keeping track of the potential legislative changes. Many of them were focused on closing gaps in the existing legislation, but many of the potential provisions for nature restoration were very subjective in nature and would likely to subject to challenge if they became law. These were being presented as Section 6ZB in a new act.

Elsewhere, the Scottish Venison Association was being amalgamated with SQWV, and was being supported by £40,000 from ADMG. This will hopefully create a much more effective overall organization, and there is a lot of positivity around this.

As usual, ADMG will be represented at the Scone Game Fair, probably in an overall deer hub this time.

1. **Nature Scot Report**

As above, the Natural Environment Bill has been published, with the intention of updating current deer legislation.

There will be additional potential triggers for intervention, with nature restoration now holding greater leverage than damage as such.

There will be no change to the female deer season.

The Fit & Competent register is likely to become a Competency register, with authorizations then becoming de-regulated to a very large extent.

Venison dealer licences will be removed.

There will be a number of important changes to processes. The period in which a deer management plan has to be produced and presented to Nature Scot will be reduced from 12 months to 3 months. Likewise, the period of notice required to enter a property will reduce from 2 weeks to 5 days. Such changes are designed to make everything work much more quickly.

1. **AOCB**

Reay Forest will be hosting a Common Ground Forum event at Achfary on 6th November, and just recently held a Best Practice event looking at woodland herbivore impact monitoring.

Thank you to Annette and Wendy Parrott for setting up the hall and providing coffee and cakes etc for those attending.

1. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting would be held on Wed 19th November, 2pm at Lairg Community Hall.