

NORTHERN DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

Summary Minutes of the Meeting on 22nd August 2019 at Kildonan Hall

Present: Chair - Howard Palmer (Latheronwheel West), Treasurer - Anson MacAuslan (Langwell & Braemore), Secretary – Helen MacIntyre, Holly Deary - SNH, Tom Chetwynd – ADMG, Victor Clements – HIA Consultant, James Donaldson – Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, Andrew Mackay – Melvich Community Council, representatives from: Langwell, Braemore, Achentoul, RSPB, Strathmore, Braehour & Backlass, Dalnawillan & Rumsdale, Shurrery, Bighouse, Skelpick & Rhifail, Badanloch, Torrish, Number One Holding, Suisgill, Fountains Forestry, Forest and Land Scotland.

Apologies: Dunbeath & Glutt, Strathy, Syre, SGRPID, Sandside, Strathmore & Broubster Forests, Armadale Farm, Achkeepster

1. Welcome and Apologies - The Chairman welcomed everyone and opened the meeting at 2.30pm.

2. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 9th May 2019 and matters arising

The minutes were approved. It was suggested that the group calculates its economic benefits of deer management to show the local community, perhaps putting something in the press.

Jim Donaldson (JD) of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service spoke about the fire at Bighouse and actions for improved communication at future fires. An email has been circulated to all with the minutes of the Post Melvich Wildfire Working Group meeting and information about the Community Asset Register. The Fire Service aims to work in partnership with locals as they don't have the resources to work alone. Unfortunately, this is what fell down for the Bighouse fire. Actions agreed by the Working Group: to get more drones in use; future planning; proper mapping of the area with correct contact details in case of fire; better communications; local rendezvous point. During the fire there were people coming up offering assistance and there was a delay in getting that information through. The Fire Service going through a modernisation at the moment. Environmental conditions have had a big impact, including flooding and dry spells due to changing weather conditions. They now have better vehicles. There is a Community Asset Register for people to put details of resources on and the Fire service can come and visit estates to see what resources they have got. They appreciate that the land is your livelihood and they are there to help protect that. The Fire Service are responsible for people on the hill during a fire, and they want to make sure they stay safe. A report into the cause of the fire will be circulated once available. One member suggested we put signs out to say it is illegal to start a fire, and that more people should have fogging units, which cost about £5000. JD agreed that signage is a good idea – could there be some partnership with the local council? Now with the North Coast 500, there are more tourists, some with midge burners – increasing fire risk. Fire Service could focus on preventing wildfires at certain times of year. VC said South Grampian estates have their own signage, asset register, agreed payment rates for helping neighbours. We would need to have some sort of working group set up for this. Signs particular to your area mean people are more likely to notice them as they will be different. JD said everyone should assess their fire equipment, keep it in good condition and let everyone know where it is kept. Bighouse says again a big thank you to all local estates for their assistance during the fire. **Action:** to circulate Jim Donaldson's contact details and documents.

3. Chairman's Report – Howard Palmer

All issues are covered elsewhere in the agenda.

4. Treasurer's Report – Anson MacAuslan

Subs are not bringing in enough money to cover ADMG subs and secretarial fees, plus we need to pay for the HIA report. HP proposed to raise subs and it was agreed by a majority. SNH are now looking for 50% funding from groups for helicopter counts, so the group will also need to raise around £30k for this. It was asked if we could use drones or fixed wing planes instead. HD explained that SNH doesn't find either of those methods as reliable. HP said the helicopter count money wouldn't be raised through subs. It was suggested we could approach community funds from windfarms. One member said some other groups calculate subs on a fixed acreage rather

than culls, since culls can fluctuate. One DMG has members pay a flat rate per member plus an allocation on number of stags shot. One member asked for a breakdown of ADMG expenditure to see what the annual subscription goes towards. **Action:** to circulate ADMG annual report. Anson to send out subs invoices after the meeting. **Action:** to discuss subs and other methods of raising money at May meeting.

5. Culls and counts

a) **Planned 2020 counts** – The group foot count will be done as usual (1st week in March for North and South sub-groups, end of Feb for West sub-groups). It is unlikely we will get an SNH helicopter count.

b) **Proposed hind/calf culls for 2019/20**

Some members are continuing with reduction culls, trying to get away from numbers and towards looking at the health of the hill. There will be habitat monitoring to go along with this. HD emphasised the importance of property-specific cull target setting, in the context of the group population model.

c) **Population modelling**

Circulated models show what is predicted to happen to each sub-group population if culls continue at the current rate. In order to make the modelling more accurate we need a good foot count in 2020. Porous fencing around forestry will make it difficult to count all deer. From the high stag count figures for South Sub-Group 1, some stags may spend part of the year in the south and then spread across the group at other times of year. We will continue working on the models. HD said target population for each sub-group should be decided on. Where there is difficulty counting all the deer, some groups look at the count each year and adjust culls up or down a percent depending on whether the count has gone up or down. HP is still in favour of annual foot counts to inform management.

6. Group Deer Management Plan – Priority Actions

The actions the group will concentrate on are:

1 – Population modelling and group population targets

2 – Habitat impact assessments

3 – Ensuring community engagement and attendance. We have invited community councils to this meeting. We are attending to the needs of public interest and keen to engage the community as far as we can.

4 – Economic benefits and costs. There are six sub-actions within the public interest section of the SNH assessment, for which we scored two reds and four ambers. **Action:** Helen to collect figures from group.

7. Habitat Impact Assessment Report – Victor Clements

Victor has collected information from group members on current HIA monitoring practices. 50% are not doing any HIA, which is less than most other groups. Designated sites are mostly in good condition, though some of the information is dated. These sites cover a lot of the group area and are well spread across the area, so we could use the designated sites as a proxy for the whole.

HD explained that SNH site condition monitoring methods are being revised, so no designated sites will be monitored until at least 2021. It would be difficult to do HIA in areas with many crofts. Victor suggests that if the DMG did some monitoring of the SSSIs between now and 2021 that would be all we would need to do. Blanket bog covers around 100,000 ha and is in good condition, so Victor believes we are doing ok as a group. There is not much point in looking at the dry heather habitats as there is not much compared to the blanket bog. He suggests doing a certain number of plots per SSSI rather than per property. However, if group members do the HIAs only every 5/6 years in between SNH's site condition monitoring then people might forget how to do them. Do we do the HIAs ourselves or contract someone else to do it? The area is looking at getting World Heritage Status, so can we get some funding towards monitoring the habitat?

HD doesn't think that only monitoring the designated sites is the way forward, and that some areas outwith the sites could benefit from monitoring. She pointed out that Best Practice Monitoring (BPM – the method for groups to do HIA) is different from SNH's Site Condition Monitoring (SCM). BPM is looking at two habitat types – heather and blanket bog. SCM is quite detailed and looking at the condition of a particular feature, but also includes herbivore impacts. SNH also do Site Checking, which is a walk over the ground, looking at general trends. VC said there is a case for saying that what SNH are doing and what we are being asked to do should be better aligned, and ADMG are making this case.

What do we do with the results of monitoring? We should use it in cull planning. If impacts are acceptable then deer numbers do not need to be reduced. VC said we are not doing enough HIA at the moment to really inform deer management. Native woodlands cover just 0.4% of the area, which means it is very difficult to bring them back into good condition. It should be noted that some properties are committed to a certain number of HIA plots as part of an AECS scheme.

8. SNH Update and results of 2019 DMG assessments

SNH are writing a review on progress of the deer sector, to be submitted to the Scottish Government in autumn. It will include the assessments of DMGs. The independent Deer Working Group will also report separately to the Scottish Government in the autumn. There are some poor performing groups (in the context of the SNH assessment) concentrated around the north of Scotland, including NDMG. We are amongst the lowest ranking DMGs in terms of the assessments.

9. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report – Tom Chetwynd

There is likely to be a London meeting of ADMG next year. Not much to update since May meeting notes (see minutes). ADMG are constantly lobbying the Scottish Government to ensure the industry is fairly treated. ADMG are always happy to provide support in whatever form to ensure a group makes progress. They will be sending out a questionnaire shortly regarding the assessment program, and they encourage groups to provide evidence to the survey which ADMG can use.

10. Any Other Competent Business

Ragwort has been spreading to the cliffs and will be very difficult to get rid of now.

It was asked if everyone has settled their sporting rates satisfactorily. Several replied that they had.

One member commented that he does not believe calculating contributions on an acreage basis is fair and it should be done on an ability to pay. TC said ADMG will likely always keep their subscriptions on an income basis.

The group is still looking for a vice chair to volunteer. Please contact Helen or Howard if you have any questions.

Holding Number One is still for sale, with a closing date likely in early October. Howard thanked the owner for his loyal attendance at the meetings.

11. Date of Next Meeting – TBC w/c 4th May 2020 at Kildonan Hall.