

# Northern Deer Management Group

## Minutes of the Meeting on Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> May 2020 at 2.30pm by online Zoom call

A meeting of group Office Bearers and SNH was held instead of a full group meeting due to Government restrictions on the movement of people to help reduce the spread of Covid-19.

### Present:

Chairman: Howard Palmer (HP)

Treasurer: Anson MacAuslan (AM)

Secretary: Helen MacIntyre (HM)

Debbie Skinner – SNH (DS)

Holly Deary – SNH (HD)

### 1. Approval of Minutes of Meeting 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2019 and matters arising

It was decided not to approve the minutes due to the absence of most group members. No matters arising.

### 2. Treasurer's Report – Anson MacAuslan

See separate accounts sheet. FLS owe group subs for 2019. **Action:** HP to chase other outstanding fees, including a contribution to the group Deer Management Plan.

ADMG are delaying their subs invoices this year until at least October due to Covid-19.

### 3. Culls and counts

a) **Results of hind cull 2019-20** – These were higher than targets in sub-groups West 2 and South 1, and lower than target in South 2.

b) **Proposed stag cull 2020** – The total looks lower than last year but not all members have given figures yet.

c) **Group foot count 2020** – There were good conditions for the counts done on 9<sup>th</sup> March. West 2, South 1 & South 2 had most members participate and co-ordinated on one day. In North sub-group, Sandside did not count. In West 1, some didn't count and not all counted on the same day. Armadale Farm counted this year but not on the same day as other neighbours.

South 2 counted 17% more deer than last year, West 2 14% more, South 1 7% fewer deer. North & West 1 no change but there were estates missing from the 2020 count so numbers may have increased.

Deer counted on the count day may not be there during the culling season, so collaboration between members of all sub-groups in understanding patterns of deer movement across the whole group area is particularly important to achieving culls. For example, there are more stags in South 1 over the winter.

SNH said the calving rate this year is likely to be higher across the north of Scotland. Most hinds culled were pregnant. Population can rise quite quickly with these fairly small differences. HP said properties should make sure to cull at least as many as last year. HD said if the value of venison is low people might hold back on hind culls, but HD said the risk with this is that deer populations could increase significantly this year. Processors are currently considering how they can operate in line with social distancing, and there are various venison partnership meetings underway to explore how to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on the venison industry. Unless they can sell the venison, people will not cull deer. There is still some time before the start of the stags so we are hopeful. Sporting stag options may be more difficult. Are stalkers allowed

out? SNH says in terms of Scottish government guidance, no it is not an essential activity at the moment. Same applies to HIAs and recruitment counts – they are not essential. As this guidance changes ensuring there is clarity amongst individuals on the ground will be important.

**d) Population modelling** – We need each sub-group to decide their population targets required to deliver their objectives. South 1 have density targets for Suisgill and Langwell/Braemore. The Deer Working Group report recommended under 10 deer/km<sup>2</sup> but there has been no response from the Scottish Government yet, and this is likely to be delayed due to Covid-19. SNH recommends that target densities should be set depending on the area and impacts. For example, blanket bog would require a lower density than 10 to avoid damage. Deer managers should look at impacts on the ground, condition of deer, mortality etc. to decide suitable densities. **Action:** HM to email members for sub-group objectives and hind/calf targets for the 2020-21 season.

#### **4. Group Deer Management Plan**

**a) Draft Working Plan** – This has been shared with the group and no comments received. We need to add population modelling and habitat impact assessment information to this plan.

**b) Priority Actions** – areas for improvement with regards to SNH's objectives.

**Habitat Impact Assessment** – The possibility of a group monitoring project was discussed. This would encourage members and help support those uncertain of how to start. There was an HIA training day held at Berriedale in November 2019.

**Population modelling** – Discussed above.

**Economic benefits/costs** – We can estimate things like venison income from cull numbers. HM to draft a questionnaire for members to share data. This will be kept confidential and only total figures added to the group Plan.

#### **5. SNH Update**

The response from Scottish Government on the SNH Report and Deer Working Group report is likely to be delayed due to Covid-19. SNH counts have not covered as much as they would like this year. Northern is still a priority. SNH are still looking for contributions from groups towards helicopter counts.

#### **6. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report**

See separate report by Tom Turnbull, Vice Chair of ADMG.

#### **7. Any Other Competent Business**

Howard's term as Chair ends this August. If anyone would like to volunteer please get in touch. Anson has volunteered to do it if no-one else is interested.

SNH Site Condition Monitoring will be starting again, done by SNH staff. It looks at the condition of specific features and also looks at herbivore impacts, but it is different to Habitat Impact Assessments carried out by landowners. **Action:** Debbie to let us know if any sites within NDMG will be done this year.

We have been contacted by a crofter regarding a problem with too many deer on common grazing land within the group. Should the Crofting Commission be involved in the DMG, or local grazing committees? **Action:** Anson to find contact details for local grazing committees.

#### **8. Date of Next Meeting** – 2.30pm on Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020 at Kildonan Hall.