

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 26th Feb. 2016

As you may imagine 2015 was an extremely busy year for ADMG and DMGs generally, and 2016 has started off in the same vein. Arguably this will be the most momentous year for deer managers that any of us have experienced. Despite that I promise to be less long winded than usual this morning.

The Land Reform Bill is being rushed through its stages in the Parliament and the Scottish Government intend to have this on the statute book, come what may, before the Scottish elections in May. And then we have the second RACCE review of deer management now brought forward to the Autumn. 2016 is make or break for the voluntary principle!

Before the turn of the year at Stage 1 of the Bill, we were back in front of the Rural Affairs Committee giving verbal evidence and making representations in respect of the deer aspects of the Bill. In the event we were much criticised by some members of the Committee and clearly this is based on a perception, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the voluntary system of deer management is not fit for purpose, that there are still too many deer in Scotland, doing irreparable damage to the environment, and that the sector needs to be fully regulated; this despite ADMG reporting in detail on the rapid and substantive progress that DMGs are making across the board in producing new deer management plans and addressing the public interest aspects which were deemed to be a priority by the Rural Affairs Committee and the Minister after their 2013 Review.

What we are up against is a highly organised campaign from those whose agenda is to bring the ownership and management of deer under full State control, not to mention break up the estates, to convince MSPs that the deer sector has not changed, cannot change and is beyond saving and that the voluntary principle has failed. This case is made by constant harking back to a caricature of deer management as it was in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, in the recent Stage 2 RACCE debate there was reference to Frank Fraser Darling's prescription for a Scottish red deer population of just 60,000, also reference to the red deer population having quadrupled since the 1960s, a statement that to maintain a stable deer population it is necessary to cull 1 in 3 annually, and numerous references to the deer population being "out of control". That type of misinformation is what we are up against.

So what are we doing to counter that?

- We have briefed and will continue to brief individual RACCE Committee members and MSPs generally on the rapid progress being made.
- We had the Minister present at our November Regional Meeting when she heard the progress reports of the 20 plus DMGs represented there. In subsequent correspondence with me and when herself giving evidence to the Committee she made favourable reference to that.
- We have circulated an annotated version of a Misinformation Sheet sent to all MSPs by some of our critics.
- Also, with the intention of putting forward up to date facts about deer and their impacts to counter the mythology on offer from our critics, we have sent to all MSPs a fact sheet based on ScotGov statistics and information, including:
 - That there are 275,000 red deer in the areas covered by the DMGs which extends to 3.26m ha. 32,600 sq. km. (SNH to RACCE 2013)

- Which represents 8.6 deer per sq. km overall, obviously with local variation.
- 815,000 breeding ewes are to be found on the same area (SGRPID stats 2014 Highland, Grampian and Tayside)
- 85.3% of designated site features where deer are present are, to quote SNH in 2015, *“in favourable condition, recovering due to management, or unfavourable but with site condition monitoring herbivore targets being met”*. Thus deer impacts remain to be rectified on just 14.7% of designated sites, and this figure is on a downward trend.
- Deer were reported in the media as being the main culprit in the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (Forestry Commission 2015) but analysis by SNH, still ongoing, has identified that just half of the native woodland area, 161,000ha lies within the area covered by DMGs and that less than 1/3 of that is in unfavourable condition owing to herbivore impacts. (There are lots of other reasons for native woods being in unfavourable condition, underplanting with non native species to name but one).

All DMGs have been sent a copy of those stats and please use them in briefing your own MSPs and local media.

Our communication campaign needs to work at both national and local level. This is a job for all of us. We are expected to consult on our draft DMPs. Consultation and transparency were big points from the 2013 RACCE Review and will undoubtedly be one of the main points of consideration at the 2016 Review. I would therefore strongly encourage DMG Chairs to make use of your local press to draw attention to the publication of your deer management plans, which is a positive news story.

I am pleased to say that since our seminar at Birnam in November, despite the IT glitch, most DMGs have taken up the ADMG “off the peg” website and we now have 25 in place and accessible through the ADMG web portal. 7 DMGs already have their DMPs online for consultation. I urge all Groups to follow suit urgently. Your website will be your main tool in consulting on your DMP, although local community meetings are also essential.

A further word on Assessments. The SNH 2014 Assessment Report, based on a Red/Amber/Green broad grading system was misconstrued by the RACCE Committee and others as a critique of the deer sector not as a baseline for assessing progress when the next Review takes place this year. This has taken much effort to correct. We are therefore currently working with SNH to develop a more straightforward scoring process for the 2016 Assessments that will avoid future such misunderstandings and my particular thanks to Victor Clements for devising the system. Once this is in place we will actually, in effect, have the basis of a quality assurance scheme for deer management and we are giving some thought to the value of that. An Industry designed and led QA scheme could effectively demonstrate that the sector has taken ownership of the Assessment process, and intends to use it as an ongoing basis for future development and improvement. In short it would help to demonstrate that the voluntary principle works for deer management.

Whatever the perceptions externally, the reality is that you, within your individual Deer Management Groups, almost without exception, have risen remarkably to the challenge with which we are faced. The new deer management plans, mostly prepared by experienced consultants with a 50% grant from SNH, are now being completed and put online for consultation on an almost daily basis and those Groups which are a little behind the curve are also making steady forward progress.

The feedback which I have heard is that many Groups have found the Planning process, and indeed the baseline assessment, valuable, in some cases helping to resolve longstanding difficulties and internal differences. However there is still a long way to go and very little time before your DMGs are reassessed by SNH, mostly to be in May and June. This second Assessment, measuring progress since 2014, will be the basis of the SNH report to the RACCE Review and it is therefore crucial that all DMGs have completed their DMPs, had them out for consultation, put them in the public arena, and had them endorsed for grant payment by SNH. I am more than a little concerned to hear from SNH that some DMGs may miss the deadline for completing their Plans and claiming their grants before the end of this financial year, 31st March. The Review is likely to judge us all by the speed of the slowest. So for those who are struggling please think about the rest of us and ask for help if you need it.

My own expectation is that the reassessment will individually and collectively demonstrate the “step change” for which the Environment Minister at the time and the Rural Affairs Committee called. At the Stage 2 Committee debate the Minister undertook that the Review would be objective and evidence based. If that is the case, and it should be, we can give a good account of ourselves.

So my key messages to you today are:

- Get your DMP finished and signed off by SNH by the end of March, with just a little flexibility for Groups which were later starters. If you have written a DMP yourselves, get it checked by your SNH WMO or send it to ADMG to ensure that it ticks all the boxes at your Assessment.
- Consult on it locally before finalising it.
- Get it on your DMG website asap. This is the easiest way to put your DMP out for consultation and to demonstrate that you are joining the growing ranks of Groups with an online presence and a fully compliant website.
- Finally, get it reported in the local press.

To return to the Bill briefly, as all are aware, Part 6 proposes the removal of the exemption from local authority business rates of deer forests and shooting rights. Despite forthright criticism of this aspect of the Bill from RACCE at Stage 1 in relation to: lack of detail as to how it would work, no impact assessment, whether it would apply to all land, and how much money it would raise; also the possibility of unintended consequences, particularly in creating a disincentive to deer management, the Govt. shows no sign of withdrawing this measure and they have largely now satisfied RACCE with the answers supplied to some of their questions although actually most of those uncertainties remain.

An amendment submitted by Alex Fergusson to remove Part 6 entirely was defeated. However ADMG has put forward an amendment, through Mike Russell, which would have the effect of enabling Regional Assessors, when assessing rateable value, “to take account of good management in the public interest”. If that were adopted, being a member of a DMG with an effective DMP could be the basis of relief or partial relief from sporting rates, or that is our idea behind the amendment. This proposal has wide support within RACCE but the amendment was withdrawn at the Stage 2 debate on the assurance of the Minister that it would receive further consideration. So this is still a live issue and Mike Russell reserved his position and may reintroduce the amendment at Stage 3. We will continue to press for this amendment.

We also need to look beyond the Review to delivering our DMPs in practice. We need to continue the momentum, to be creative and progressive, so that when we

are reassessed again at some time in the probably not too distant future we will not only be judged on having delivered a good deer management planning process but we will also be able to show that we have practiced what we preached and delivered effective deer management, properly integrated with other land uses, which contributes to environmental improvement and most importantly which continues to deliver for remote parts of rural Scotland in terms of jobs, supporting communities, tourism and the local economy. When the Review takes place I would like to be able to say to the Committee, not only that we have done what was required of us – completed DMPs in all DMGs, but also to paint a picture of future progression and innovation. The possibility of a DMG QA scheme based on self assessment to which I alluded earlier would help to demonstrate that.

As to our routine business we have held 3 Regional Meetings during the year and my particular thanks to those many who have attended them and given updates on your Groups and Planning process.

We also continue to participate actively in many Committees – the Access and Moorland Forums, SCSTG, LDNS, WES, SVP, the Industry Competence Group, and a good few more. Having noted this for the record I propose to miss Item 8 on then agenda - Committee reports, as we have an extra speaker this year and I want to leave plenty of time for questions.

We will as usual be organising a Birnam seminar in the Spring for Chairs and Secretaries, details to be advised in due course. It will certainly focus on the imminent Assessment process.

Venison deserves a particular mention this year in connection with the e-coli O157 outbreak in October. This is a serious matter indeed for all of us and hence one of our speakers this morning is Ian McWatt, head of Food Standards Scotland, who will, I anticipate, have some hard hitting things to say to us.

As most will be aware SNH has had to absorb further heavy cuts in its budget this year, 10% I am told. The outlook beyond 2016 is not yet known. The impact for us is significant as all the joint projects between ADMG and SNH have fallen by the wayside. In particular, unless we can find another way to fund it, the SWARD data management model for DMGs, which had reached its pilot stage, will not be progressed in the short term. Similarly we had hoped to reactivate Best Practice which has fallen off the map. At a time when we have so much to prove it is particularly frustrating for these important developments to be held back but there is not much to be done about it.

We have applied to ECAF (Environmental Cooperative Action Fund under the AECS (formerly SRDP) for funding, as, I understand, have a small number of individual DMGs. We are not very hopeful that the ADMG application will be successful as it does not seem to be designed for representative bodies but it will test the new scheme and maybe we can try again at the next application window later this year. It will be very interesting to see if any of the DMGs which have applied are successful as ECAF was produced, at least partially, as a result of ADMG lobbying for an element of SRDP that could be accessed jointly by groups of landholdings with a common purpose.

There has also been some restructuring within the SNH Wildlife team but I will leave Robbie Kernahan to talk about that under Item 9.

Many of you will have contributed to the information required for the PACEC economic study of the deer sector last year. This has taken rather longer than

expected to finalise with the consultants but we are now able to share the results and I will ask Finlay, who has been managing the project, to report on this later in the meeting.

This year we have dropped the separate publication of our Stag Season Report which has been sponsored since the outset by Knight Frank, for which very many thanks. Although of continuing interest to many somehow this seems a little less relevant than it was bearing in mind the rapid changes with which we are all faced and in future we will report in more simple and less costly form within Scope, as you will see in today's issue which is there for collection at the back of the room.

Much of our past use of printed media for internal and external communications will be more easily undertaken in future through the Internet. The change in the ADMG web arrangements mean that the ADMG website will not only display material of relevance to the sector as a whole but will act as a portal to the individual websites of our member DMGs which is where all the local information about Groups will be found, including DMPs, Minutes, Constitutions etc. As I said earlier, the swift take up of the template website for DMGs which we developed last year is very encouraging and I have to say again to any Group that does not have a website that you absolutely need to have one. It is free from ADMG at the outset although there will be an annual hosting fee thereafter. If you have yet to get going on this please speak to Dick.

Finally, this is my opportunity to thank the Executive Committee for their considerable extra efforts over the last 12 months. I try not to bother them all other than at meetings but I do pick individual brains on relevant matters. We have a very strong Committee with a wide range of knowledge and experience and new ideas come forward all the time. My particular thanks to Finlay, a steady hand at the helm, to Dick Playfair who has had more to do on the PR/Communications front than ever, and to Linzi whose one day a week for ADMG stretches a long way in terms of supporting member Groups.

On the subject of the Committee I was very much saddened earlier this week to receive a letter from Stephen Gibbs. He has been poorly over recent months and wrote to intimate his withdrawal from ADMG. Stephen's contribution to ADMG has been enormous, second to none, from speaking forcibly for the Association's formation back in 1992 when DCS were at the time opposed, from his 14 years as our longest serving Chairman, and from his leadership of the Scottish Venison Partnership since it was set up in about 2005 up to the present day.

I worked with him as ADMG Secretary throughout his chairmanship and have the greatest regard and respect for him and I thank him on all our behalves for his invaluable efforts for the DMGs. I hope very much that we will see him again at ADMG meetings when his health is restored.

That is the end of my report for the year. Happy to take questions or comments before we continue with the agenda.