

ADMG Parliamentary Event – March 2020
SNH, Ross Johnston

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of SNH at what is such a timely event marking a busy time for ADMG and the wider deer sector - with a number of key reports having recently been published and currently being considered.

There is no doubt that deer and the way in which they are managed has been under scrutiny over recent years. As a consequence deer managers have been faced with a number of challenges - not least in responding to the task of demonstrating how deer management is delivering public benefit.

No doubt for you, as for us, this scrutiny has meant the 'next review' has never felt far away.

I don't doubt there will continue to be scrutiny on deer and how they are managed as we move forward, but there is an opportunity here to build on common ground, to work together, recognise progress, address challenges and importantly continue the progressive and constructive dialogue to make sure we do not see a polarisation of views between interests – as we may have seen in the past.

I would like to acknowledge progress which has been made and identified within the SNH report to Scottish Government.

ADMG and the deer sector has responded positively and constructively, as shown through our recent report to Scottish Government which provides an update on progress from 2016.

Recognising the significant efforts of individual deer managers, DMGs and the ADMG over this period, we were pleased to be able to report on an overall improving picture.

This report drew on a number of different sources of information - commissioned reports, ongoing programmes of work – but the most significant to many of you in this room was the DMG Assessment process which has brought a focus for many involved in deer management over the last number of years.

We recognise the significant efforts that have gone into delivering the improvements which have been identified through these assessments. Inevitably there have been some challenging discussions, over the period, in leading up to and through this process but the SNH staff involved reflected that this was on the whole a positive and constructive exercise.

The development and focus of the assessment process has in its self, we believe, contributed to the focussing of efforts and in raising and setting the bar of expectation.

Credit should go to ADMG for time spent preparing for this in clarifying expectations and in supporting their members through investing in their programme of 'Health Checks', ensuring your members were best placed for the assessment process.

The report also, inevitably pointed to a number of challenges where more progress is needed.

Future challenges remain to ensure sustainable deer management – particularly where benefits from deer management can clearly be evidenced on the ground.

While progress has been made, our report highlights some of the more difficult aspects of fully integrating impact based approaches, and particularly native woodland condition and restoration – These are areas which need to see further focus going forward.

There is a challenge in being able to demonstrate the sustainable nature of the management and quantify how this is being delivered on the ground. This is something SNH, ADMG and also Environment LINK are together keen to develop further so that achievements can be evidenced. Understanding what information is needed and available to quantify delivery will be important.

The right balance in use of incentives, recognition of good practice/delivery and use of powers to regulate is key to maintaining momentum.

Importance of DMGs and Collaboration

It is also important to take the opportunity to emphasise and be clear on the value we see from progressive, collaborative approaches to managing deer and the benefits the best performing DMGs can deliver for people and nature.

Inevitably roles and focus change over time – DMGs have come a considerable way from the purpose and role they may have initially been set up for. It is likely this evolution will need to continue – but we believe the DMG structures are well placed to develop and adapt to this challenge.

Role in supporting and advising SG on DWG report and recommendations.

Of course, there is much focus on the recently published Deer Working Group report at the moment. This is a significant report with some forensic analysis of the changes in deer legislation and a wide ranging review of many aspects of deer policy and practice.

We appreciate the effort which has gone into this significant piece of work, and like many here no doubt, we value such a synthesis of deer related research and evidence.

Not surprisingly, given the extent of the report and number of recommendations there will need to be some time to work through these. There is much in this report for SNH to reflect, a number of recommendations on how we prioritise resources and efforts, how we use the powers available, along with proposed changes to legislative and policy aspects.

We will of course be working closely with the Scottish Government as the response to the report is considered.

Context of climate change emergency, biodiversity loss, land use

The wider context to all our work has of course changed radically in the last year or so. With the UK Climate Change Committee's Net Zero report leading to the declaration of a climate emergency, and the IPBES Global Assessment of Biodiversity setting out the threat to human-well-being of biodiversity loss.

There is no doubt we have reached a critical point for Scotland's nature and the environment. We need to step up and be leaders in tackling biodiversity loss and climate change impacts. The deer sector, and wider land management interests will be critical to helping us to deliver nature based solutions. Woodland and peatland are clear priorities, delivering the new Scottish Forestry Strategy and the Peatland Action programme will need to be supported by effective management of deer and their impacts.

We recognise the contribution that deer managers can make to these challenges. We will shortly be having the first meeting of new joint group, which includes ADMG, ENV LinK, NFUS and FLS to develop thinking joint working approaches and importantly actions.

This is also happening at a time when approaches to regional land use planning are being developed, post EU exit funding and future agricultural support is being considered and when natural capital approaches are becoming more advanced. These are all potentially significant in how Scotland's land and deer are managed in the future. It is engagement on these strategic issues as well as the local management where we value our relationship with ADMG.

In concluding:

It is important that we recognise progress, the steps taken and the efforts that have been made to date. I don't think there will be any complacency from anyone in the room about the challenges which remain – momentum which has developed needs to continue, any hiatus in terms of waiting for responses to DWG recommendations would be detrimental.

So the clear message has to be to continue on delivering on the public interest outcomes where progress is being made, look for opportunity in what will be both a challenging but exciting time within the deer sector, and SNH look forward to working closely with ADMG as we go forward.