

Association of Deer Management Groups

Comments on RACCE Report to the Scottish Government - December 2015

Summary

- Many DMGs had Deer Management Plans before the 2013 RACCE Committee Review. Most of these required to be replaced in light of the Review.
- Development of the public interest criteria represented a substantial task for SNH and they did not therefore become available until August 2014.
- The Assessments were carried out to establish a baseline (**not as a critique**) of the deer sector immediately following publication of the public interest criteria and prior to any deer management planning commencing. The SNH Assessments Report failed to make this clear.
- The SNH funding package did not become available until December 2014.
- An additional constraint was the initial shortage of consultants capable of carrying out deer management planning for DMGs. This has been subsequently rectified and there are now 6 consultants working on individual deer management plans.
- We would request that the 2016 Review should not take place before the “**end of 2016**” as was stipulated in the 2014 Committee Review, particularly in view of the time lost at the beginning of the new Planning process.

Having studied the Rural Affairs Committee Report on the Land Reform Bill ADMG is pleased to note that the Committee has understood and taken on board the potentially counterproductive effects of removing the exemption from Local Authority business rates on deer forests (**Part 6**). The Committee has correctly identified that this would be likely to work against other aspects of Government policy. It would be contradictory to require higher levels of deer management activity and at the same time to impose an additional cost on deer management within the same legislation (Part 6).

ADMG, along with the Lowland Deer Network Scotland, is also very pleased to note that the Committee has understood the very different circumstances that pertain in relation to lowland deer management (para 371) and that any further legislative measures should take account of that. The concern about participation by local authorities was also rightly noted. However greater recognition of the successes and the level of commitment and professionalism of the Lowland Deer Groups would be welcome.

In relation to **Part 8**, ADMG is dismayed to note the tenor of the Committee's observations in regard to the progress made by Deer Management Groups and their effectiveness, under the voluntary principle, in delivering sustainable deer management. All the written and verbal evidence submitted by this organisation and others, and by Scottish Natural Heritage, have indicated a firm and rapid direction of travel that aligns increasingly with Scottish Government policy as set down in “Wild Deer – A National Approach” and in the Deer Code.

In particular we wish to counter the way in which the Report released online by SNH in November 2015 on the baseline Assessment of Deer Management Groups has been misinterpreted. The Assessment process was developed jointly between SNH and ADMG to assist DMGs in identifying current and future opportunities for delivery of the public interest along with any deficiencies to be addressed in their new Deer Management Plans and it has been very helpful in that process.

The Assessments carried out by SNH Wildlife Management Officers at the end of 2014 were also intended to form a baseline of DMG performance against which they could monitor their own future progress and to be of value to the Rural Affairs Committee as an objective measure of change at the time of the 2016 Review. As the public interest criteria had only been made available just before the Assessment process in Autumn 2014, DMGs had no opportunity to assess their Public Interest status and therefore scored poorly at assessment. In reality many DMGs have identified good public benefit contribution during the ongoing management planning process and are taking steps to improve further.

ADMG considers that the Committee has taken no account of the time required by SNH to set up mechanisms to assist and identify delivery of the tasks which the Committee and the Minister set out for the deer sector at the 2013/14 Review; nor has it taken account of the evidence of progress submitted by ADMG since the 2014 baseline Assessment and the launch of the SNH grant for deer management planning.

To recall the timeline of the 2014/2016 process:

Autumn 2013	RACCE Committee review of deer management
Jan 2014	ADMG consultation on draft DMG Benchmark.
Feb 2014	Rural Affairs Committee Review Report.
March 2014	Minister accepts Report.
March 2014	Advance announcement of fund of £200,000 to assist deer management planning.
July 2014	ADMG Benchmark published
Aug 2014	SNH publication of “Public Interest Objectives for DMGs” – Note this was the first available definition of “the public interest” in relation to deer management.
Aug/Sept 2014	Baseline assessments of each DMG against operational and public interest criteria.
November 2014	SNH issue of deer management planning grant application forms.
December 2014 And following	Deer management planning by DMGs ongoing.
June 2015	ADMG progress report to RACCE.
October 2015	Publication by SNH of 2014 DMG Assessment report (12 months after Assessments completed).

The misinterpretation of the purpose of the Baseline Assessment appears to have led to the prejudicial and unjustified conclusions in the Committee Report which refers to: *“the lack of progress being made”* (360), *“ensure that no further time is wasted”* (361) *“urgent need to better manage deer in the public interest and to meet biodiversity targets”* (358), *“there are fears that the lowland deer situation could be as bad as that faced in some parts of the Highlands”* (373).

Evidence submitted by this organisation and confirmed by SNH, not referred to at any point in the Committee Stage 1 Report, advises of the very considerable ongoing progress. In particular the assertion that *“many significant problems remain in managing wild deer in Scotland in the public interest”* (368) ignores the interim written report to the Committee by ADMG in June 2015, as well as the further written evidence put to the Committee at stage 1. In our verbal evidence we referred to information provided by SNH that *“85.3% of designated site features within the deer range are in either favourable condition, recovering due to management, or unfavourable but with site condition monitoring herbivore targets met”*. The count information supplied by SNH to the 2013 Review that 275,379 red deer occupy 3,259,442 hectares, a reduction of 3% on the previous series of counts, representing 8.3 deer per square kilometre averaged over the whole, should also provide some reassurance that the “problems” are being addressed. This number of open hill red deer, 275,000 in 2013, has almost certainly declined further since 2013 in view of a number of further reduction culls and higher winter mortality in some areas in the most recent wet winters. As reported to the 2013 Review these deer share their range with 2.3m sheep.

There appears to be a presumption that a fully statutory deer management system would deliver best value and most public benefit for Scotland. This overlooks the added value generated under the voluntary principle from effective public agency/private sector collaboration. In addition the present system delivers considerable inward investment and resources that would be very costly to replace from public funds.

The deer sector at both organisational level (ADMG) and local level (individual DMGs) has committed strongly to meeting the expectations set out in the Committee 2014 Report and has made good progress since the baseline Assessments were carried out in Autumn 2014, and will continue to do so until the 2016 Review and beyond. It is therefore very disappointing, not to say demoralising, to have the situation misrepresented by a misunderstanding of the SNH Assessment Report. The current situation in relation to deer management planning, as reported by SNH to the ADMG Seminar on 25 November is as follows:

- 5 deer management plans (DMPs) completed, SNH grant paid
- 21 DMPs in preparation
- 11 DMG applications for DMP grant with SNH
- 4 DMGs working up applications to SNH

Thus 43 out of the 44 DMGs are now engaged in the Planning process. All 44 plus a small number of new DMGs will have Plans available for the 2016 Review.

On DMG communications ADMG has developed a template DMG website and will shortly start to roll this out to members.

In light of all the above we therefore disagree with the Committee proposals (370) to introduce additional measures to the Land Reform Bill. In 2014 the Committee recommended that the Deer Management Groups should be permitted *“a reasonable timeframe for all DMGs to have adopted such deer management plans by the end of 2016. The Committee will monitor progress in this respect and will consider what further action may be required, should the voluntary approach fail to ensure that deer management plans are adopted by all Deer Management Groups by the end of 2016”*. This timeframe was agreed by the Environment Minister and has been endorsed by his successor who attended an ADMG Regional Meeting on 9 November where she heard the reports from many DMGs on progress with deer management planning.

As noted above, the practical timescale, February 2014 to end 2016, has been considerably reduced by the delay in the development of the Public Interest criteria and of the launch of the grant scheme just 12 months ago. Nonetheless ADMG expects the sector to be in a position to give a good account of itself at the Review late next year not only in regard to deer management planning but also as to public engagement.

We acknowledge the point (363) that in 2016 the judgement of progress will be largely about process as Deer Management Plan action plans will be at the earliest stages of implementation. Should the Review conclude that a further review, after a period of say 5 years, is desirable to assess effective delivery of Plans that would be acceptable.

Should there be circumstances where individual Deer Management Groups or areas where collaborative deer management has yet to be established or are deemed to require intervention, we consider that SNH have sufficient statutory powers in terms of Section 7 and Section 8 to take all necessary steps but we have no objection to the new powers proposed under Section 8 of the Land Reform Bill, as was stated in our evidence to the Committee. We do however object to the Committee's proposal, which prejudices the outcome of the 2016 Review, that these measures should be regarded as "*interim*" to "*be in force throughout the period during which the new statutory scheme was being developed*".

We would also like to see added into the Bill an acknowledgment that the SNH statutory powers, both existing and proposed, may be used on economic grounds in circumstances where there is or has been overculling, in addition to situations where underculling is having negative environmental consequences.

As a final comment we have recently been advised by SNH that, as a result of further funding cutbacks, certain joint ADMG/SNH projects will be discontinued. These include SWARD - a fully developed data processing model to assist DMGs, now ready for roll out, habitat impact assessment training and also further development of Wild Deer Best Practice. The loss of these projects will constrain the ongoing progress of DMGs beyond 2016. It is to be hoped that funding cuts will not also impact on the SNH count programme.

This funding hiatus falls at a most unfortunate time for the deer sector in view of the expectations placed upon it. We question whether SNH with less resources available will be in a position to continue to support deer management planning at a level equivalent to the valuable contribution made to date. Finally, on the topic of funding, we have recently attended Scottish Government workshops on the Environmental Collaborative Action Fund.

The very short window for 2015 applications, ending 15 January 2016, makes the practicality of application by individual DMGs very difficult in this round, bearing in mind current lack of detail. We hope that 2016 applications may be more realistic but would suggest that a rolling application system would be more suitable.

Richard Cooke
Chairman, Association of Deer Management Groups

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