

Land Reform (Scotland) Bill

ADMG Briefing on Part 8 – Deer Measures

Some questions answered about deer

Q. Are there too many deer in Scotland?

A. There are an estimated 275,000 red deer (winter population) in Highland Scotland (SNH 2013 based on counts). The overall Scottish deer population (4 species) is not known but is estimated at 700,000 to 800,000. Roe deer in the lowlands have benefitted from environmental projects such as the Central Scotland Green Network and they may now be the most numerous species.

Q. What is the density of the Highland deer population?

A. 275,000 red deer occupy 3.26m hectares (32,600 sq km) representing a density of 8.4 deer per sq. km. (SNH 2013). Local densities are in the range 4 – 15 per sq km and vary according to land management objectives.

Q. What other grazing animals are there?

A. In addition to wild goats, hares and rabbits, 275,000 deer share their range with 2,090,000 sheep of which 815,100 are breeding ewes (winter population) (Scot Gov statistics 2014). Some cattle are grazed in the summer months only.

Q. Is this too many grazing animals?

A. The Basic Payment Scheme under the new 2015 CAP regime requires farmers to carry a minimum of 0.05 livestock units per ha. (a livestock unit equates to 6.66 sheep and 3.33 deer). 275,000 deer plus 815,000 sheep equate to 204,969 livestock units (122,387 sheep, 82,582 deer) on 3,260,000 hectares representing 0.06 livestock units per hectare, almost the same as the Basic Payment Scheme minimum qualifying stocking rate. On that basis there are not too many grazing animals overall.

Q. What about environmental damage? Are red deer damaging the environment?

A. 85.3% of designated site features where deer are present are in “favourable condition, recovering due to management, or unfavourable but with site condition monitoring herbivore targets being met” (SNH 2015). Thus deer impacts remain to be addressed on 14.7% of designated sites and this figure is on a downward trend.

Q. What about native woodlands?

A. *Analysis by SNH of the Native Woodland Survey of Scotland (Forestry Commission 2015) indicates that 161,011 ha, 49.6% of the total area of native woodland in Scotland, lies in the open red deer range. Of that total 36,668 ha (22.8%) are in unfavourable condition owing to impacts by wild and domestic herbivores. Deer are likely to have a disproportionately high impact being free ranging and inclined to seek shelter in open native woodlands.*

Thus 77.2% of native woodlands in the red deer range are not in unfavourable condition owing to herbivores. This is ahead of the Scottish Government target of 60% by 2020, and land managers are working with SNH and FCS to achieve further improvements.

Q. Are voluntary Deer Management Groups (DMGs) the best way of managing our deer in the public interest?

A. *The Rural Affairs Committee review of deer management in 2013 found that DMGs should develop more rapidly, bring their Deer Management Plans up to date to reflect the public interest and should consult and communicate better. The Committee recommended a further review at the end of 2016 which was endorsed by the Minister for Environment.*

Of the 44 DMGs, within the last 12 months five have completed new deer management plans, 21 are near to doing so and SNH has an additional 11 within the grant application process. The remaining Groups are either preparing applications or self planning and are actively engaged. A number of new Groups are being formed and a baseline assessment of operational capacity and public benefit contribution has been carried out for each Group by SNH and will be repeated this summer to assess progress.

Deer management varies greatly throughout Scotland from the wilds of Sutherland to the Central Belt. Collaborative management under the voluntary principle, within the framework of existing legislation (1996 Deer (Scotland) Act; 2011 Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act) and Government policy and guidance), provides the flexibility to deal with local circumstances, including addressing environmental impacts and public safety issues. Public consultation will ensure that Deer Management Plans take account of all relevant interests. SNH powers of intervention have not been required to date but these powers, along with the refinements included in the draft Bill, are available as a backstop measure.