

ADMG AGM REPORT – 8th March 2017

Richard Cooke, Chairman, ADMG

I know I say it every year, but to say we have had a busy year in respect of 2016 would be a magnificent understatement. It has in many ways been a critical year for deer management. Intense and unprecedented.

Since last year's AGM we have had:

- the enactment of the Land Reform Act, some of the secondary legislation is still passing through the Parliament;
- the Election last May, leading to significant changes in the political landscape in regard to our own contacts with the Scottish Parliament;
- the DMG re-Assessment process in May and June last year;
- Dare I mention Brexit – opportunity or threat? Who's to say; bit of both perhaps. Let's not get side tracked on Brexit today.
- then there was the all important SNH Report on Deer Management published in November, followed by:
- the Review by the Environment Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, the outcome of which we have yet to see; the jury is out!
- and at DMG level also, the pace of change has continued to accelerate for all of us and, in a very real sense, we are rising to the challenge.

To go into a little more detail on that sequence of events, a year ago the Land Reform Bill was well advanced and we knew then, since confirmed, that it would lead to the reintroduction of sporting rates and some additional powers of intervention for SNH. Those SNH powers have yet to be used but the reintroduction of rates is in progress.

Sporting Rates

We will all have submitted returns to the Regional Assessors and are waiting to see what they come up with by way of rateable values. However much or little it may be, it will be an additional charge against deer management, which is in nobody's interest and is unlikely to make much of a contribution to the public purse, if any, once all the costs of implementation are taken into account. I would certainly not want the job of the Regional Assessors who, in addition to the normal business rates revaluation due to be implemented a month from now, and the subject of much furore, have to carry out Assessments on approximately 55,000 landholdings,

That is their figure as reported to the Rural Affairs Committee, including on public land. It is difficult to see how they can hit the deadline at the end of March when the new business rates become payable. I understand they may be given an extension to issue the assessments but the rates payable will be backdated. Landholdings with a small deer cull and little other sporting activity or other rateable business enterprises, ie with a total rateable value below £15,000, very much the majority of land based businesses, will qualify for relief under the Small Business Bonus Scheme for as long as this remains the policy of the Scottish Government.

Before Rating Assessments are accepted, please take the time to compare your proposed rateable value with others. Confirmed assessments provide evidence which the Assessors can use against other businesses. DMGs should look at this together. If in doubt appeal, which you must do within six months of notification of your assessment. You can't do it later unless you can show a "material change in circumstances". You can always withdraw your appeal if you decide you have got off lightly. Even if you qualify for the SBBS relief, if your assessment is not to your liking

you should still appeal. There is no guarantee that the SBBS will continue when the Government finds itself short of money.

And in negotiation please remember to mention that you are a member of a DMG with a current DMP. The legislation provided a basis for a possible allowance for this although we have yet to see how the Assessors will take this into account.

I will come to this again later, but I cannot overstate the value and importance of speaking or writing to your MSP on the extra burden that rates will place on you. The current general business rates revaluation has attracted much criticism over recent weeks and the Scottish Government has already given some ground. It is a good moment to get reasonable points across on sporting rates even though they are now enshrined in law.

We have found that most MSPs will react to polite clear notes on matters of concern. My experience so far is that when challenged about sporting rates ruling party MSPs and Ministers will stick to the party line but I do sense a lack of conviction. And it is relevant that the fisheries organisations have succeeded in stopping some very questionable legislation in its tracks and Marine Scotland has shelved most of its draconian plans. That's quite a result!

In summary, sporting rates may now be enshrined again in law but we should continue to make our case against them and to argue our assessments individually with the Assessors, appealing when necessary to protect your negotiating position.

Elections

Next in the sequence of events, the Scottish Elections, led to the formation of a further Scottish National Party led Government, albeit without an overall majority on this occasion and a significant change of faces. We now have two Cabinet rank Ministers dealing with the rural sector and I would say in respect of both that it is pleasing to deal with individuals who have held senior office before and who have a fair working knowledge of the countryside. We have had meetings with both on two separate occasions over the last six months and had a fair hearing.

The RACCE Committee has become the ECCLR committee, Environment Climate Change and Land Reform that is, being the Committee dealing with the Environment Minister, Roseanna Cunningham's Ministerial portfolio, deer matters in particular. The Committee has a high proportion of new members and a new Convener, Graeme Dey, formerly Vice Convener of the old RACCE Committee.

Assessments 2016

The next tidal wave to engulf us was the DMG Re-assessment process carried out by the SNH Wildlife Management Officers, recently reorganised to be answerable to SNH Area Managers, rather than the Head of Operations. Thus the Area Managers had an overview role in the Re-Assessments. To remind you, the original 2013 baseline Assessment process was devised to assist Deer Management Groups and ADMG was involved with SNH in developing the system which is based partly on our own Benchmark. The second Assessment was rather different from 2013, more judgmental and less consultative, and we did have some reservations at the time both in general and at DMG level in respect of some of the grading.

However, while there was some discussion between individual DMGs and SNH in regard to specific gradings, in general it was felt that the overall exercise produced a reasonable reflection of the progress made by the DMGs since 2014. If the Assessments were to be redone today there would undoubtedly be a significant further overall improvement as new deer management plans have continued to be

adopted and put on line since last June. There are also some new Groups forming and doubtless will be more and these Groups also will continue to show progress.

Overall, although the Assessment process requires some refinement, it is potentially useful for all Groups in identifying weaker areas which can then be addressed. It will presumably be used again for the next 3 yearly Review in 2019 and it will undoubtedly focus on how effectively the new generation DMPs are being delivered. That is whether we are doing what we said we would in our DMPs.

The SNH Report

Our next big event during 2016 was the SNH Report on Deer Management. We were informed that the Scottish Government direction to SNH was for a warts and all, self critical, state-of-the-nation report on the deer sector as a whole – all species of deer, throughout Scotland - Highland, Lowland and near urban, and all types of management. We had a number of meetings with the SNH Report team prior to publication and emphasised repeatedly the need to give due credit to the DMGs for the progress made and to ensure that the tone of the Report would encourage continuing progress with what has become a very positive direction of travel. And in saying that, there is no complacency on our side, we acknowledge that there is much more to do; room for further improvement and development. Nothing stands still in deer management or in anything else.

Without going into it in too much detail, (our full written evidence, extending to 9000 words, is available on the website along with the 30 or so other submissions and the parliamentary TV record of the verbal sessions), without going into detail, we were disappointed. We had sought an encouraging “glass half full”, “so far so good”, representation of the sector and, as some independent observers have commented, we got the opposite. While the body of the Report gave due credit to the progress made, the conclusions were to the effect that it was not enough and that SNH was unconvinced that the step change called for by the RACCE Committee had been delivered.

To quote the Report: *“we cannot confidently conclude that a step change has occurred”*, and then that dreadful condemnatory conclusion in the last bullet point in the Main Findings - *“we are not confident that present approaches to deer management will be effective in sustaining and improving the natural heritage in a reasonable timescale”*. Indeed to many, myself included, and I have heard nothing since to change my view, it seemed as if the core of the Report and its conclusions contradicted each other. The progress made by most DMGs was noted and strongly commended yet the conclusion was that it was not enough. How discouraging is that?

Our disappointment and indeed sense of injustice, was clearly reflected in many DMGs as an unprecedented number chose to submit written evidence to the Committee, many on points of detail and accuracy. Thank you to those that did so for reinforcing ADMG’s concerns. Underlying the whole Report there is an unspoken premise that “there are too many deer in Scotland”. Yet when SNH gave evidence themselves to the Committee they said that “there is no magic number”.

Apart from its devastating conclusions (not too strong a word I think), our main issues with the Report included:-

- Firstly, that we have been advised by DCS and SNH over many years that while numbers are an important indicator it is the impacts on the habitat that matter. More from Linzi on this later and also see her article in Scope. Surely this is self – evident, yet in the SNH Report there was a full examination, based on two consultancy studies, one

incomplete when the Report was written, of numbers, densities and trends and some of the conclusions drawn seemed, at least initially, incomprehensible, and in some cases plain wrong and a number of DMGs have challenged how their situation was represented. Some of the anomalies have since been explained by JHI and it was of some consolation to hear Professor Steve Albon in both his verbal and written evidence on behalf of JHI, say that it was notable that deer numbers have now levelled off, and indeed started to decline, despite a pattern of milder winters, and a substantial reduction in sheep numbers, circumstances which might normally have led to an increase in deer. He attributed this to culling effort. A success story? Surely? Not as it was presented in the Report.

- Secondly, insufficient account was taken of sheep and other herbivores. If you are talking about herbivore impacts surely you need to take account of all herbivores?
- Third, disregard of DMG count data in the JHI Assessment of Populations.
- Next there were some detailed challenges by individual DMGs to the information presented in the Report in regard to Section 7 Areas which allowed the Committee to conclude that S7 Agreements have largely failed which, at the very least, is a view that can be challenged in respect of several S7 areas, including those that have been brought to an end and those where habitat targets have been met. So it is a work in progress not a failure.
- Some of the statements based on the Forestry Commission Native Woodlands of Scotland Survey published in 2015 have also been questioned.
- Finally the Section on the Economic Impact of Deer Management was selective in its use of the PACEC Economic Study, commissioned by ADMG, LDNS and SGA and published in early 2016, in that SNH were able to conclude that the overall economic impact of deer management appeared to be a negative, having chosen to disregard the secondary economic values generated by deer in Scotland. They used the PACEC direct income figure of £17.6m and 722 FTE jobs, as opposed to PACEC's estimated total economic contribution of the deer industry - £141m and 2540 FTE jobs. This enabled SNH to conclude that: *"present management approaches appear to lead to high social and economic costs which outweigh the current benefits"*.

Anyway, as I say, we have had our say to the Committee and this is my last rant on the subject. We both need and wish to carry on our longstanding close working relationship with SNH at all levels. We have met the CEO and colleagues, at our suggestion, to mend the fences and it is now back to the important task of delivering the new deer management plans and expanding collaborative management into new geographical areas where needed.

The ECCLR Review

As to where the Review has got to, the ECCLR Committee has received a very considerable amount of written evidence including from a number of people in this room, and, despite having many other things on its plate, has taken the trouble to hold extra verbal evidence sessions in a creditable effort to build a thorough understanding of the complexities of deer management and the extent to which it

varies over Scotland as a whole. As I said earlier, the education of MSPs about what we do and the direct lobbying of as many MSPs as possible is vital.

Active participants in deer management were able to politely point out the deficiencies in the Report, and this certainly enabled us to give the Committee pause for thought. Without that concerted and detailed effort, we might now be expecting the announcement of yet more deer legislation, more powers for SNH. On the basis of ongoing discussions I am reasonably hopeful that that will not be the outcome, although we will certainly remain under the spotlight at both national and local level and the Land Reform Act of last year now provides for further reviews every three years.

We understand that publication of the Committee's findings and recommendations is to be expected around Easter. Then we will have to wait, perhaps for some months, to learn of the response and decisions as to any actions to be taken by the Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham.

Routine Business

Although the politics surrounding deer management have been the most significant part of the workload of ADMG over the last twelve months, all the usual business of supporting individual DMGs, working with consultants, attending Committees, liaising with the public agencies and developing plans for the future have continued as usual. Item 7 on the Agenda is for Committee Reports and, as time is limited, I am just going to list them quickly now:-

- Moorland Forum
- National Access Forum
- Country Sports Tourism Group
- Scottish Venison Partnership
- Scottish Quality Wild Venison Limited
- Deer Management Round Table
- Wild Deer Best Practice Steering Group
- And numerous meetings with SNH, FES, and other organisations.
- Also of course representation at DMG meetings when invited.

There have however been some significant developments in the venison sector, particularly relating to the follow-on from the E-coli incident in 2015 and I am therefore going to ask the Chair of the Scottish Venison Partnership, Bill Bewsher, and the Secretary of SQWV Limited, Jonathan Whitehead in the absence of the new Chair, Leo Barclay, to make short reports when we get to Item 7. I will also ask Dick Playfair to give us an update on the number of DMGs now with an online presence. Interesting how transparency and communication were a central theme of the RACCE findings in 2014 yet, while we have largely delivered on that score, they received scant reference in the SNH Report and have hardly come up at all in this new Committee's enquiry.

We have also held our usual Regional Meetings, one in Inverness and one in Perth and, for the second time, we held a meeting in London for owners who are not usually able to attend Regional Meetings in Scotland. This was a well-attended event and successful I think. It provided an opportunity to launch our Project Funding Appeal which Finlay will refer to under his Financial Report shortly. We have a lot of work to do going forward and clearly SNH have much less wildlife staff and less to invest in deer sector development than they had, so much of this will require investment from ADMG, not least in additional time from our part time Project Officer, Linzi Seivwright. The Fund is intended to support our work programme over the next

three years. We remain short of our target of £65,000 however and further voluntary donations would be most welcome.

We did not in the end hold a Birnam Seminar in 2016. There seemed little point in doing so in the Spring when the DMG Assessments were already in progress. We felt that it would be more appropriate to do so following the Review to take account of any developments. So we will have a Seminar in 2017, post Review hopefully, date yet not fixed. The focus is likely to be on the delivery of the newly completed Deer Management Plans.

As to our, and I mean by that, all of us, future work programme, at DMG level there are a number of Groups that did not fare well in the Assessment process and they will have some catching up to do; also some new Groups in the wings. ADMG will support those struggling and new Groups in any way we can. It is clear from the Review, and I have said this on previous occasions, that the deer sector tends to be judged by Government and others on the speed of the slowest. Thus it is important to all of us that all our fellow Groups reach the same high standard as the best within the next 3 years. In 2019, we must be in a position to show substantial further progress across the board, no exceptions.

May I particularly emphasise that an immediate priority for all DMGs is Habitat Monitoring. You will hear that again this morning. A small but increasing number of Groups have undergone training and are now doing their own Habitat Impact Assessments. For those who have yet to start I am afraid we will be nagging you and the Birnam Seminar will certainly include habitat in the programme. We need to be in a position to ensure that habitat impacts rather than deer numbers are the focus of the SNH Report in 2019.

ADMG's own work programme during this year and beyond will include:

- Support DMGs in introducing comprehensive habitat impact assessments as a means to identify and address negative environmental impacts where they occur.
- Revisit, update and add to Wild Deer Best Practice. The BP Steering Group has met again recently after a long time in abeyance. BP is highly thought of in the sector but is no longer fully funded by SNH and is in need of being brought up to date and there is a case for some new Guides. One of ADMG's investments will be to start putting some of the Guides into video format for access on line and top of our list is HIAs.
- Complete the development of SWARD, the online deer data management package, and trial this at DMG scale. This will probably take 2 years rather than one.
- Consider with SNH new geographical areas for collaborative management. There are a number emerging.
- Work with Scottish Environment Link and the public agencies on all of the above and in developing new approaches to facilitate and support deer management under the voluntary principle. We are in discussion as to the form that joint working might take. We need to work together in a common cause and move away from the rather confrontational posturing of the past. If the Review encourages that so much the better.
- Consider with those other interests how the public interest can be defined at local level in terms of deer impacts. Clarity on this would be a much needed reference point for DMGs.
- Longer term, consider how DMG progress can be demonstrated perhaps through some form of accreditation system which demonstrates the public

benefit which we contribute in environmental, economic, employment, social, animal welfare and human safety terms.

Finally, my grateful thanks to the Committee and particularly the handful of members whose brains I pick when drafting evidence, consultation responses, letters etc often at short notice. We have become a strong team with a broad range of knowledge and I greatly value the wisdom available to me from within the Executive Committee.