

15 October 2020

Dear Minister

Firstly, my apologies for bombarding you with correspondence over recent weeks. On this occasion I write to draw your attention to the impacts of the current Covid-19 related restrictions on the red deer sector and the implications for deer management and environmental priorities.

We have just undertaken a quick member survey to sample the likely effects on the stag stalking season of the “single household” and “rule of six” restrictions introduced last month. The season, due to end on 20 October, is the main income period, the “harvest”, for deer management businesses when more than two thirds of all deer related income is generated and flows into Highland estates, underwriting the cost of deer management and supporting direct employment as well as local businesses.

In the majority of cases stalking is let with accommodation, often self-catering but also fully staffed and serviced lodges, these having been heavily affected by the “single household” and “rule of six” restrictions respectively. For example, on the estate for which I myself am responsible, where the stalking is let with a fully staffed lodge for parties of up to 8 couples, all four let stalking weeks, with a total value of £75,000, were cancelled within 24 hours of the restrictions being introduced. The reason given in all cases was that the hosts were no longer able to bring together their large mixed parties of invitees and therefore preferred to give it a miss this year. No refunds were payable as we were unable to deliver on the accommodation element of our leases.

Our quick survey of members conducted over the last two weeks has elicited 34 responses to date, and has revealed total losses among those respondents due to cancellations amounting to £1.1m. This is a relatively small sample and it may be assumed that the total impact on the sector is several times that total. A copy of the full survey analysis report is attached.

As to the hind season (21st October to 16 February), although some of our survey respondents have given comments and figures for most it is too early to estimate what income will be lost to the sector in the key months ahead. The letting of hind stalking provides an increasingly important income stream over the winter months and will, this year, undoubtedly also be impacted by the single household restrictions if they continue in force beyond this month.

As you are already aware the third main source of deer management income, venison sales, has been heavily affected by Covid the average price to producers having fallen from £2.30 per kg in 2019 to £1 per kg in 2020. The attached survey also provides information on the venison situation.

May I please make it clear that ADMG fully understands the need for current restrictions and supports the Scottish Government's measures to contain the impact of the coronavirus. I do however feel it important to make known to you the heavy economic impact on this sector (as on many others). Of particular concern I would point to the likelihood that the loss of income to deer management businesses will inevitably lead to some job losses which may reduce the capacity of the industry to deliver culls sufficient to contain deer populations at current levels. There are of course both environmental and economic implications should unavoidable slippage occur, a step in the wrong direction after many years of steady progress in adjusting populations to below 10 per sq. km. overall, the limit suggested by the Deer Working Group. ADMG has emphasised to members the necessity to make every possible effort to deliver agreed target culls as per DMG deer management plans, and will continue to do so.

We fully recognise that there are exceptional demands on public funds at present and also that many industries can make a valid case for intervention and it is not our intention to plea for special treatment. What would however be helpful in supporting the hind cull would be temporary relief from sporting rates. While some deer businesses benefit from the Small Business Bonus Scheme, many do not, and relief from this additional overhead cost would be a welcome gesture of support from Government for the continuing efforts being made to maintain a sustainable red deer population. One of our members has also made the constructive suggestion that hind culling associated with designated sites should be supported, perhaps by a headage supplement.

I trust the above is of help to you in understanding the far reaching impacts of Covid on our sector which plays such an important role in keeping herbivore impacts on the upland environment at a sustainable level and which is also now a key player in the programme to address climate change.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Cooke
Chair
Association of Deer Management Groups