

NatureScot key messages

ADMG Meeting, 1 January 2021

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Headlines

You probably won't be surprised to hear that feedback is variable. From those DMGs we have heard from - cull delivery is broadly in line with plans, but there are a number where this is not the case and there are a few groups where there is little or no information coming through.

A general reflection is that the hind cull targets set were probably conservative given the circumstances, constraints and uncertainty. Overall the planned and actual cull is likely to be down on previous years.

As I say, reports on hind cull progress are mixed. The majority of DMGs we have had updates from are within 10 - 20% of planned targets, and some have delivered over their targets despite Covid challenges; however, for those DMGs who have not responded to updates on progress local NatureScot staff will continue seek further information.

It is a little difficult to read too much in to some of this as some will put most efforts into achieving cull pre-Christmas and others after – but generally we are hearing that culls have been planned to be undertaken more evenly spread throughout the season– which would be consistent with messages to ensure there isn't particular peaks in carcass supply.

We know from FLS that their cull of 16,000 deer at the end of December is down on previous years by some 6000 deer. Restrictions on travel and working arrangements are, we expect, also likely to see a reduction in woodland culls within and outwith DMG areas.

Restrictions have obviously reduced the sporting opportunities, there are constraints on ways of working - particularly where people work together in teams, the reduced venison price, and concerns over game dealer capacity will no doubt all influence decisions and the ability to undertake culls - given risks and costs involved.

Larger properties generally appear to be delivering on culls, albeit at a slower pace with smaller properties reporting more difficulties in attaining culls.

We continue to encourage all DMGs to make every effort to deliver hind culls in line with plans, and to maintain open communication on progress and constraints.

We will all understand the potential implications of culls not being taken in terms of, higher winter/spring mortality, higher impacts and damage which we want to guard against and will only add to the challenge of having to address next year. We are keen to ensure gains that have been made are not lost – especially where efforts to reduce populations have been made and can easily be undone.

NatureScot's message to DMGs remains simple – don't lose sight of the basics, emphasising the importance of cull planning, monitoring and managing impacts and delivering culls. But we recognise there are constraints and risks which need to be managed given the circumstances.

We went into in some detail at the last ADMG meeting on broader expectations on deer management which supports peatland and woodland condition which are key priorities for addressing Climate change and biodiversity loss.

DMG engagement

Engagement within DMGs is mixed – with some taking to video conferencing meetings well, and others less keen or don't have the technology to embrace this. While this forum comes with challenges, in the absence of face-to-face meetings it's an important way of meeting to monitor delivery of group DMPs

It is important that DMGs find ways to continue to provide clear direction to their members and maintain the collaborative focus through other means of communication while face to face meetings aren't able to happen.

Deer Counts

The restrictions have had an impact on our count programme. We still have outstanding counts in South Ross, Knoydart and Harris and Lewis, and support/assistance with Mid-West DMG

We are obviously keen to try and get these counts done, but we have to ensure we are operating in line with current guidance, we need to be in a position to satisfy ourselves we are providing a safe environment for our staff to work in and that we consider the risks and mitigation available.

At this time, given current guidance and risk we have suspended counting – we will review this as the situation changes. We are very unlikely to be undertaking any census work before 15 February – but we will keep communications with relevant groups going and update as necessary.

3 - 4 people operating in a confined space of a helicopter for some hours needs considered carefully. If and when we do start counting I don't foresee any change to the position that counts will only involve our staff.

On a more positive note - Jamie will provide a bit more of an update on the new technologies we are seeking to develop after this.

HIA

- *Whilst we don't know how challenging Covid restrictions are likely to make HIA this spring/early summer, it is anticipated that local data collection will be feasible and we encourage DMGs to get planning in place and ensure that members are aware of the group plan for doing this work.*
- Woodland HIA will be a priority in some DMG DMPs for this year and a Woodland HIA guide is currently in the process of being finalised to add to the suite of BP Guides

Deer Working Group Report

- *As we discussed at the Autumn ADMG meeting, Scottish Government continues to expect to respond to the DWG meeting in March.*
- In the meantime, NatureScot and other Public Agencies continue to work closely with SG, and of course a number of the recommendations align or include work which had been planned or was being taken forward or within the context of the deer strategy - WDNA
- *We touched on the 'Green recovery' at the last meeting. This, alongside climate and biodiversity agendas, means environmental public interest priorities will continue to be a focus and we will work closely with ADMG to understand the opportunities for the sector to demonstrate how it is stepping up to these challenges.*
- The challenge for the sector is to continue to adapt, share experiences, demonstrate evidence of this contribution and consider where there are opportunities to be more ambitious across the sector. Promoting positive examples will be an important part of this.

The DWG response will inevitably provide a focus on deer....

- Demonstrating the contribution the deer sector is making to the delivering public interest – and in particular the climate change and biodiversity loss responses – will continue to be important, and so will an effective means of quantifying what is being delivered
- The assessments of 2019 showed significant progress. But it also demonstrated the challenge of quantifying delivery on the ground and understanding the types of information needed to do this therefore important – DMGs should continue to look to demonstrate how this can be evidenced.

We continue to encourage all DMGs to make every effort to deliver hind culls in line with plans, and to maintain open communication to plan and monitor this.

As ever we are keen that you all keep in contact with local area officers - albeit virtually and not face to face.