

Political Update - ADMG Regional Meeting, Inverness, 24 November 2021

Tom Turnbull – ADMG Chairman

We continue to wait on the implementation of the accepted DWG Recommendations. There will be a period of stakeholder consultation and ADMG will be involved in this process and will represent the concerns of our membership to the best of our abilities. We will also continue to liaise with NatureScot. It is very important to consider that rural policy will always now be framed in the light of the climate crisis. This will be coupled with increased private investment in carbon offsetting and a differing view of land management to that which many of us may consider to be the norm.

It is an ongoing frustration that the considerable collaborative work that has already been done by land managers is not more frequently recognised by Scottish Government and one of the important things for ADMG to consider is how we can get this message to the politicians and policy makers. All our hard work was recognised through the assessment process up to 2019. However, the DWG report hardly touched on the important work of our members, whether that be peatland restoration work or the planting schemes that are appearing all over the Highlands.

We met last week with Francesca Osowska and Robbie Kernahan of NatureScot. The intention of our meeting was to ensure that ADMG works alongside NatureScot when the DWG recommendations are implemented. Whilst these are being considered we stated our commitment to voluntary collaborative deer management and outlined some of our plans for the future. I have been encouraged by that fact despite the unhelpful recommendation in the DWG report that there was no longer an over emphasis required on collaborative deer management. It was confirmed at the meeting that this absolutely was not the case and that NatureScot will continue to provide support and guidance going forward for Deer Management Groups. At the meeting we stressed the importance to continue to manage deer on a landscape scale and how collaboration will be vital into the future, not just for deer but also in the challenges presented by the climate crisis. It would appear that our message of 'all herbivores, not just deer' is increasingly understood and that that message is being taken to Scottish Government. We will hear from Donald Fraser of NatureScot today and I am sure that he will be able to emphasise the important role that DMGs will play in deer management in the Highlands.

It seems likely that to implement much of what is suggested in the DWG report, Scottish Government will have to introduce some sort of Deer Bill towards the end of this Parliament. The 99 recommendations in the DWG report largely dealt with the tidying up of statute. ADMG will obviously endeavour to represent the membership during this time, and it is encouraging to hear from NatureScot of the important role that collaboration will have into the future of deer management.

We have recently responded to two consultations that are currently taking place. Firstly, the consultation on the Forestry and Land Scotland Draft Corporate Plan in which we encouraged the further important and ongoing constructive liaison between FLS and Deer Management Groups and encouraged this to be directly referenced in the text. We supported the commitment to a sustainable rural economy and to resilient rural communities and promoted the development of community stalking opportunities where possible on publicly owned land.

Secondly, we have responded by letter to Mairi McAllan MSP, Minister for Environment and Land Reform, on the consultation on the use of dogs to control foxes and other wild animals in Scotland. Whilst this is not a core issue when it comes to deer management, I felt it was very important to stress the important role that dogs play in the following up wounded deer where necessary and that training dogs for the use on deer is not compromised by the potential constraints on trail hunting. Links to both of these responses have appeared on e-scope. We also requested again for a meeting with Mairi McAllan which would provide us with an opportunity to emphasise the important role of deer management not just in light of the climate crisis but also for remote rural communities and the rural economy.

The ever-closer links between rural policy and the fight against climate change coupled with inward investment for carbon capture is likely to see deer numbers dropping further to achieve those targets. I am sure you are all aware of the target 10 deer per sq km that is recommended in the Deer Working Group report. We don't yet know how this will be implemented but we fear that the conversation around numbers and densities will continue into the future, deer counts will continue to form the basis of deer management and NatureScot's ongoing investigations into drone and satellite counting demonstrate that this will be important. It will be also important for ADMG to continue to challenge unrealistic targets whilst also pointing out the need for long-term thinking about the effects of reforesting large parts of Scotland and the potential unseen implications this may have. ADMG does not oppose the strategy but we are keen to point out the effects for access, carcass extraction, increased fecundity and the need to plan with those land managers around you to help the deer cull.

ADMG continues to liaise with land managers and representatives from a number of backgrounds and organisations including The Scottish Venison Association, Scotland's Moorland Forum, the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group and The National Access Forum. We will be having a meeting tomorrow of the Deer Management Round Table where I hope that we will hear a little more about NatureScot's ideas on the implementation of the Deer Working Group recommendations and, as soon as we know where these are heading, we will make the membership aware. We are no doubt on the cusp of a period of change but maintaining close contacts with these organisations will enable us to keep abreast of all matters that will influence deer management for DMGs.

Our objective will always be to represent the broad spectrum of our membership. We have to be aware that this is changing all the time and to be inclusive we must all try to welcome all members of Deer Management Groups. Without a fully inclusive collaborative structure we will not be able to continue to consider the importance of deer in our landscape.