

## **Tom Turnbull – ADMG Chairman's address, 5 December 2023**

Thank you all for logging on today.

I have said in previous meetings that ever since the 2019 Deer Working Group Report we have been in a period of limbo. The 90 plus accepted recommendations have been considered by Scottish Government and now it looks as though their implementation which has already started will come into place over the next 12 months.

We have already seen the close season for stags abandoned in what I believe was more of a reduction in bureaucracy for Scottish Government than a serious attempt to consider deer numbers. We will lose the checks and balances that were present through the authorisation process and the need to follow Best Practice guidance will no longer be required. We have also seen the enabling of the use of image intensifying sights for the shooting of deer over which ADMG had concerns both for welfare and also for health and safety.

Meanwhile the Scottish Government consultations keep coming and ADMG has already responded to consultations on land reform, agriculture and forestry grant schemes in the last year. We will shortly be submitting our response on the Scottish biodiversity strategy consultation which has considerable implications for deer managers with several recommendations to help 'substantially reduce deer numbers across our landscape.' These will include enhanced powers of intervention and target densities across the whole of Scotland and not just the Highlands. These will be set at 10 deer/sq km across the board and 2 deer/sq km for 'priority woodland'. It is a great shame that Scottish Government continue to use blanket densities and I believe that when it comes to areas away from the open hill these density targets will be broadly unachievable. I would urge all of you to respond to the Biodiversity Strategy consultation, and it is possible to respond without having to answer all the questions and just concentrate on those issues that are applicable to you and particularly for deer.

We are also now expecting a new consultation early in the New Year on the Natural Environment Bill which will include many of the recommendations from the Deer Working Group Report. It is clear then that Scottish Government wish to see wholesale change in the rural sector.

We take considerable time and effort over the responses to consultations and we have real concerns that industry concerns over welfare have been dismissed. Welfare for deer seems to have fallen by the wayside, this demonstrates a distinct lack of consistency when so many decisions in other rural sectors are based around welfare for animals. I do hope that Scottish Government carefully considers the ramifications of not considering properly the fears stakeholders and practitioners.

Whilst most Deer Management Groups are taking steps to reduce deer numbers in line with government targets it is clear to me that ADMG members are well ahead of the game when it comes to deer management.

There is a fundamental lack of understanding of deer numbers, habitat damage or culls outside the DMG area. It's no longer acceptable for Scottish Government to continue to pressure DMGs without first endeavouring to better understand what is happening elsewhere. As I mention in my editorial for the Autumn edition of Scope, we continue to hear about ever increasing, historically high deer numbers with a supposed 1 million deer now in Scotland. Despite these claims our members can point to a reducing highland deer population of around 300,000 red deer. That leaves 700,000 other deer, most of which must reside outside the DMG area.

The truth is we just don't know what is happening on the DMG fringes and beyond yet it is the DMGs that face the pressure from Scottish Government. Recognition where it is due must be forthcoming from NatureScot and Scottish Government if we are to maintain the momentum that DMGs have built up.

I would like to make the point to NatureScot that there is only so much that DMGs can take by way of regulation and legislation without tackling the real issues elsewhere. There is a real danger that without real recognition of where progress is being made and/or significant incentives to reduce deer numbers there is only so far that many can go in terms of deer reductions. Equally to wave away the concerns of deer managers about medium to long term employment in deer management is flippant. We hear of the 'just transition' throughout consultations but this is cold comfort to those who fear for jobs and the history and heritage of upland deer management.

ADMG and its members are happy and willing to make the sorts of improvements required to fight climate change and improve biodiversity but please help to streamline the mechanisms needed to achieve Scottish Government targets. Underspend in both the Forestry Grant Scheme and Peatland Action are not down to unwillingness on behalf of land managers but often instead to the inefficiencies of the system.

The Strategic Deer Board has been considering the four workstreams of regulation, legislation, operational delivery and incentives. Whilst currently I can see the first three all being implemented, I do have real concerns that the latter, and incentives might not be as forthcoming. As I have already mentioned significant cull increases are being requested across the whole of Scotland, however I fear that these targets will be missed until real incentives are in place for deer management.

On a more positive note, the Common Ground Forum continues to grow, and we will be hearing from Alan McDonnell shortly from Trees for Life who has been a vital part of the process and sits on the Forum steering group. ADMG has committed funds to the ongoing work of this forum and continues to sit on the steering group.

One of the important outputs of the process has been for ADMG and Environment Link to both express their concerns about the need for a vibrant venison sector, if the target of an increase in cull across Scotland of an extra 50,000 deer per annum is to be achieved. ADMG and Environment Link recently both signed a letter to the Minister Lorna Slater MSP suggesting that a subsidised venison price would be the best way to incentivise an increased cull. The very thought of these two organisations co-signing a letter five years ago would have been unthinkable, but I think this demonstrates very well that where there is a common cause the deer sector is better speaking with one voice. Scottish Government has sadly indicated that a nationwide approach would not be possible although there is a good chance that a pilot scheme or schemes may well be implemented.

The venison market is a primary concern for ADMG, and I am pleased to say that we are seeing some significant steps forward. Not only will we be hearing from Dick Playfair later on the refreshed venison strategy but we will also be hearing from John Fortieth later in the meeting on his detailed report and investigation into the venison market, and processing capacity and infrastructure and its ability to deal with the proposed Scottish Government increased culls. Having heard from John at the recent Venison Summit at Birnam I think that his report is a very important step forward in better understanding the capacity out there for venison processing and sales.

ADMG would like members to start considering whether we need to up the subscriptions for ADMG to support Scottish Venison. Without sufficient funds it is increasingly difficult to improve the marketing and messaging around venison. I intend to put it to members at next year's AGM that we do need to raise subscriptions for the first time in seven years and that the monies raised are kept separate to other ADMG funds and given to Scottish Venison.

The current levy which is only raised by two game dealers is insufficient for Scottish Venison to deliver on and currently relies on Dick Playfair's time and hard work for which he is not sufficiently remunerated. Ideally Scottish Venison would have a project officer who is able spend sufficient time to raise venison's profile. We also hope that Scottish Government will consider how to get venison out to wider audience including its use in schools and hospitals. Venison must become more 'normalised' in the view of the consumer.

Away from consultations and venison, ADMG continues to support other projects including the deer management sub group on the National Access Forum aimed at raising awareness around the responsibilities that access takers have and that deer management is taking place in the hills. For those of you who haven't updated *Heading for the Scottish Hills* I would encourage you to do so including those times during the hind season when you know you will be particularly busy. We have been impressed with the cooperation that we have had from access groups, and NatureScot have been particularly helpful in updating the advice for access takers when it comes to deer management.

ADMG is very aware that for some of our members it is often difficult to get to our meetings and this is why we often have Zoom meetings like today as opposed to in person meetings. In an effort to ensure that we are talking to as many of our members as possible we recently had an event in London that to which some of you were invited. This was held at the Fishmongers Hall and we are extremely grateful to the Fishmongers Company for hosting us. Amongst the topics discussed were the importance of those people working on the ground in deer management, riparian woodland creation and we had an excellent presentation by Ben Mardall and David Allison from Grosvenor Reay Forest Estate. This is an event that we would like to have more often, and I hope it might become biannual.

I hope that you can all see that there is an awful lot going on at the moment, and as I mentioned at the start the next 12 months are crucial for deer management across Scotland and not just the Highlands. We believe that ADMG members can be extremely proud of all the work that they have done over the last few years. However, we can be sure that more changes are coming, the hind seasons remain under review and we can be in little doubt that we will continue to be put under more pressure. If any DMGs feel that they need the support of ADMG then please do let us know and we will help where we can, and do contact me if you have any queries and we will endeavour to provide support wherever we can.

Thank you.

