

ADMG AGM - 19 March 2025

Chair's address - Tom Turnbull

Welcome, apologies, thank you to today's sponsor Ardgay Game, and remembering three who will be missed greatly by the Association - Ewen Macpherson, Andrew Gordon and Drew Macfarlane Slack.

The publication of the Natural Environment Bill starkly underlines the increased pressure that will be placed on deer managers in the Highlands. We find ourselves at a crossroads, targets for biodiversity and climate now dominate the Scottish Government's objectives for deer management. The heavy-handed draft legislation raises serious concerns. Yet again I feel that we, the Deer Management Groups are the targets of potentially oppressive legislation because deer management outside the Highlands has been put into the 'too difficult to deal with pile'.

You will all remember that the consultation introduced the idea of Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders; these have been dropped in name from the Bill following concerns from us and the deer sector. On the announcement of the Bill, we were delighted to see that DMNROs had been removed - however, closer inspection would suggest that what we have now, could be considered as DMNROs by any other name.

The real area of concern for ADMG and for those members that we have canvassed are the proposed changes to the grounds for intervention under the new Section 6ZA and 6ZB of the Deer Act.

Under Section 6ZB the grounds for intervention relate to nature restoration. I'm sure that we can all agree that nature restoration is an admirable objective; however, the burden placed on deer managers is in our opinion unmerited, especially those deer managers - many of whom are here today - who have already started to deliver for biodiversity and climate change.

Section 6ZB, allows for intervention in relation to a particular area of land if deer are seen as detrimental by NatureScot to the preservation, protection, restoration, enhancement or improvement of the natural environment or if deer management contributes to a relevant target, strategy or plan relating to the environment, climate change or biodiversity.

These proposals are wide ranging and all encompassing, they are also subjective and fail to take into account the interests of owners and occupiers of the land. It is very unclear to us how this will work in practice and whilst you may not expect support and incentives to be referred to within the legislation, there is very little coming out of Scottish Government to suggest how those who are targeted through this new legislation will be compensated or incentivised to reduce deer down to what might be very low levels over long timescales.

Under the Deer Act the mechanisms for intervention will remain Sections 6, 7 and 8, deer management plans, control agreements and control schemes. This is something that we argued for in the consultation and we are pleased that our voices have been heard.

However, worryingly the collaborative nature of the intervention process with NatureScot seems to have been diminished under the Bill with the drafting of a control agreement falling to NatureScot as opposed to collaborative working with deer managers or the Deer Management Group. Under these terms what has been a voluntary agreement is starting to feel less collaborative and more statutory.

We will be working with Scottish Government and NatureScot to better understand and to seek clarity on the situations in which they envisage the regulations being used.

Meanwhile, the lack of Government knowledge on deer and deer management outside the Highland range is stark. We in the Highlands are starting to deliver and will continue to do so in a way that cannot be seen anywhere else in the UK. The policies of Scottish Government therefore, appear to be penalising those who are already delivering on deer management. My message to government and to NatureScot is, don't lose the good will of our members. Voluntary collaborative deer management only works if the participants are onside.

Conversations with civil servants and in particular the recent evidence session of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee have not alleviated my fears. This Bill in my opinion is targeted squarely at the Highlands: directly at us and our member DMGs.

Scottish Government officials giving evidence recently to the RAI Committee said, and I quote: "in the Highlands and open hill areas of Scotland, where established arrangements, procedures and collaborations are in place, and there are fairly large landholdings, those things are easier to manage, and it is easier to focus on them." Whilst for areas not covered by DMGs and I quote again: "for the most part, it is a difficult issue."

In the run-up to this point, we have always been assured that the issue predominantly does not lie in the uplands. Nothing now would appear to be further from the truth.

ADMG's core values are collaboration, sustainable deer management and deer welfare, but we feel that the implications of the introduction of this Bill could threaten all three - and in particular, collaboration. Where is the incentive to continue to collaborate going forward if it puts you in the firing line of heavy-handed legislation? In testing the temperature of the membership, I have spoken to a few of you and I have been struck by the strength of feeling expressed around the Bill. One DMG Chair stated that it feels like "we are paying for the stick that beats us" and another stated that "it was time for a line in the sand." We will be having a meeting on 8 April at Strathdearn Community Centre at which we hope to have the Chairs or a representative from each DMG where we can dig into the implications of the Bill in greater detail, so please do ensure that someone from your DMG attends.

I was recently part of a round table discussion with the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee and have met with Finlay Carson the Convener of the Committee. I yesterday met with Jim Fairlie Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity. Three weeks ago, we also had Mr Fairlie on the hill with us at Glenfalloch undertaking deer management to protect a SSSI; we even had him dragging a marauding stag. We were pleased that Ariane Burgess MSP took the time to be at a Common Ground Forum stalkers' event last Thursday and I will be meeting with Tim Eagle MSP next week. Both sit on the RAI Committee.

We are pleased that Scottish Government has listened to industry fears around the extension of the female seasons. However, the emphasis of the Bill is almost entirely on deer, yet we all know that restoration is not a function solely of deer management. Other herbivores and non-native invasive species don't get a look in. It seems clear that if we base habitat restoration purely on deer then we are setting ourselves up to fail.

The last few weeks have seen some changes around how we engage with Scottish Government and its agencies. FLS contributions to DMGs will now be provided by a combination of the Scottish Government, NatureScot and FLS, and whilst FLS will still contribute to the day-to-day administration costs of DMGs, their ADMG subscriptions will now be covered by NatureScot. Whilst this will not leave us out of pocket it is a change to what has gone before.

We are grateful to NatureScot for providing funding to support the Deer Management Groups.

All of us here know how important managing deer collaboratively is, and this is why deer management works and works well across the upland deer range but not so much in the low ground, and why the DMG model has been highlighted in research by the James Hutton Institute published last year as a good example of collaborative landscape management; this is why ADMG continues to promote and sit on the steering group of the Common Ground Forum. This groundbreaking network has given a voice to deer managers and a place where deer management can be discussed. It has particularly provided a platform for stalkers to have their voices heard both locally and at Holyrood.

The Forum goes from strength to strength and it has caught the attention of Scottish Government. It won the innovation award at the RSPB Nature of Scotland Awards in December and ADMG feels that we now need to encourage our member DMGs to sign up to the Common Ground Accord which promotes respectful behaviour through the upland deer sector. Many of you will have been involved in this project and I believe that now is the time to demonstrate that deer management in the Highlands will continue to innovate despite the pressure that it is put under. As the Natural Environment Bill is debated over coming months the Common Ground Forum will continue to provide a place where deer management can be discussed in a civil and courteous way.

The continuation of the Common Ground Forum will require funding and I would encourage all of you to consider donating to enable it to do so, be that at organisation, DMG, estate or individual level. So, my plea today is sign up to the Accord as a DMG and please consider supporting the Forum financially as it continues to change and positively influence the discussions around deer management. There are flyers showing how to sign up on your seats.

As well as the Common Ground Forum I wanted also to highlight what else has been achieved or is being supported, funded or undertaken by ADMG and our member Deer Management Groups.

- Collaborative landscape scale deer management over 3 million hectares.
- A local landscape scale forum for deer management.
- £40,000 per annum of direct investment for Scottish Venison.
- £8,000 per annum of support for the groundbreaking and award-winning Common Ground Forum.
- Support for the Deer People fund that enables young deer stalkers to experience wildlife management around the world.
- Support for individual projects that are beneficial to the furthering of collaborative deer management.
- A good working relationship with NatureScot on deer management that has historically been beneficial to both NatureScot and our members.
- Localised forums that facilitate data collection, training, habitat impact assessment, and Best Practice Guidance development.

- Habitat monitoring across large swathes of the Highlands.
- Complete and comprehensive cull data alongside population models set five years in advance in conversation with NatureScot.
- Deer Management Plans that are publicly accessible and working plans that are updated regularly with DMGs having been assessed on 101 criteria on three separate occasions demonstrating real progress over six years.

In conclusion, I would like to sum up by calling on those representatives of Scottish Government and NatureScot in the room to consider what may be threatened through the introduction of heavy-handed legislation. In the Highlands you are relatively fortunate, you have a motivated deer sector that works with you, collaborates on a landscape scale and is already delivering towards your ambitious targets. Not only do Deer Management Groups undertake this on a voluntary basis, it is also undertaken at a considerable cost to them.

As the Natural Environment Bill is debated, we will be underlining the dangers of demotivating the Highland deer sector further. We are very proud of what we deliver as deer managers and so we should be; what we would like is some recognition of what has already been achieved and continues to be undertaken in the public interest.

We would like to see incentives for deer management, upland and lowland, and a recognition of the work that has gone before. The overbearing threat of enhanced regulation and the persistent attacks on the one area of Scotland are counter-productive and challenge a system that is already delivering so much. I urge Government to stop and think as they pursue this legislation that this may be the straw - the final straw - that breaks the camel's back.