

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE EASTER ROSS DEER
MANAGEMENT GROUP, HELD ON FRIDAY 10th MARCH 2017 AT 2PM
AT MIDFEARN LODGE, ARDGAY.**

Present:

Mr Charlie Brooke	(Chairman)	Midfearn Estate
Mr Callum Beattie		Gledfield Estate
Mr Michael Brown		Midfearn Estate
Mr Jim Gilmour		Gruinards Estate
Mr Alastair Harington	(Vice Chair)	Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Richard Harington		Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Alex Hunter		Dounie Estate
Mr David MacDonald		Strathrusdale Estate
Mr Kim Sawyer		Dounie Estate

In attendance:

Mr David Campbell (Management Plan)
Mr Sinclair Coghill (Scottish Natural Heritage)
Mr Gordon Robertson (Secretary and Treasurer)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Neil Cameron (Gledfield), and Helen and Robert Franklin (Gruinards Estate), Ronnie Ross (Glencalvie Estate)

2. Chairman's introduction

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the Meeting.

3. Minutes of Meeting held on 04.11.2016

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 4th November 2016, previously circulated, were approved.

4. Action points from the previous Minutes.

All previous action points had been dealt with but three required further reporting.

- **Feedback from ASDMG regarding methods for apportioning annual running costs of individual Deer Management Groups**

GR had spoken to 15 different Groups throughout Scotland and all had adopted the practice of apportioning the total annual management costs for their Group by using the number of stags shot per individual estate as a percentage.

For ‘one off expenditure’, such as a helicopter account, Groups tended to discuss and agree how this was accounted for prior to any commitment to commission any work.

- **Dominance of Highland Game, Game Dealer’s in Scotland.**

GR reported that matters had become more serious as Yorkshire Game had gone into liquidation. This effectively left Ardgay Game and Highland Game as the only two large dealers in Scotland, with the latter continuing to dominate the market. The Group continued to support their local dealer, Ardgay Game, and all will keep a watchful eye on this important issue.

- **Muir Burning.**

At the November meeting, all agreed that the practice of Muir Burning was desirable to improve the quality of heather, but cost and staff time were major issues. Potential funding through the Environmental Co-operation Action Fund (ECAAF) had ceased as the programme was being re-designed and the scheme withdrawn. It is planned to re-launch the scheme later this year. GR will advise members when the scheme becomes active again. **Action GR**

5. **Deer Management Plan.**

David Campbell stressed that the completed Population Model within the Plan required regular assessment. This is a fluid method of recording and management, and all members needed to be aware of the commitments made.

Staff Training should remain high on the agenda. GR will contact the Forestry Commission regarding membership of the Group, but also enquire whether opportunities existed to work with them in setting up training courses. Members will also seek opportunities to join up with neighbouring Estates within other DMGs in order to share costs. **Action GR**

MB pointed out that First Aid Training Courses were regularly run by the Machinery Ring. He stressed that members should also put ATV and DMQ Level I as high priority qualifications that all estate staff should have.

GR will contact the Machinery Ring for details of upcoming courses. **Action GR**

DC stressed that each individual member of the Group should regularly re-visit the Deer Management Plan and consider the requirement to deliver public interest in management practices. This is not an onerous task and we should all demonstrate that we recognise the commitment made. **Action All**

KS asked for further details of the selected monitoring sites. GR will re-circulate the map which indicates the locations to all members. There are 10 plots on every estate within the Group. DC reaffirmed the Groups commitment to this task stressing that habitat management will lead and guide future management.

Action GR

SC acknowledged that SNH accepted that this task is a challenging one. SNH may be in a position to offer funds for Habitat Management Assessment and Training. He suggested that monitoring of sites should be carried out every five years. We have a good base line now and the Group should use this data as the starting point. The habitat in question is mainly Blanket Bog or Wet or Dry Heath.

SC updated the Group on the Government's review of Deer Management in Scotland. He reminded everyone that the Government had asked the Rural Affairs Committee to look into this matter in 2013. SNH were tasked to carry out this report which found that some areas of Scotland were managing the deer population well and other fell short.

SC stressed that the ERDMG had delivered their required plan, working closely with SNH.

SNH's report had been presented to the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee at the end of October 2016 and was still being considered. SC postulated that the outcome will probably not result in DMG's being regulated. It is likely that SNH will be tasked to further support DMGs to deliver the desired objectives.

What is clear is that all DMGs should be proactive, and be seen to be delivering best practice. This is, without doubt, the best way to retain control and to demonstrate that we are ‘ahead of the curve’.

DC echoed this advice repeating that the Group has its Plan completed. We must all ensure that the objectives are achieved.

GR reported that he had attended the AGM of the ASDMGs in Kingussie on the 8th March. Similar messages had emerged. SNH stressed that they wished to build on the existing relationships that they have with DMGs. There is a clear way forward, and an ongoing commitment for the delivery and improvement of the Plans. SNH will continue to provide base level support, utilise existing data whilst fulfilling their Regulatory Duties.

SNH confirmed that they will promote and support Groups in taking advantage of Grants that might be available, in particular supporting newly formed Groups. They will, however, be also focusing on those areas of Scotland where no collaborative Deer Management Agreements are in place.

GR highlighted two further issues from the AGM

- Action for Peatlands. An £8 million fund towards peatland restoration is available and very simple to apply for.
- Sporting Rates are now being levied. There still remains uncertainty as to how the Assessors are to apply this new tax. If in any doubt about an assessment made, you are advised to appeal. The Assessor’s Department is apparently swamped.

General Discussion

DC and SC were of the opinion that, provided DMGs delivered what is agreed within their Plans, that the voluntary arrangement currently in place will continue. With SNH’s budgets being cut, and the management costs currently being met by the DMGs, it seems extremely unlikely that a radical change is on the cards.

AH confirmed this view and illustrated this by explaining how Fishery Boards had been taken into the remit of SNH only to be returned to the previous system when the cost and loss of Proprietor support became evident.

When questioned by AH on the overall deer population numbers within the Group, SG pointed out that we now have information on habitat condition and on existing deer numbers. Mixing this in with other practices such as grouse and agriculture

we are not far off the correct level. The likelihood is there will need to be a further reduction in hind numbers.

The updated cull records will be circulated so that individual estates can finally confirm the accuracy of the data recorded **Action GR**

SC reminded that the Forestry Commission (FC) will have shot significant numbers of deer so that when they join the group, the cull targets will be 'not far off the mark' As a matter of urgency, GR will make contact once more with Derik Macaskill of FC to reach agreement. **Action GR**

6. **Finance.**

Following a wide ranging discussion it was agreed that

1. GAR would prepare a draft budget for the forthcoming year and circulate for approval.
2. This will hopefully include the Forestry Commission as contributory members.
3. GAR will revert again to Jonathan Mason on the subject of Glencalvie's membership. 1,213 hectares of their land fell within the Group and all felt that this estate should be part of the Group and contribute in the same way as existing members. The helicopter count identified 200 hinds, 11 stags and 53 calves on the area of Glencalvie that lies within the ERDMG.
4. It was agreed that once the annual budget was agreed, the costs will be apportioned according to the number of deer shot upon each estate as a proportion of the whole.
5. It was noted that the Association of Deer Management Groups will, on a national level, be charging individual Estates a membership fee based on the number of beasts shot. Currently £4 per stag, £2 per hind and £1 for anything else. **Action all 4 of the above GR**

9 **Any other business and date of next meeting.**

MB enquired whether a further foot count of deer was being planned. SG recommended that individual estates should spend half a day monitoring hind numbers and recruitment rates. This should be best done after mid April. DC

reminded members that this action was included within the Deer Management Plan.

MB asked for any further information on grants for muir burning. GR will investigate. **Action GR**

The date of the next Meeting date will be circulated once agreed, with the meeting taking place, as usual, at Midfearn Lodge. It is likely to be in mid September 2017.

7. Actions.

- **Advise members of the Group when ECAF is re-launched.** GR
- **Contact Forestry Commission regarding membership of the Group and explore opportunities for training courses** GR
- **Contact the Machinery Ring (Lynn 01463 811603) details of training courses.** GR for
- **Review commitment made within the DMP to deliver public interest within our management practices.** ALL
- **Re-circulate the map showing the location of habitat monitoring sites.** GR
- **Circulate final table of cull returns** GR
- **Contact Derik Macaskill of FC re membership.** GR
- **Finance. Complete the 4 objectives minuted.** GR
- **Report back on grant aid for muir burning.** GR