

Report on Deer Management in Scotland: Report to the Scottish Government from Scottish Natural Heritage 2016

The 5th Report of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee.

Synopsis by John Bruce

After consideration of previous hearings, the SNH report of 2016 and several evidence gathering hearings the ECCLR Committee have published their opinions.

Among the twenty seven main points there is a range of opinions and acknowledgements, criticisms and recommendations.

The acknowledgements recognise several key issues which the sector had been attempting to ensure were understood, the statements here reflect acknowledgement of issues such as it is important to engage with the scientists and the sector to mitigate the impact of a report of this nature, that deer counting is not a precise science, that it is the trends and impacts of deer, not their absolute numbers, which is important. That there are considerable differences between hill and lowland deer management styles.

The criticisms include a lack of preparedness of SNH for this review, a lack of current data ready for the review, a failure to engage with the selected scientific committee prior to publication. The varying levels of engagement of /by the Local Authorities is noted.

The recommendations include suggestions that the lowland deer management may benefit from a network of deer larders, that collaborative deer management should be considered among the various options available to improve, where necessary, the management of deer in the lowlands. That Local Authorities should improve their performance in deer management.

The recommendations also include areas of improvement in the role of SNH and that SNH should make use of its new powers to demand deer management plans to be submitted to establish, and approve, the planned cull. Deer counts should be undertaken every 5 years. Issues of Public Interest should be incorporated into the planning stages.

There is reference to a review of stag close seasons to promote, rather than hinder, the effective management of deer for both ecological purposes and crop protection.

To address some of the issues highlighted the Committee recommends that:

1. The Scottish Government establish, as a matter of urgency, an independent short term Working Group to provide clear advice on the way forward for deer management in Scotland and report back in early

autumn 2017. The Group should have a very tight remit and should consider—The recommendations contained within the Committee’s report, reflecting the position of the Land Reform Review Group and those of the predecessor Committee and how best to establish a framework where—

- SNH is responsible for determining the cull levels required in the public interest in each of these areas;
- DMGs carry out deer counts in their area, according to a particular methodology, and return them to SNH ;
- DMGs return planned deer culls and plans to SNH; and
- SNH consider their deer cull, the deer count, and the planned cull, and go back to DMGs if it is not appropriate.

2. The Group should also consider—

- the cost to the public purse and whether there are alternatives to fencing that could deliver the objective;
- the approach to Deer Management in the Lowlands; and
- lessons from management approaches elsewhere in Europe.

Throughout the consultation and evidence gathering period reference has been made to the condition of many Deer Management Plans and DMG were criticised for gaps in their plans and a lack of appreciation of Public Interest issues in some plans. Some of the criticisms were unfortunately timed as many recently redrafted DMP had hardly been completed let alone implemented. The timing of this review was unfortunate in that at least three pertinent pieces of research are barely complete and the new DMP have not had sufficient time to influence the deer population or it’s impact on the landscape.

The report has been passed to the Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, who will consider the findings and determine which elements shall be taken forward. There is no timescale for this stage.