

**MINUTES OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
 HELD AT LEDGOWAN LODGE HOTEL, ACHNASHEEN  
 WEDNESDAY 5<sup>th</sup> JUNE 2019**

Present:	Randal Wilson	Chairman
	Alasdair MacDonald	Dundonnell
	Stuart Allison	Eilean Darach
	Angus Davidson	Fannich
	Alex Stoddart	Fannich
	Hendrick van Beuningen	Foich
	Jake Buckthorp	Foich
	Gary Ross	Gruinard
	Mark Lorimer	Inverbroom
	Craig McIntosh	Inverbroom
	Donald MacLeod	Kinlochewe
	Andrew Oliver	Letterewe
	Paul Swan	Letterewe
	Kenny Ross	Lochrosque, Cabuie and West Fannich
	George Seligman	Strathbran
	David Bennett	Strathbran
	Donald Macrae	Strathvaich
In Attendance:	Ken Bowlt	Secretary/Treasurer
	Sinclair Coghill	SNH
	Tamara Lawson	SNH
	Jamie Bain	Lochluichart Estate
Apologies:	Gordon Crawford	Eilean Darach
	Maurits van Dedem	Fannich
	Ruari Matheson	Fannich
	The Hon Mrs J MacLay	Gruinard
	Norman Kelman	Heights of Kinlochewe
	Barbara MacDonald	Letterewe
	Ronnie Ross	Lochrosque
	Edgar Seligman	Strathbran
	Kenny MacLean	Garve & District Council

**I. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIRMAN**

Action

The Chairman, Randal Wilson (RW), welcomed everyone to the AGM and thanked all for making the effort to attend.

RW advised the meeting that the main item that the Group had been dealing with since our last meeting in March was the ongoing assessment of our Group by SNH and he advised that/

that the assessment continued to show improvement in performance. However, he advised that there was still the need for further progress within our Group and in particular drew attention to the habitat information and population model implementation.

RW reminded the Group that these items were the most important to any deer management group and he reported that the Group had come a long way in a short time, particularly with the population model.

RW highlighted that the population model might have been more straightforward but for the heavy mortality, particularly in the stag population, over the last four years where the Group had witnessed two of the worst winters on record.

The result of these harsh winters was that mature stags were simply not about in the numbers that deer forest owners would like to see and he suggested that both the population model and the numbers on the ground tell us that as a Group, we will have to show restraint in stag culls over the next couple of years or so. Nevertheless, he indicated that with sustainable recruitment, things could change for the better reasonably quickly.

RW highlighted that we scored “amber” for our Scottish Quality Wild Venison uptake, as we only have three estate members within the Group and he advised that it was the intention to send a questionnaire out to members to try to find out the reasons for the lack of uptake. RW made the point that the Group had to think about the bigger picture in terms of giving the venison dealer and the consumer confidence that the wild venison from our Group area was as safe to eat as it possibly could be. He suggested that the rules of the Scheme are not that onerous once you are up to speed and he stressed that it was vital to make sure we maintain a market for our venison. He suggested that being a member of SQWV helps do just that. RW also mentioned that SQWV have offered to do free inspections of larders so that estates can make informed decisions when they commit to the scheme and he hoped Group members would take SQWV up on this.

RW also indicated that from the Association of Deer Management Groups’ perspective, we await SNH’s report on the DMP Assessments to the Minister and her RACCE Committee this autumn and of course their deliberation on it. However, he suggested that clearly the carrot and stick approach of the Government was not going to change any time soon in terms of delivery of the voluntary principle.

RW welcomed in particular the presence of Jamie Bain (JB) from Lochluichart Estate at the meeting and congratulated Kenny Ross (KR) and Jamie Bain for their cooperation. RW suggested that it clearly made sense for JB to be at the meeting to share information both ways and accepted that although Lochluichart were not re-joining the Group, he indicated that JB’s attendance was a huge step in the right direction.

RW also mentioned Ken Bowlts (KSB) and his team who have done a great deal of work on behalf of the Group again this year, most of it to do with the SNH DMG Assessment and most of it unseen by members. He thanked KSB and his team for their ongoing support and indicated that as a result he would be looking for approval for KSB to be able to invoice for the partial recovery of some of the cost of the increased workload.

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## 2. **MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 22<sup>nd</sup> MAY 2018**

### 2.1 **Adoption**

The meeting adopted the Minutes as an accurate record of the previous AGM, this being proposed by George Seligman (GS) of Strathbran and seconded by Mark Lorimer (ML) of Inverbroom.

### 2.2 **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising, it being agreed that all of the issues noted as being actionable in the previous Minutes had either been dealt with or would be dealt with through items on the Agenda.

## 3. **DRAFT FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 30<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2018**

KSB took the Group through the income and expenditure accounts previously circulated to the membership.

The draft financial position as at 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018 was presented in the usual format, a single page report showing actuals for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016, 2017 and 2018.

He suggested that these figures showed a similar pattern over the years subject to Deer Management Plan costs and grant income that may have been received.

In particular, in the year 2015/16, there had been significant Deer Management Plan costs, with a grant having been received for roughly half of the cost from SNH.

KSB brought the Group's attention to the two columns on the left hand side shaded yellow which compared the budget for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018 with the actuals for the same period.

The figures generally showed that there was very little discrepancy between the budget and the actuals other than that the actuals showed an income and a separate expenditure both of £1,800 which related to the cost of pulling together the Habitat Impact Assessment data and the grant received for same. KSB explained that this had been excluded from the actual figures because rather than the Group paying for the cost and then receiving the grant, KSB's office had simply issued an invoice to SNH, as requested by them, and had received the grant directly.

There being no queries from the floor, the figures were adopted by the meeting, proposed by GS and seconded by ML.

## 4. **BUDGET FOR THE YEAR TO 30<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2019**

### 4.1 **Budget**

KSB highlighted for the Group the column shaded green on the income and expenditure/

expenditure account page, this being the budgeted figures for the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

KSB suggested to the Group that the expenditure figures were very much in line with previous years.

However, he highlighted the main difference which related to the additional work that had to be undertaken in terms of the Deer Management Plan over the last two years. He indicated that there was no provision within the Group's budget for meeting the cost of the Deer Management Plan work and as a result, KSB's office had undertaken all the work in connection with the health check the previous year and again this year leading up to and including the assessment of the Deer Management Plan by SNH. This included an inordinate amount of work remapping the areas for the group and making all the necessary changes to the Plan and KSB indicated that he proposed raising a bill of £5,400 (inclusive of VAT) which would cover the salary cost that he had paid to his staff to undertake the work.

KSB mentioned that at the end of each year, the Group had always budgeted to have a residual bank balance of £1,000. However, there was further discussion within the Group that in future, we should try to have at least a balance of £2,000, and subject to this change, the budget was approved by the Group, proposed by GS and seconded by ML.

GS reinforced the increased funding needs by indicating that there was an ever increasing burden on the Group in terms of the work undertaken and that costs would be likely to increase in future years.

#### 4.2 **Members Subscriptions**

The meeting reviewed the proposed subscription schedule previously circulated and agreed that, subject to the budget being amended as above so that the Group ended up with a balance of £2,000 at the year end, the subscription schedule would be amended to reflect this.

The meeting agreed to the revised subscriptions proposed, this being proposed by GS and seconded by ML.

### 5. **DEER MANAGEMENT PLAN**

RW highlighted that a great deal of work had been undertaken on the Deer Management Plan (DMP) in the lead up to the health check last year and thereafter. Further work had been done prior to the most recent assessment and strenuous efforts had been made to bring the DMP fully up to date with all the necessary revisions to both text and plans. He advised that this was an ongoing process, with changes being made as and when approved by the Group.

#### 5.1/

## 5.1 **2019 Assessment**

Copies of the final Assessments were circulated to members prior to the meeting.

### 5.1.1 **ADMG Benchmark Assessment**

RW took the meeting through the ADMG Benchmark Assessment, covering 15 areas in terms of how the Group was run. He advised that SNH's view was that delivery was good (green) for all of the areas, with the exception of venison marketing, where they noted that only three estates were members of Scottish Quality Wild Venison (SQWV). He advised that he would continue to encourage member estates to become members of SQWV.

### 5.1.2 **Deer Management Group Planning Assessment – Public Interest Assessment**

RW advised that this Assessment, covering 13 areas of public interest, was also considered largely good by SNH. However, there were some areas where delivery was considered partial/variable in quality and these included actions to monitor and manage deer impacts in the wider countryside, the use of habitat impact assessment data to inform management actions, poor take-up of SQWV membership, quantification of economic cost of deer to agriculture and forestry and, lastly, maintenance of training data in terms of deer welfare.

RW emphasised that whilst progress had been substantial over the last few years, this was an ongoing process and that there was no room for complacency in terms of delivery.

## 5.2 **Review of Actions Arising from the DMP**

Following last year's health check, it had been decided to produce a paper titled "Actions from Deer Management Plan" with this setting out the action plan and being updated as and when progress was made. This paper had been circulated to the Group previously and RW indicated that he would use it to run through the various actions highlighted in the paper.

### 5.2.1 **Designated Sites**

One of the DMP targets was that designated sites which were currently described as "unfavourable" as a consequence of herbivore impact will have deer management in place to work towards favourable/recovering status. The action being required for this was to develop an action plan for sites in unfavourable condition and explore funding options.

Tamara Lawton (TL) confirmed that she had previously circulated details to RW confirming that an extra 100 survey plots were being undertaken, as part of the Fannich Hills SSSI survey work, and hopefully this would provide/

provide better quality data for the Group's use. RW welcomed this as transferring some of the data from designated sites had proved difficult in terms of the methodology and the location of some of the plots.

TL also confirmed that she had put in a funding bid to assist in developing a Management Plan focussed on the An Teallach SSSI area. She confirmed that this bid had been successful and that she would therefore be contacting Eilean Darach, Dundonnell and Gruinard with a view to organising this.

#### 5.2.2 Woodland

RW reminded the Group of the intention to develop a plan to improve the condition of native woodlands within the Group area and to explore funding options. In doing so, he recalled the issue of methodology, which was still with the Association of Deer Management Groups for guidance. The issue was that any new surveys that are carried out need to have parity with the original survey and with other areas across the country. Therefore, this needs to be agreed at ADMG level before any surveys took place. In essence, RW confirmed that the Group were adopting a holding position and as soon as there was clear guidance on the right methodology to use, progress could then be made.

#### 5.2.3 Woodland Expansion

RW reminded the Group of the woodland creation opportunities mapping project previously proposed and agreed to and confirmed that all the necessary letters of support from Group members had been lodged with Forestry Scotland and they were now considering an application to their Forestry Collaborative Fund. On the basis that the funding was available, as agreed previously, the work would be undertaken. If not, there would have to be a rethink.

GS mentioned to the Group that Strathbran had been successful in acquiring the Grudie Oakwood. He indicated that he was currently thinking how best to restore these woods and would be keeping the Group up to date as he developed his proposals.

#### 5.2.4 Carbon Sensitive Habitats

The meeting noted that there certainly was less funding available under the SNH Peatland Action Scheme, with TL confirming that in future, any feasibility work would be dealt with on an estate by estate basis and undertaken by SNH officers.

#### 5.2.5 Habitat Monitoring

The Group were able to look at the habitat monitoring summary maps produced by Caroline Cook which were projected onto the big screen for everyone to see.

There/

There was some very useful discussion on where the hotspots were and whether this was an issue to do with deer or sheep. In particular, Alasdair MacDonald (AM) of Dundonnell confirmed that the red spots on Dundonnell were largely caused by sheep. A query was raised as to whether the sample plots had been chosen on a random basis, as they seemed to all be on one location and almost along a line. It was suggested that randomised plots should be chosen and AM agreed to take this on board. It was noted that this may also be an issue for Fannich.

SC confirmed that he had previously prepared randomised plots for the Group. It was agreed that KSB would forward these on.

KSB

Whilst discussing the maps, focus turned to the targets which should be incorporated in the DMP for trampling/grazing, it subsequently being agreed that the Group would look to achieve 85% of all plots for both trampling/grazing being in the low to moderate range. RW said this was certainly achievable and one of the ways of doing this was for us to focus on the high impact plots such as those previously discussed on Dundonnell and Fannich.

#### 5.2.6 Public Access

RW noted the progress made in the submission of entries for Heading for the Scottish Hills website and the follow up there had been with the properties who had yet to upload their entries. It was agreed that this needed to be further checked.

KSB

#### 5.2.7 Deer Population Model

RW explained that a considerable amount of work had been undertaken on the Deer Population Model. In particular, he thanked members of the Group for submitting their recruitment counts, explaining that the collation of such detail was vital to make the Deer Population Model a useful tool to help inform decision making about the management of the deer population.

He then asked KSB to illustrate the workings of the Model, which he did by use of laptop/projector, cross referencing to the updated maps from the Deer Management Plan showing habitat data, etc.

KSB ran through the Deer Population Model, starting by looking at the historical sporting cull taken by the Group members. Although the five year average stag cull was some 379 stags per season, KSB suggested that the sporting stag requirement could probably be more accurately stated at 400, given some anomalies in recent years' culls. He drew members attention to the small grey shaded box at the top right hand side of the Model, showing that in order for the population to provide the aspirational annual cull of 400 stags, it would be necessary to have a population of 3,000 stags within the Group area. Depending on the stag:hind cull ratio chosen, the requirement of hinds could vary from 3,000 (1:1) or 3,750 hinds (1:1.25). He/

He explained that this was a useful initial approach when considering what level of population should be maintained. He asked the Group to note that if a population of 1:1 was going to be maintained, the Model's figures were suggesting that the sporting cull could be secured with a lower overall population and therefore deer density, with the corresponding improvements in habitat.

KSB then ran through the Deer Population Model calculations, explaining how the Model had been adapted to take into account the recruitment figures provided by members.

KSB summarised the recruitment count as comprising almost 24% of the hind population and that it suggested a recruitment figure of 17% on average, although varying from 4% up to 27%. KSB explained how these figures were "retrofitted" in the Deer Population Model, effectively converting what had been a five year projection into a one year actual and then four year projection. KSB also asked the meeting to note that a further year bringing us through to spring 2024 had been added to the Model such that we now had one year's actual and, again, five years projection.

KSB then illustrated to the Group how, by adjusting the level of cull to be taken, the Deer Population Model recalculated the herd size each season going forward. He explained that he had worked with the Model, tweaking the figures, and that there may be benefits in reducing the stag cull to, say, 80% to allow the stag population to consolidate. This also reflected what was being seen on the ground, with there being a general consensus that there was a shortage of mature stags. He also suggested that there may be merit in considering increasing the hind cull in order to adjust the stag:hind ratio and to bring this down from the current rate of almost 1:1.6 to nearer, say, 1:1.25.

There then was extensive discussion within the Group about the use of the Model and how it worked, with various adjustments being asked to the cull level and the Group then being able to see the impact that this would have on the population. In particular, it was noted that if the current stag cull was maintained, the stag population within the Group area would decrease such that a sporting cull of 400 stags would become unsustainable. Such adjustments also showed that if there was any let up in the hind cull, hind numbers might increase relatively rapidly.

KSB showed the meeting how the Deer Population Model also had a tab for each member's annual cull of stags, hinds and calves and from this, calculated the five year average cull for each estate, which is then used in the Deer Population Density Model spreadsheet. RW was pleased to note that more than half of the estates had followed the advice of the Group and reduced their stag cull last season, with four estates culling about the same as their five year average and only three estates significantly above the five year average. JB explained the reasons Lochluichart had shot additional stags. He clarified that they shot 60 stags from the north side, 43 of/



of which were shot on hill ground and 17 on grant aided woodlands. They also shot stags for public safety reasons in that they were getting onto the main road due to the deterioration of fences throughout the previous bad winter. KSB also showed the tab for the recruitment count data which was then subsequently used in the Deer Population modelling and lastly he showed how there was also a tab allocating the proposed cull around estates. In other words, once the Model had produced a cull number, it also allocated this around the estates, thereby producing an estate by estate cull recommendation.

In looking at these figures, GS suggested that the Group needed to establish Forest Enterprise figures for their woodland at Grudie as these historic cull figures would not be continued under the Strathbran management. Therefore, it was important to identify which part of the Forest Enterprise figures related to the Grudie woodland and thereafter adjust the proposed cull accordingly.

GS went on to say that he would be reluctant to make drastic changes in culling policy until more data is available.

RW suggested that the general picture was that the area was light on mature stags and therefore that did point the Group in the direction of reducing the stag cull. As regards hinds, RW suggested it depended how brave we are, given we have a stag:hind ratio of 1:1.6 rather than perhaps going to a 1:1 ratio, the Group should aim for 1.3 to 1.4 and that might work better for the West Ross area. He summarised by suggesting that the Group go lighter on stags and perhaps heavier on hinds.

There was some unease about hitting hinds harder, particularly from Foich and Eilean Darach, but after an extensive discussion, the general consensus was that we would drop the stag culls by 20% from the corrected five year average and maintain the hind cull at the five year average, although perhaps be mindful that hitting the hinds harder might be the way to go.

KSB agreed to adjust the figures and to circulate the information to members.

KSB

#### 5.1.8 Deer Welfare

Given the feedback from the Assessment on the need to update the data as regards qualifications of all people stalking, it was agreed that we would update our records. KSB is to arrange a questionnaire to be circulated in order to collate the data and update the records.

KSB

### 5.3 Proposed Priorities for the Coming Year

The Group agreed that the priorities for the coming year should be:-

- deer population and population modelling;
- habitat monitoring;
- carbon/

- carbon sensitive habitats;
- woodland expansion;
- existing native condition survey and methodology;
- venison marketing – SQWV;
- economic costs.

In terms of SQWV, RW suggested that everyone within the Group look at this. It had been highlighted as a problem area by SNH due to the lack of uptake and with the increasing scrutiny on the food chain, RW urged everyone to consider membership.

All

GS talked of his own experience where SQWV had undertaken a survey which, although initially he was horrified at, at the end of the day was an eye opener for him. They had queried the quality of drainage from his larder, the quality of the water supply to it and a host of other matters, all of which were eminently sensible. He advised that it probably cost him £8,000 but he urged everyone else within the Group to consider membership of SQWV given the importance to us all of keeping venison in the food chain.

#### 5.4 **Budgetary Implications**

RW suggested that in terms of the current year, there was nothing the Group was doing that would mean amendment was required to the budget, and therefore there were no budgetary implications in the programme being proposed.

#### 6. **POACHING**

No issues of poaching were raised at the meeting.

#### 7. **ASSOCIATION OF DEER MANAGEMENT GROUPS (ADMG)**

RW presented an update report on ADMG's work. He mentioned the Deer Working Group which was created in 2018 to look into the system of deer management within Scotland and report back in tandem with SNH's report on operational matters to the Cabinet Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham and her Environment, Climate and Land Reform Committee. Unfortunately, during this process, the Chair of the Deer Working Group, Simon Pepper, died. He was seen as a moderate in terms of a sympathetic ear to the current deer management system. Simon has been replaced by Robin Callander, who may be more of a reformist. Richard Cooke of the ADMG is an advisor only to the Panel and his influence may be limited, but only time will tell.

The Association awaits the deliberations of Government and we should all hear in October of the outcome of both the Deer Working Group and SNH's report to Ministers and let us hope that there will not be too many changes to cope with.

RW indicated that Richard Cooke had informed him that most deer management groups have made a significant improvement over their previous assessments, so hopefully this will be reflected in SNH's report.

As/

As always, the ADMG keeps up to date with members with their E-scope publication. RW indicated he was aware that there appeared to be glitch last year where members may not have been informed of the ADMG AGM in Aviemore, but hoped that in future, the circulation of information would be better. As always, RW confirmed that it is good to see as many members taking an interest in the Association's work and what it does on behalf of all Deer Management Groups in liaison with the SNH hierarchy and our political masters.

#### 8. **SNH/DEER COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND**

Sinclair Coghill (SC) confirmed that a lot of focus had gone on the assessments carried out and confirmed that generally there was a significant improvement amongst most of the Groups.

#### 9. **GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATIONS (GDPR)**

KSB advised that there was still work to do on this but he hoped that it would be completed shortly.

KSB

#### 10. **ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS**

Both RW and KSB agreed to step down to allow the election of office bearers but were re-elected unopposed, in both cases proposed by GS and seconded by Kenny Ross (KR).

#### 11. **ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

None.

#### 12. **DATES OF NEXT MEETINGS**

It was agreed that the following dates should provisionally be put in the diary:-

- Working meeting – Wednesday 13th November 2019
- Working meeting – Wednesday 11th March 2020
- AGM – Wednesday 27th May 2020

In drawing the meeting to a close, RW thanked all of the Group members involved in the interim management meetings for all their help. He also thanked everyone for the vigorous discussion on the Population Model and looked forward to progressing this in future meetings.