

## **MDMG Deer Management Meeting & Stakeholders meeting**

**Date:** 6<sup>th</sup> June 2016

**Location:** Tomatin Village Hall

**Chair:** Drew McFarlane Slack

**Technical presentations:** Douglas Campbell (Strath Caulaidh Ltd)

**Minutes:** Matt Watson (Strath Caulaidh Ltd)

### **Attendees:**

Euan Anderson – Aberarder  
Kevin Johnston – Corriegarth  
Edward Osborne – Tomatin Community Council  
Charlie Connell – Garrogie  
Andrew Dempster – Coignafearn  
Arthur Duffus – Balavil  
L Humphreys – Balavil  
Kenny Graham – Coignafearn  
Ian Sharp – Cluny  
Tom Richmond – Cluny  
Bruce Hendry – Glenshero  
I Christie – Glenshero  
Catherine Wares – FCS  
Chris Donald – SNH  
Graeme Taylor – SNH  
M Saunders – Strathdearn Community Council  
Vivian Roden - Strathdearn Community Council  
Thomas MacDonnell – Braeroy/Tulloch  
Steve MacClellan – Strathdearn Community Council  
Russell Cooper – FES  
Jimmy Irvine – Glenmazeran  
Mike Cottam – CNPA

### **Minute**

Introduction from Drew MacFarlane Slack (DMS) including a brief resume explaining his background in chairing groups and meetings and covering his election as MDMG group chair in 2015. Explained the context of this meeting as a follow up meeting to meetings held in 2015 with all MDMG stakeholders and sets out the importance of meeting such as this to ensure meetings are open to wider interest groups and people on the fringes of the core management group.

The proposed structure of the meeting is to review the cull information, then to explain the plan to stakeholders to give them a flavour of the plan, what has happened over the previous year and to open up for questions and answers, following this there will be a site visit to Coignafearn followed by a meeting with the keepers or estate managers to get their views independently from their managers or owners.

DCS then handed over to Douglas Campbell (DC) of Strath Caulaidh to provide a summary of the planning process for the benefit of stakeholders who are less familiar

with it.

A number of queries were raised through this presentation as follows:

Charles Connell requested clarification regarding the east west split in the group – a map was presented to show this.

Charles Connell also asked if there had been any formal feedback from the Scottish Government (SG) on how they think the process has gone. Drew explained that the obvious route for feedback on a national level is from the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) and so far their feedback has been very positive and the group is considered to be doing well but it is acknowledged that there is still more to be done. Chris Donald of SNH noted that the plan had been assessed by SNH initially in 2014 and will be re-assessed in 2016 to see if it is being delivered/implemented.

Drew noted that the plan is a plan approved by the group members who are a constituted body and have been since 2015. Planning decisions by the group are ratified by vote so it's really important that group members participate and that the group works together to try and ensure adequate delivery of the plan.

Douglas Campbell added that Scottish Government are currently carrying out a review process across all 45 Deer Management Groups (DMG's) and the findings of this review will guide the overall approach of Scottish Government to deer management more widely.

Douglas Campbell then delivered a summary of the group's annual report

A number of queries or observations were made through this presentation as follows:

In response to comments that estates should aim to preferentially shoot hind calf's wherever possible Andrew Dempster commented that this is difficult when populations are under a lot of pressure as they are so jumpy and it's difficult to have time to choose and shoot calves so selectively.

Douglas Campbell acknowledged this and then went on to highlight that there are important differences in recruitment between woodland and open range populations and this is important of the planning process as the plan does not currently give much consideration to the lowland deer in woodlands or outside the RDMA.

Viv Roden queried the reasons for such events and DC explained that they are to do with the over winter weather and the conditions of the animals going into winter.

Douglas also explained that there had been a significant high mortality event in winter 2014/15 and this was far from ideal, though it has also contributed to helping the group become closer to achieving their target for the year.

Margaret Saunders then queried if stags get more aggressive during the rut if population numbers are reduced dramatically. DC replied that this is not normally the case.

DC then made a follow up comment on the mortality event noting the major differences between recruitment rates and deer condition in woodlands compared to open range during severe weather events. In essence, deer breed at a much higher rate in woodland and remain in much better condition all winter, even in severe weather events. This points to managers seeking to reduce hind density, improve habitat, expand woodland cover and open up low ground to help deer survive the winter (and ideally stop feeding them also). The SDMP of course proposes all these measures.

Chris Donald said the major mortality event was a serious concern. Managers needed to consider this from an animal welfare point of view and demonstrate their management from now on will help to reduce the risk of this happening again.

Drew MS and Douglas Campbell both re-inforced this point, and explained again the underlying rationale for the SDMP which if delivered will help deal with this issue. A Dempster of Coignafearn commented that he thought the severe mortality event was all down to people harassing the deer in the previous winter, by pushing them onto high ground and away from their preferred lower ground.

He then asked Douglas Campbell to clarify what he had said about the relative numbers of stag and hind calves dying in 2014-15. Douglas said that he suspected more male calves had died than females, although this was not recorded by estates.

Jimmy Irvine then asked Douglas what he thought the main drivers of peatland erosion on the plateau were, based on the experiment SCL had been running for SNH – was it weather or climate change etc? Douglas confirmed that high levels of peat were being eroded from bare peat surfaces, and this was related to weather as far as we could tell at this time. The experiment funding is now in debate as SNH is running low on money, and so it remains to be seen whether we will get much more data from the site before it is closed down.

Douglas Campbell was asked whether he thought windfarm construction in the Monadhliaths would cause deer distribution to change. Douglas commented that the new growth on verges is very attractive once sites are built, and that in construction some displacement is probably inevitable but it is probably over short distances and timescales only.

Chris Donald commented that windfarms may create barriers to deer movement.

Drew MS said he would happily listen in more detail to Andrew Dempster's theory on deer mortality being related to disturbance because of heavy hind culling, and not down to weather and lack of shelter. Andrew's main point was it is better to shoot the animals in a better place in winter than at Coignafearn, for example at Cluny, which others agreed with including Douglas.

Drew MS mentioned that the Exec Committee had met recently and all agreed a collaborative plan for hind culls this winter and next was needed, not an individual plan as had been in place up until now. Drew confirmed he has asked Douglas and Thomas MacDonnell to meet with all relevant estates and agree a plan along these lines.

Douglas provided an update and confirmed they had already met with Coignafearn on this basis, and were next to meet with Cluny before meeting with the wider group of relevant estates to agree the detail. The targets needed to be flexible and regional not local and specific.

Drew MS said he wants to see collaboration in place soon and working immediately. He strongly encouraged estates to work together to help deliver the hind culling target which is crucial. It is estates themselves which need to develop their own protocols so they need to get talking. Drew is happy to provide the help needed to facilitate this if needed.

Mike Cottam commented that he was pleased to see the MDMG plan being executed and was glad that the Speyside plan he had written came up with similar proposals and was also working quite well.

Chris Donald said the holy grail for DMG's was to be able to crack the collaborative nut. Kenny Graham said that in developing the SDMP more consideration should have been taken of sub-populations and not the regional population, as it is the sub pop's the cull is actually taken from. Douglas commented that this was the estate's business to work out, as they had the expertise to deliver what is ultimately a strategic regional target set for

regional gain as well as local gain.

Drew MS then asked whether anyone disagreed with the recommendations made by SCL in their Annual Report. No one disagreed.

Douglas Campbell made some comments about the possibility of extending the plan in due course to deliver collaborative stag management, as this was the logical next step – it would allow us to get over the problem of some people not quite having enough mature stags some years and others having more. Drew said ‘one war at a time please’!

Drew asked Charles Connell for his views on the recommendations. Charles said he would like to see closer to real time reporting of deer being culled by neighbours, to help inform his own decisions.

Douglas pointed out that this was being done on the other side of the Monadhliath at Newtonmore, in theory, and Garrogie could join in if they wished. Drew MS said he would undertake a more formal investigation of this as an option and revert to Charles. Drew asked Kenny Graham of Coignfearn whether he had any feedback from Sigrid, and also wanted to extend thanks to her for the stags for hinds swap continuing; Kenny said there was no further feedback but he would keep in touch if there was.

Douglas and Drew went on to emphasise the importance of estates returning questionnaires.

Jimmy Irvine was asked to speak. He made a comment that he thought the SDMP was along the right lines and that the MDMG is currently doing a great job. That said, he was concerned about the plan going too far with hind culls. There may be an impact on jobs. He thought though this was not currently likely and wanted to say well done generally.

Viv Roden was asked to speak in general about her experiences that day. She commented that it was very interesting, but generally nobody at the community council ever raised deer related issues hence she thought the MDMG was well on top of things in terms of engaging with them. She reported that the community are generally appreciative of the revenues arising from deer and the employment it brings. That said, she had heard of an incident with an unknown stalker shooting deer out the back of Tomatin from a public road in daylight. Nobody knew anything about this.

Drew asked whether people in communities and the wider country were really aware of deer management going on. Most folk though not.

Margaret Saunders thought there was a serious disconnect.

Jimmy Irvine said it would be a good idea to get kids up to the estates to see what is going on.

Drew MS said this had been done at Aberarder with some students to good success.

Euan Anderson confirmed this and said he thought it had been worthwhile.

Chris Donald said they did visits at Creag Meagaidh regularly. But the difficulty for schools would be cost of transport etc.

Douglas and Drew said it would be a good thing to promote, especially amongst kids studying biology and geography locally.

Drew then asked Catherine Wares of FC for an update. She commented on the woodland issue, saying that it would be good to see some fences come down eventually to let deer back into regenerating areas for mutual benefit.

Drew MS asked for thoughts from Thomas. He said you need low deer densities for woodland regen. It is a long process, more like 30 than 10 years. Once done, stalking would be good in these areas. You could run the areas more for the public to come and

hunt, like in the continent, rather than running it for the rich. This is bad for PR. He also said if estates held lower densities, but got bigger stags, they should not be shy to charge lots more – say £1000 or 1500 rather than £500. Most estates lose money hence this could help them.

Mike Cottam was asked for his closing comments. He said DMG's need to follow the Code. If they do, all issues should resolve themselves easily. It's an ideal model and based on strong collaboration.

Drew closed the meeting, saying that we are now strongly moving along with SDMP delivery. He wants politicians to see the benefits of all working together the way the MDMG now is.