SOUTH GRAMPIAN DEER MANAGEMENT GROUP

Minutes

**Spring Meeting**

**Tuesday 14th May 2024**

# at 10.00 am

**Kilry Hall**

1. ***Welcome & Introductions***

Present: Doug McAdam (Chair), Richard Gledson (Balmoral, Vice Chair), Deirdre Stewart (Secretary/ Treasurer), Victor Clements (prospective new secretary/ treasurer), John Thomson & Kevin Peters (FLS), Mark Mitchell (Scottish Water/ Lintrathen), Bruce Cooper (Scottish Water Glenhead/ Glen Damff), Graeme Taylor & Jimmy Irvine (Nature Scot), Isla Martin (Nature Scot area officer/ Corrie Fee), Brian Smith (Clova Estate), Hector Maclean (Balnaboth), Richard Cooke (ADMG), Colin Maclean & Mike Cottam (CNPA), Martin Taylor (Lednathie & Balintore), Gary Coutts (Balmoral), Chris Walker Bachnagairn/ Balmoral), David Rudge (Glen Callater), Angus MacNicol (Invercauld)

Apologies: Ian Robertson (Auldallan), James Davidson and Jamie Gammell (Alrick), Barclay Dougall (Lednathie & Balintore), Liam Donald (Glenshee), Will Reid (Glen Callater)

1. ***Minutes from AGM held 15th June 2023***

The minutes were taken as read, proposed by Richard Gledson, and seconded by Angus MacNicol. There were no matters arising.

1. **Accounts**

*A statement of income & expenditure 2023-24*

The P & L account was presented.

£14,983 had been invoiced over the year, with costs of £14,750. The spend was within budget, as savings had been made on administration.

The bank balance at 31st March stood at £3173,85, up £941,43 since 2023.

The account was approved by all those present.

*Debtors & Creditors*

£1442.99 was still owed by debtors, and will aim to be recovered.

There are no creditors.

*Draft Budget for 2024/25*

An administration budget of £13,000 has been set for 2024-25, which is down £2000 on recent years. That equates to a quarterly cost of £3250, to be split among members by the currently agreed mechanism of landholding size.

*Ratification of 2024/25 budget & mechanism*

The Chair had previously circulated the proposed draft budget to members by email and all had approved bar Tulchan. Chairman is still in discussions with Tulchan. The situation would be reviewed at the autumn meeting.

With that in mind, the meeting endorsed the budget as set out.

1. **Appointments Confirmation**

*Chair*

Doug McAdam will remain as Chair, proposed by Mark Mitchell and seconded by Hector Maclean.

*Vice Chair*

Richard Gledson will remain as vice- Chair, proposed by Angus MacNicol and seconded by Hector Maclean.

*Secretary/ Treasurer*

Deirdre Stewart was standing down from her position due to her change of job. The Chairman thanked her for her years of service to the deer group, endorsed by all those present.

It was greed that Victor Clements would take over as Secretary/ Treasurer, proposed by Richard Gledson and seconded by Angus MacNicol. VC very pleased to be taking up the position.

1. **Deer Cull**

*Season 2023-24*

Glenshee had a higher cull than expected, as wind conditions favoured their beat. Monthly hind counts were conducted, with very few hefted hinds now apparent. The cull of hefted hinds had been increased by a proportion.

The figures showed Tulchan had a bigger cull this season past. Tulchan tends to hold deer.

Bachnagairn had been counting on a monthly basis as well. Stag numbers had now fallen away, and the season just past had been a difficult one, with significantly fewer animals around.

FLS had been doing a lot of survey work on Glen Prosen in advance of woodland restoration efforts there. This had disrupted stalking efforts to a significant degree, with personnel having to work around this, but the cull was still large, especially of stags. The hind cull was less than intended.

Some large herds of deer had been noted on the property, including up to 1000 on one day, but their origin was unknown.

There was a larger cull in Glen Doll, and this would have to be continued. The existing plantation there was going to be restructured, with a change of species from conifers to native broadleaves, and there is likely to be no perimeter fence due to the difficult terrain. All this suggests greater pressure on deer numbers.

Initial scoping/ concept plans for deer management at the FLS Glen Prosen estate with regard to fencing and enclosures will be forwarded to the DMG, and these would be circulated to members.

FLS had also undertaken the deer control in Corrie Fee this season past, and that had worked very well.

Brian Smith had just recently taken over the stalking on Clova (South), so could not comment on the previous season.

Glenhead/ Glen Damff had plenty of stags at present, with some resident hinds. There were a lot of big herds of deer moving around more widely across different properties.

The Glen Callater beat on Invercauld now had reduced sporting stags, and the hind cull was difficult, with a lot of animals moving around. They had done two counts this spring, averaging 7.7 deer per sq km.

Martin Taylor had just started with Lednathie/ Balintore. There were quite a few deer around at the moment. Happy to maintain current culls, and will take more if they are there.

Balnaboth had no specific feedback on the season. They had surpassed their cull targets.

Lintrathen had seen an increase in numbers, with some very big groups of deer from time to time, and coming in to grass fields in May.

*Section 7 Control agreement- Nature Scot Update*

Nature Scot had issued a Press Release to confirm that they had viewed the 2023-24 season as a success in the Caenlochan area, and this had significant coverage. They were keen to build on this over the coming two seasons, and deliver the target density of 10 deer per sq km by summer 2026.

The cull had been above target for hinds and particularly for stags, communications had been good, and numbers had been collated every few weeks to monitor progress. Thanks due to all who participated.

There were three points of interest in the population model.

Firstly, it was important to use an accurate recruitment rate, with the area tending to under-estimate this in the past. The default was 40%, but there was a suggestion of 30-32% on the properties further west.

DMG members to finish any counts this week, noting it was now getting a bit late. VC to chase up all data at beginning of next week and forward to Nature Scot, who would upgrade current model, and produce an allocation of culls to particular properties, and convene a Section 7 meeting soon to agree final figures for 2024-25. Nature Scot would come out next week to help close any gaps if necessary.

Secondly, the cull intensity would be prioritized in Zone 1 were there were most deer.

Finally, with a potentially lower recruitment this year, and a higher than planned 2023-24 cull, there was the potential to get to 10 deer per sq km a year earlier than planned. Nature Scot were not pushing this. It was agreed that the DMG would work to the agreed 2026 timeline, meaning another two seasons of reduction. Nature Scot staff would support them in doing that.

10 deer per sq km was a specific target within the Section 7, so it would be deemed to have failed if this was not achieved. Therefore, very important not to under estimate recruitment rates.

Whitehouse had reported c 20 deer, split 50:50 between male and female. The DMG would work to try and recruit other smaller properties.

Tulchan had achieved almost all their hind cull before Christmas, which was good, but did mean that the necessary disturbance required to move deer so that neighbours could get their culls did not materialize thereafter, making getting hind culls more difficult elsewhere.

Tulchan did have OOS authorizations, enabling them to begin hind culling on 1st October. They did no culling after end of traditional season.

*Season 2024/25 options*

The default Section 7 cull was to be 610 stags, 710 hinds and 253 calves. But to be informed by recruitment counts. The default position would be 40% recruitment unless there was evidence to the contrary.

NS would convene a meeting shortly to discuss and agree cull allocations in advance of the 2024-25 season.

The difference between 32% and 40% recruitment would amount to c200 hinds. This was not a big number across the area, but it is important to get it right.

The DMG members present expressed a clear preference for a reduction cull that was gradual and sustained, rather than “boom & bust”, and that it was less detrimental and easier to plan for.

There was a query about where some of the hinds actually were, with the answer seemingly that they were largely around the perimeter of the DMG area.

A number of properties felt that activity on Glen Prosen would dictate how many deer they might be able to get, and that this was a hugely important project within the area, probably more so than the Caenlochan SSSI/ SAC site itself. There was concern that their cull had a significantly higher number of stags than hinds.

*FLS Glen Prosen*

A very significant scheme was being planned to restore woodland cover to much of the property, with fences due to start this year.

Most of the activity would be on the south side of the Prosen water, but with two compartments to the north as well as other environmental improvement work including peatland restoration and development of montane vegetation. The site would tie in with Corrie Fee and what FLS were also doing in Glen Doll to tidy up from the damage done by Storm Arwen. FLS would shortly be taking their plans out to public and stakeholder consultation, and a number of drop-in events had been organized.

On the deer front, the target cull had been increased to 360 red deer and 70 roe, with a higher cull in Glen Doll as well. However, FLS would get more if this was warranted, and their tolerance of deer now had to be very low to allow their plans to go forwards.

Riparian planting will be completed relatively quickly, and a strategic/ deflection fence is being considered to try and prevent deer from being funnelled in to the area, potentially stretching across in to Glen Markie.

Initial community consultation with neighbouring landowners had made little reference to deer, with an emphasis on the cost of the operation, and the potential problem of fox control.

It is important for DMG to note that this is a very significant scheme, potentially up to two thirds of 8000 acres being planted.

FLS were likely to have a more consistent stalking presence on their ground now.

1. **CNPA update**

*Venison Subsidy scheme*

CNPA had developed a scheme which all members of the DMG would qualify for if they achieved 110% of their three year average hind cull. If, for example, your normal cull was 100 hinds and calves, and you achieved 110, then £70 per animal would be paid on numbers in excess of 85% (85 in this case) up to 110. The scheme was capped at 150% of three year average cull. Expressions of Interest where being taken at the moment, which could be just a simple email. Proof of cull/ sale would be required. The money was paid to property, not via game dealer.

The £70 payment would effectively increase price from £1.50- 2.50 per kg.

Any estates within the DMG area but outside the CNPA area would qualify as this still benefitted features within the park.

ADMG felt that a per kg payment would be easier, but CNPA said that they had considered that, but estates on the CNPA Upland Group told them that a headage payment would be better, and that payment could come direct to them, not via game dealer.

The scheme was important because since the 1959 Deer Act, there had never been any incentives to cull greater numbers. This was the first time this was being attempted. It was unlikely that any underhand activity could take place in a relatively small trial like this, or there be any market manipulation taking place because of it.

The objective was to try and support an increased cull of another 50,000 animals annually across Scotland.

There were 3 X trials taking place in Scotland: this one on red deer in the CNPA area, one for sika in a high density wooded area of south Loch Ness, and one on roe deer in central Scotland. The details on each would be slightly different, and it was hoped that experience could be gained of the three species in different situations.

There might be some potential for looking at an economic assessment of the trial within the park.

*Climate Adaption Scheme*

CNPA were also making available this £370,000 scheme, targeted at actions that might mitigate flooding or wildfire within the CNPA area.

The scheme was now open for taking Expressions of Interest, with applications being required before 9th June.

1. **Nature Scot Update**

Locally, the Section 7 process was working well to date.

DMG were aware of discussions regarding legislation and the venison subsidy trials. The sika and roe trials would require a new app, which would geo-reference the position of culls, and potentially remove the need to submit an end of year return. The trials should bring additional property contacts to the attention of Nature Scot.

NS would be monitoring leases and permissions, and any changes to returns from nearby publicly owned land. Very keen not to exclude people with lower levels of qualifications and experience.

1. **ADMG Update**

ADMG where very happy with the venison subsidy initiative, which had first been suggested by participants in the Common Ground Forum, and developed by the Scottish Venison Group, ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK. It was the first ever structured support for deer management in Scotland, albeit being run as a trial in 2024-25.

ScotGov had given a commitment to supporting such a scheme. Details on trials given above. The scheme potentially closes the gap between value achieved and cost per kg.

ADMG involved in wider variety of consultations at the moment.

The Common Ground Forum was regarded as being successful, with improved discussion among organizations now.

ADMG were very much against the Deer Management Nature Restoration Orders (DMNROs) that were being consulted on, aimed at moving the emphasis from damage which can be evidenced to restoration which is more a matter of opinion, and extremely difficult to define in law.

A number of politicians now had some interest, either directly or indirectly, in rural affairs, and potentially deer management, including Mairi Gougeon, Mairi MacAllan, Jim Fairlie and Gillian Martin, who is likely to be main contact for matters relating to deer management.

1. **AOCB**

The Parkswatch blogsite had recently written an article on Caenlochan, focused on Nature Scot approach to this in the past, 10 deer per sq km and pushing for Holyrood to conduct an inquiry in to the issue.

The CNPA Heritage Horizons project had received some interest from within the SG DMG area. Demand was outstripping supply to date.

There was a lot of demand for peatland action work within the area, with 38,000 ha of potentially eroded peat within the CNPA area.

There was a poor relationship between deer density and success of schemes, but there was a nervousness about deer damage that might undo any restoration activity undertaken. CNPA monitoring sites at the moment for success.

VC to source maps for peatland distribution within SG DMG area.

There was to be a stalkers shoot at Balmoral on 14th June/ All welcome.

There was no count within the area this year.

Aiming to count first suitable Monday after 15th February next year.

Drones were not yet sufficiently developed to effectively count the Section 7 area. Satellite counting could detect numbers, but not possible to classify, or distinguish from other deer species.

NS plan was to count when 10 deer per sq km had been achieved.

Would look to get spring meeting and S7 Steering Group meeting on same day next spring.

Concern was expressed on what would happen if Tulchan did not support the DMG on same basis as other properties, thereby adding cost on to them. Chair said the situation will be reviewed at autumn meeting, with more contact taking place between now and then.

*Date of next meeting*

The main autumn meeting would be on **Tues 5th November**, 10 am at Kilry Hall.

Nature Scot would shortly be looking to arrange a Section 7 meeting to agree cull allocations for the year ahead.