Dear All

**SGDMG Executive Steering Group Meeting 26th April**

I write to provide an update on Group matters, in particular following a meeting of the Executive Steering Group to the South Grampian Deer Management Group on 26th April. This meeting also included representation from NatureScot and CNPA.

**Helicopter Count of Red Deer Spring 22**

Thank you all to those who helped co-ordinate the count by helicopter of red deer across the Group range. Preliminary results have been circulated, but we await the final count report from NatureScot with associated maps.

Following discussions with NatureScot, and some post count analysis, there is a general acceptance across the Group that culls of the last two seasons following the previous significant culls have not served to reduce or even maintain the population and further work is required to maintain the population at a sustainable level. Where last year, it had been agreed prior to the season that due to a reported shortage of hinds, the Group would deliver only a maintenance level cull. For the Group as a whole, the final cull figures fell well short of even a maintenance cull level and this is clearly reflected in the recent count numbers.

When final count results are issued, these will be shared with all Group members.

**Season 2022/23**

Group members represented at the Executive Steering Group meeting on 26th April, expressly asked NatureScot that a Section 7 Control Agreement be put in place for season 2022/23. The principal reasons for this are:-

1. To demonstrate the Group’s wish to manage deer by the Voluntary Principle and avoid top down regulatory measures. A Section 7 Agreement as requested by the DMG is a voluntary measure.

1. To permit a level of regulatory action for the Caenlochan area, which would permit strengthened regulation if required upon individual landholdings who did not contribute and engage in the collaborative processes required to deliver sustainable red deer management for the Caenlochan and related area.
2. In order to gain support from both NatureScot and the Cairngorms National Park Authority in formulating and delivering a suitable cull strategy over a period of years.

Strategic consideration will also be given to landholdings to be included within the Section 7 Control Agreement.

It is proposed that any Section 7 Agreement put in place for season 22/23 will be subject to a closely monitored cull strategy, and we will hope to develop this with each individual landowning over the coming months.

In order to help regularly and timeously record, administer and monitor this cull, the Executive Steering Group agreed to additional administrative resources for the Group, as part of the budget for the financial year 2022/23.

**Heritage Horizons Project**

Full documentation was issued earlier in the year to invite submission of tenders for the development of the Strategic Land Management Plan for the South Grampian DMG. A great deal of work had gone into supporting documentation for the tender, including the full Statement of Requirements.

The Heritage Horizons Project offers significant opportunity to the Group in terms of potential resources for developing a collaborative and Strategic Land Management Plan with deer at its core. It is hoped that a Consultant this year, will help develop the scope for a new plan, within this first year of the Heritage Horizons Project, called the Development Phase. Thereafter a five year delivery phase potentially holds the prospect of £500,000 funding pot towards Group work and delivery projects on the ground which would be open to Group members.

However, sadly, despite several expressions of interest, nobody tendered for the job as Consultant to help with this process. We are investigating why no submissions have been made, but in the event that Consultants felt that they could not deliver what was being asked for, for the prescribed contract amount, i.e. economic grounds, it may well be the case that financial contributions are sought from Group members in order to progress with the Heritage Horizons initiative. Alternatively, scope of the works proposed will be scaled back or diluted, in order that something can be achieved through Heritage Horizons during this first Development Phase. CNPA have also been approached to provide additional funding to support a larger contract amount. CNPA are discussing with consultants who previously expressed interest in this work.

Of note is the fact that the prospect of the more significant funding during the delivery phase may be put at risk should regulatory action escalate within the Group area. So, there is a lot to play for, over the coming months.

**Accounts and Budgeting**

With regards to Accounts and Budgeting, I can report as follows:-

We closed the year, with a small balance in the bank account of just over £500. Decision was therefore required at the Executive Steering Group meeting for this year’s budget to allow us to issue invoices, in order to gain funds, for the commitments of ongoing Group administration and operations. A budget was agreed by those present at the ESG meeting, strategically building capacity for the Group operation, with additional time from myself for project management work around Heritage Horizons and strategic plan development, and administratively in supporting enhanced cull recording, administration etc. Chairman costs will be held at previously agreed level.

The first tranche of invoices have been issued, and if you would like to see a full copy of either accounts for 2021/22, or the budget for 22/23, then please let me know and I can forward that to you.

**Communications**

Where I am taking time to circulate this update to you all, it is also important that you maintain links with the Executive Steering Group member who represents your interests, and if you need reminded of who they are, then let me know.

Therefore, the next few months will be relatively busy with Group matters:-

* Section 7 Agreement terms and negotiations and process set up.
* A cull strategy for this season is going to require close liaison with yourselves. We would expect to be in touch about this in due course.
* We will need to overcome the difficulty of nobody having tendered for the Heritage Horizons contract, and that will require my input into changing the Statement of Requirements or scope of the project, as well as potentially liaising with all Group members with regards to financial contributions for this process to develop the new plan.
* There remains the possibility, as proposed by the Deer Working Group Report recommendations, that a Government enquiry may yet be held into Caenlochan. Should that arise, Doug and myself would expect to represent the Group, for whatever form that may take.
* I would also like to highlight that NatureScot have recently been subjected to several Freedom of Information requests focused on NatureScot’s involvement in Caenlochan our DMG operation and dealings with NatureScot/SNH. Doug and I have so far been involved in the first of these which necessitated a review of over 900 pages of email and other correspondence between SGDMG and NatureScot/SNH over last 5 years. The was just the first of several requests which are assumed to have come from interested journalists and which highlights that the Caenlochan situation is still very prominent.

We would hope to hold a Group wide meeting at some point, when it makes sense to do so, and some of the above aspects have been progressed. Meantime I hope this serves as a useful update to you. As ever if you would wish to discuss any of these points with either Doug or myself then please do not hesitate to drop us a line or give us a phone.

With kind regards

Deirdre