**South Grampian DMG Spring AGM Meeting**

**to be held at 10am on 8th April 2025**

**at Kilry Village Hall**

**MINUTES**

This meeting included the 2025 South Grampian DMG AGM, and the spring 2025 post season Caenlochan Section 7 meeting, separately chaired by Nature Scot.

1. **Welcome & Introductions**

*Present: Doug McAdam (Chair), Barclay Dougall (Lednathie & Balintore), Jimmy Irvine, Graeme Taylor and Colin McPhail (Nature Scot), Brian Smith (Clova South), Thomas Wells (Balnaboth), Ian Robertson (Auldallan), David Rudge (Glenshee), Mike Cottam & Colin McClean (CNPA), Isla Martin (Nature Scot- Corrie Fee), John Gibb (Glen Isla House), Jason Williamson (Glencally Estate), Gary Coutts (Balmoral), Chris Walker (Bachnagairn), Rob Mearns (Tulchan), John Montgomery & Sophie Cade (FLS), Bruce Cooper (Independent), Mark Mitchell (Scottish Water/ Lintrathen), Jamie Gammell & James Davidson (Alrick).*

*Apologies*

*Will Reid (Callater), Richard Cooke (ADMG), Kevin Peters (FLS), Angus McNicol (Invercauld), Liam Donald (Glenshee)*

The Chair recorded his thanks to recently retired Balmoral factor Richard Gledson for his years of service to the deer group, and wished him all the best for the future.

1. **Minutes from November 2024 meeting**

The minutes were taken as read with no amendments.

1. **Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes that would not be addressed elsewhere on the agenda.

1. **Financial Position**

*Account for 2024-25*

The DMG had £1198.62 in account at year end to 31st March. There were a number of differences to budget: (1) VAT had been deregistered in summer 2024, (2) Some VAT and an admin cost from 2023-24 had been paid in 2024-25, (3) The Chairman’s fee and hall booking were both less than budgeted, (4) some membership income had not been received.

The accounts were accepted by the meeting as a true account of the financial position.

*Budget for 2025-26*

Two options were presented, one a break even budget, and the other designed to build a small buffer in the bank account. It was agreed that the DMG would invoice for £13,000 in 2025, the same as 2024, and that would allow us to build some funds in bank account.

*One invoice only?*

The meeting agreed that only one invoice was required per property each year. VC to invoice asap after this meeting and minutes circulated.

1. **Election of office bearers**

*Chair/ vice chair*

Jamie Gammell took the Chair, and there being no other candidates, suggested that Doug McAdam retained the role of Chairman. This was seconded by Chris Walker.

Kevin Peters of FLS was proposed as vice Chair, seconded by Ian Robertson.

It was proposed to have a second vice chair to give a Section 7/ Non- Section 7 and also a public/ private sector balance within the group office bearers in addition to the independent chair. This was accepted by the meeting, with DMcA to identify and approach some potential candidates, to be confirmed in role at autumn meeting.

*Secretary*

The meeting agreed that Victor Clements should continue as secretary.

1. **Caenlochan Section 7 Chair: Nature Scot**

The Section 7 section of the meeting was chaired by Nature Scot board member Colin McPhail.

*Introduction & Background*

Graeme Taylor provided an overview for those new to the meeting, the Section 7 was a voluntary agreement between Nature Scot and listed properties, the objective of which was to limit herbivore damage to the Caenlochan designated site. The S7 signatories are Alrick, Auchavan, Glencally/Fergus & Glenmarkie, Glenisla House, Glenshee, Tulchan, Bachnagairn, FLS Glen Doll, FLS Glen Prosen, NS Corrie Fee, Clova Farms (South), Glenhead/ Glen Damff and Glen Callater.

The current agreement was signed in February 2023, and the deer population target was to have a reduction in deer density from an initial population of 17deer per km2 to10 deer per km2 by February 2026. This would equate to 3350 animals in total.

As part of the agreement, a helicopter count had been organized for March 2025 (details to follow below), and habitat impact assessment (HIA) was planned once the density was down to target.

The properties involved had delivered upwards of 100% of the culls requested by NatureScot to date over each of the three cull seasons, supported by Nature Scot staff in overseeing operations.

*Minutes of November 2024 S7 meeting*

The minutes of November S7 meeting were taken as read with no amendments.

*Action points/ matters arising*

Nature Scot had collated and distributed cull data on a weekly basis to help the estates plan their cull programmes, and this had been very useful and successful in keeping things on track.

The helicopter count had been organized in March, and that went well, see below.

James Irvine had liaised with Callater regarding licence for the control of mountain hare for prevention of damage to wider habitats, discussions ongoing, but sitting with NatureScot to pull together a collaborative plan/ application with Glenshee & Tulchan.

There had been a discussion at November meeting about extending the Section 7 area, but not enough properties where present at that meeting to provide a quorum for this decision.

The success of current scheme in achieving target deer density will be reviewed at end of next season, 2025-26.

*Cull 2024/2025 review*

JI summarised the cull information, which had been circulated prior to the meeting. Of a target 1810 animals, 1805 had been reported, with some small changes yet to be confirmed. The important hind cull was higher than target. That the calf cull was lower seems to be a result of lower recruitment this year.

Final cull figures for the S7 area were 694 stags, 806 hinds and 305 calves.

Data was also presented for the wider DMG area, broken down in to fenced and open areas, and also some outlying properties that are not DMG members. Information is still to be received/ confirmed for these properties, with some further changes to the mapping of properties needed.

*March 2025 Count & analysis*

The helicopter count had taken place on 7th March, with good weather conditions, and both Nature Scot and all DMG observers felt that it was a very good count with no obvious errors or double counting. The count figures are accepted by all. Two helicopters had been used, with DMG observers in each.

Count information had been analysed and circulated quickly. Final maps will be available shortly, so DMG members will be able to study distribution more clearly.

Around 7000 deer had been counted across the full SGDMG count area , with 5127 within the Section 7 area, and 1868 outside this. Additional properties to the south of the Blacklunans road had been counted this time to try and give a wider picture.

The count was significantly higher than expected and predicted in the population models, and essentially above the 2026 target, with very little change from the previous count (2022), despite DMG members having delivered agreed culls. This is discussed below.

Similar counts in 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2022 had all taken place over the same area. Prior to 2016 the vast majority of the area was counted, but there were missed properties.

Nature Scot consider the count data to be a strong platform to work from going forwards.

*Season 2025-26 initial cull allocation*

NatureScot proposed a deer cull to deliver the target density (from 15.7- 10 per sq km) during 2025-26. This would mean a reduction from around 5100 to 3350 deer, and require a cull of around 1000 stags, 1400 hinds and 700 calves. A higher calving of 50% is used as productivity is high and the hills themselves are fertile and underlain by limestone. Nature Scot feel that recruitment has been routinely under-estimated over the years. There had been little data shared on recruitment by Section 7 signatories, but stalkers have agreed to provide culled hind reproduction rates to support decision making.

Bachnagairn were happy to take a higher cull, up to 70 hinds, with 35 stags. With no deer now on Glen Prosen because of culling pressure there, more deer were coming on to neighbouring properties.

Glenhead was now mostly enclosed by new fences with few deer apparent. It was a struggle to get hinds, but they would commit to 40. There was no problem getting stags. The fencing disruption over the last year or so was making things very difficult. It was very hard to judge the current situation as there was little precedent to compare to locally.

Glencally were dependent on hard weather to have numbers of deer on their ground.

Glenisla house would take the same as last year but whatever deer they had on the ground was very dependent on weather conditions, and there are now significantly fewer deer coming in to fields than previously.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Estate** | **Stags** | **Hinds** | **Calves** | **Totals** |
| Alrick | 30 | 0 | 0 | 30 |
| Auchavan | 30 | 60 | 30 | 120 |
| Glencally/Fergus and Glenmarkie | 30 | 60 | 30 | 120 |
| Glenisla House | 20 | 35 | 18 | 73 |
| Glenshee  | 50 | 50 | 25 | 125 |
| Tulchan | 65 | 150 | 75 | 290 |
| **Zone 1 Total** | **225** | **355** | **178** | **758** |
|   |   |   |   |   |
| Bachnagairn  | 35 | 70 | 35 | 140 |
| Fls Glen Doll | 50 | 50 | 50 | 150 |
| FLS Glen Prosen | 120 | 100 | 80 | 300 |
| NS Corrie Fee | 19 | 8 | 7 | 34 |
| Clova (South) | 40 | 90 | 45 | 175 |
| Glenhead/Glen Damff | 25 | 40 | 20 | 85 |
| **Zone 2 Total** | **289** | **358** | **237** | **884** |
|   |   |   |   |   |
| Glen Callater  | 45 | 50 | 25 | 120 |
| **Section 7 Total** | **559** | **763** | **440** | **1762** |
| **Advised Cull Target** | **1000** | **1400** | **700** | **3100** |
| **Cull Target %** | **55.9%** | **54.5%** | **62.9%** | **56.8%** |

This was just over 50 percent of the target 1000 stags and 1400 hinds. The 559/763 figures would barely be a maintenance cull with deer at 15.7 per sq km at present.

Nature Scot stressed that they had no choice but to ensure that the terms of the Section 7 were met, and this meant reducing population to 10 per sq km by February 2026. Section 7 signatories had also committed to the population targets within the Section 7 agreement. There could be no ambiguity about this. With this in mind, Nature Scot would go back to all members to increase cull allocations and achieve the cull totals required. It was their intention to do this as quickly as possible, and then convene another meeting (provisional date set for Tues 1st July) to discuss the practicalities and support for achieving that.

*Wider Area culls*

Auldallan was a small piece of ground, and while deer were sometimes present there in large numbers, they were usually present in the surrounding landscape, and not with them. Setting cull targets is therefore very difficult, but they will do their best to contribute to DMG totals.

Balintore/ Lednathie plan to do the same as last year.

Balnaboth would be looking to take 25 stags and 30 hinds, and would do more if opportunities arise.

Scottish Water at Lintrathen would be looking to do the same as 2024-25.

*Discussion*

There was discussion about how to progress, as there was clearly a very significant difference between what Nature Scot were saying was required, and what S7 signatories were currently willing to do.

In short, from the agency perspective, Nature Scot were legally required to deliver the objectives of the Section 7 agreement, and it would be deemed to have failed if this was not achieved. From the estates perspective, they had been culling deer under Nature Scot direction for 3 x years, and achieved +100% of cull targets. That the deer figures were now much higher than expected meant that the Nature Scot initial analysis/ modelling was wrong, and this was not any fault of the properties involved. In the circumstances, the estates felt that some flexibility was needed, and that taking extra time (possibly an additional year) to do this was a reasonable request to make.

Taking 1000 stags and 1400 hinds was a huge undertaking.. Nature Scot countered that over 1800 hinds were taken in 2018/19, at a similar density, so this was possible, and the group had capacity to do this.

There was a strong feeling within the group that Nature Scot/ SNH plans to date had never got proper control of the actual deer population, and many had long argued that the Section 7 area should be much larger in order to capture all the numbers of relevant animals and their movements. Failure to do this was a significant factor in why the issue could not be resolved. The estate owners felt that deer dynamics in the area had been the same for > 60 years, and everyone understood this. Estate owners felt Nature Scot needed to be more pro-active in trying to understand the actual problem, which had been going on for years without any progress.

Nature Scot pointed out that the deer density in the area was 44 per sq km 25 years ago, so progress had certainly been made. It was countered that the reason this number could be grazed was that the hills were underlain with limestone, they were very fertile, and that with access to forestry and lowland fields as well, that the area could potentially sustain this population. Even at those densities, mortality was rarely in evidence.

There was a discussion about mid season counts, although these had been done in the past. Nature Scot said it should be accepted that the deer were there, albeit, movement between properties could be significant, and this made population control more difficult. This was evident from the count, it was evident from the effects on designated features, and it was evident from increasing damage to agricultural ground in some areas. DMG members accepted the count numbers, around which there was no dispute. Nature Scot accepted that recruitment rates were almost certainly under-estimated within the area, with recruitment of up to 60% and more likely in peripheral areas of the DMG, and carcase inspections showing that very few hinds in most years were not pregnant. However, recruitment on the open hill could be as low as 30%, as evidenced by helicopter counts, so the year to year variation in this could be very wide.

It is likely that the Glen Prosen fence, and others in the area as well, will force the issues, and make the decisions to be made more pronounced.

Members felt that they had been working to Nature Scot plan, and had delivered this in its entirety to date. Reducing from 15.7 to 10 deer per sq km in one year was a lot to ask, particularly as the reasons for the discrepancy in numbers was not yet fully understood. It seemed as if the parameters had changed, but Nature Scot were adamant that in keeping target density to 10 per sq km by 2026, they were keeping the parameters the same. At least one member was prepared to challenge Nature Scot if they pushed their plans too quickly without proper analysis and direction as to overall outcomes. Nature Scot felt that 2018-19 had set a precedent for achieving a higher cull although recognise how difficulties of delivery (i.e. larger groups, disturbance) would affect things. CNPA said big herds had been encountered in the past as well, and these slowly reduced, so this was all possible,

There was a question about habitat assessment (HIA) of the designated site and whether this could be done in summer 2025 to inform the current situation. Nature Scot felt that there was no merit in doing this until the 10 deer per sq km had been reached, otherwise, the expectation would be that nothing much would have changed from the previous HIA of the designated sites. Evidence then suggested that impacts were too high, and that this was not just a marginal issue, but a very significant one indeed, meaning that deer reductions probably still had a long way to go. It was felt that HIA in 2025 would simply reinforce this point, and something had to change first before it would be worthwhile trying again. There was general consensus around the table regarding the timescale on this HIA.

Members were also reminded to be aware of the current political context , with deer legislation currently being taken through parliament, and Caenlochan having a high profile. It was important to resolve the issue by working with Nature Scot.

Nature Scot could help with flexibility over authorizations, and CNPA were prepared to help to continue to offer to incentivize necessary actions if that helped deliver the outcomes envisaged.

The Nature Scot chair of meeting reassured all present that they understood the work that had been done to date, and appreciated all the effort that they had put in.

*Arrangements/ support*

Nature Scot would feed the figures allocated at this meeting in to the population model (559 stags and 763 hinds) to see what the effect of that would be, but they anticipated that this would not cause any significant reduction in deer density. They would circulate this to members, and approach estates individually to try and address necessary cull levels, and get an appropriate cull target for 2025-26.

Nature Scot would be able to provide logistical help and use of equipment as required, and would be willing to deploy some of their own staff if required. They could also help with thermal counts on a localized basis at different parts of the season, to help determine where deer are located at those points.

CNPA were willing to adjust their incentive scheme if that helped to deliver target culls for the area and achieve the 10 deer per sq km density as required.

*Section 7 AOCB*

Nature Scot would book Kilry Hall for follow up meeting on 1st July.

*Section 7 Action points*

1. Nature Scot to provide any final changes to deer cull information for 2024-25 **Action: JI**
2. Nature Scot to provide modelling analysis on what they required and what DMG members had currently agreed to. **Action: JI**
3. Nature Scot to contact all S7 signatories asap with a view to increasing the cull targets that properties were prepared to take. **Action: JI & GT**
4. Nature Scot to book Kilry Hall for 1st July 10am meeting to plan for season ahead, and convene that meeting. **Action GT/ CMcP**.
5. Nature Scot to set out what additional help they could offer to help deliver an agreed deer cull for 2025-26 **Action JI/ GT**
6. CNPA to provide guidance on what a revised cull incentivization scheme might look like. **Action CMc**.
7. SGDMG to make minutes publicly available through website.

 **Action: VC**

1. SGDMG to take forwards deer planning exercise, to provide wider context, and collate other initiatives within area which will have deer management implications, with a scoping report before 1st September 2025. **Action: VC**
2. **Members Only Caenlochan discussion**

It was agreed after the above discussion that no Members Only discussion was required.

1. **Updating South Grampian Deer Plan**

FGS funding had been secured to take forward a DMG wide planning exercise this summer, and the meeting agreed that this should now take place. The objective was to take in to consideration all the various projects that were taking place, including Caenlochan, but to ensure that the area was not defined by just this one issue, which was very damaging to the functioning of the DMG as a whole. VC would be going to speak to all DMG members and agency staff May/ June, with a view to having a scoping report by late summer, and proposals to put before a n autumn DMG meeting.

1. **Other member changes/ projects**

*FLS Glen Prosen & Glen Doll*

FLS were progressing their plans, consulting at various levels, and looking to submit their Land Management Plan and EIA screening request shortly.

The plan is to enclose the majority of the site in three phases, with Phase 1 (1400 ha planting) taking place in 2026, and the rest over 203 years, subject to resources being in place.

In Glen Doll, felling and windthrow tidying up where taking place at present. This will require restocking, which will be with native species, requiring fencing as these are more palatable species. 460 ha will be enclosed over 5-6 years.

All were invited to provide feedback on plans, and view the consultation responses on FLS website.

In future, due to the smaller size of Glen Doll, FLS would probably use their own stalking staff there in future rather than contractors who were more effectively used over larger areas where bigger numbers of deer were more likely.

*Other member projects*

Scottish Water would be taking forwards peatland restoration at Glenhead, and also taking forwards 2 x planting schemes at the moment which DMG had been informed about.

In Glenshee, the Glenshee beat, Rhidorrach and Dalmunzie Estate where taking forwards a riparian woodland/ restoration scheme on the Shee Water.

Tulchan were planting three native woodland schemes at the moment.

There was very significant tree planting taking place on Balnaboth at the moment, contributing to nearly 11 miles of continuous fencing now located to their north.

1. **CNPA Update**

The CNPA cull incentivization scheme had not worked well in the S7 area, with no money paid out. The reason for this was that there had to be culls taken above previous 3 years, and culls in this area had already been high over that period, guided by Nature Scot. In comparison, £28,000 had been paid out in West Grampian DMG, with 12/20 members taking up funding in exchange for higher culls.

CNPA will look to changing their rules for South Grampian, if this allows members to deliver outputs required for Section 7 agreement to be implemented fully.

CNPA also had access to a development fund resources, which was not taken up by South Grampian, but again had worked well in West Grampian, and had been successful in engaging many smaller peripheral properties where agricultural damage was a problem in areas such as Strathardle. The fund had resourced venison processing facilities, and venison used to supply local foodbanks and eighteen schools to demonstrate community benefit. Over 700 kg of venison had been distributed in this manner, using 2 X Fisher larder modules.

The funding was also being used to deliver skills training.

1. **Nature Scot Update**

A draft natural Environment Bill had been published and was being consulted upon at the moment.

The bill would focus on:

* Statutory targets for nature conservation
* National Parks
* Deer targets
* Making procedures work better, and in a more integrated way
* More effective use of legal powers.

In relation to deer, it would potentially represent the biggest change to deer legislation since 1996, and arguably 1959. There would be a change in emphasis, from preventing damage, to facilitating restoration and enhancement. It would change the way nature Scot work.

There would also be a national competence register set up for deer, and for those on this, authorizations could then be deregulated amd streamlined. There was a question over the timeline for people getting new qualifications.

A new act was likely to be in place by autumn 2026. It would then become necessary to revise the Deer Code.

1. **ADMG Update**

The ADMG spring report had been distributed by email to all on list. As above, ADMG’s main focus at the moment is the legislative changes, which they have significant concerns about.

1. **AOCB**

*Blind or open emails?*

All agreed that email addresses should be left open, and that this would also apply to all Section 7 emails issued by Nature Scot.

*Date of next meetings*

There would be a specific Section 7 meeting chaired by Nature Scot on Tuesday 1st July, 10am at Kilry Hall, to be convened and chaired by Nature Scot.

The autumn DMG/ Section 7 meeting would be held on **Wed 12th November, at 6pm in Kilry Hall**. Please note change in time.