Dear Rob

Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence at the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee’s meeting on 2 November in Dumfries. I undertook to write to the Committee about the position with regard to the SNH report “2014 DMG Assessment – Analysis and Results”.

I can clarify that the report, although dated August 2015, was not published on the SNH website until 19 October, the delay being accounted for by web conversion, formatting and clearance procedures for publication.

Robbie Kernahan from SNH gave evidence to the Committee on 30 September, as part of a wider panel. It was unfortunate that he did not specifically mention the report and its imminent publication, and I am sure Mr Kernahan regrets any confusion caused by that omission. However his evidence was closely based on the material within the report. He described how SNH had established a DMG benchmark with the Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG), which includes public interest considerations drawn from relevant policy documents and how SNH has carried out an assessment of individual DMGs’ performance against these criteria.

I recognise that this assessment provides a mixed picture. We must, however, bear in mind that the assessment exercise was conducted in late 2014. The aim of the exercise was to illustrate to DMGs where they needed to make progress and to provide a baseline for the 2016 Review.

The Committee also requested feedback on a meeting I was due to attend with ADMG on 9 November which was part of a regional meeting of the Association held in Inverness. I listened to points raised by ADMG members about the provisions within the Land Reform Bill in Part 6 (removal of exemption for sporting rates) and Part 8 (deer management). I also heard a number of updates from DMG representatives on their progress with DMPs. These plans are being developed, often with professional outside assistance, in a manner which takes into account the public interest in deer management. While it was acknowledged that
much work remained to be done to complete the suite of agreed DMPs, I was impressed by the progress being made and by the willingness of those present to meet the challenge of the process we have put in place.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify a point discussed at the evidence session on 2 November in relation to Part 6 of the Bill, entry in the valuation roll of shootings and deer forests:

**Michael Russell:** To be accurate and fair, I note that, when the ratings were removed in 1995, farms were not part of the rating, nor were small plots of ground with shooting rights. I own a little bit of ground around my but and ben in the Highlands. I do not actually shoot on it, but people would be welcome to come and do so because it has never been rated in such a way. Just for the sake of accuracy and fairness, I point out that there was no such proposal in the past because such land was not rated, and as I understand it—the minister can confirm this—there is no such proposal now to bring farms and small plots of ground into the scheme.

**Aileen McLeod:** There is not.

For the avoidance of doubt, the provisions in Part 6 of the Bill do not propose that farms or plots of ground are to be entered in the valuation roll. It does, however, propose that shootings are entered and, as was the case prior to the 1995 exemption, these could relate to farms or other holdings.

As I have indicated previously, Ministers will have options on setting the tax burden and available reliefs following valuation. If there is any further clarification I can provide on this issue, I would be happy to do so.

I look forward to receiving the Committee’s Stage 1 report and to considering the Committee’s recommendations.

**AILEEN McLEOD**