Written submission from Alan Cory-Wright, Chairman of Breadalbane Deer Management group

I am writing to you as the Chair of Breadalbane Deer Management Group in relation to the publication, *Deer Management in Scotland: Report to the Scottish Government from Scottish Natural Heritage 2016*, recently discussed by the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (ECCLR) committee of the Scottish Parliament.

I wish to point out three very obvious errors in relation to this group.

On p21, it says that the deer density in Breadalbane is 12.7 per sq km when the recent 2015 helicopter count gave 11.24 deer per sq km.

More importantly, on p90, SNH make the following comment in relation to our Section 7 agreement:

“For three Agreement areas, (Kinveachy, Caenlochan and Breadalbane), the deer density targets have not been met and the habitat targets are not being met.”

Our Section 7 agreement allowed for a degree of flexibility in actual numbers if habitat response suggested that this was appropriate. When monitoring in 2011 suggested that this was indeed the case, SNH agreed revised culling targets with us, and these were delivered, and indeed exceeded. I would invite the members of your committee to read the attached habitat monitoring report (please see the annexe), commissioned by SNH, and judge whether habitats here are responding very well to our management or not.

We have been asked here to deliver deer reductions and try to restore our upland habitats. We believe we are doing that. The evidence suggests we are doing that. The statement given above is a misrepresentation of the situation here, it has greatly angered many members of this group, and a good relationship with SNH built up over five years has been undermined in a single short sentence which is completely ill-informed and inaccurate. This is symptomatic of the new management structure that has recently arisen within SNH and which we are currently struggling with.

I would ask that you push SNH to answer this point. The Section 7 agreement allowed for a very good and constructive working relationship with SNH in the past, delivering for both parties. The evidence here suggests that no other conclusion can be arrived at.

Finally, on p84, it says that the Breadalbane Section 7 agreement is current, and was extended for 2016. This is not the case. The agreement ended in May 2015, and was not renewed by SNH, despite almost 100% support from the group for doing that at the time. It is now unlikely that we will enter in to such an agreement again, given the change in circumstances.
An assessment and evaluation of herbivore impacts on designated habitats in the Breadalbane Hills

This report should be quoted as:


Summary

AN ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF HERBIVORE IMPACTS ON DESIGNATED HABITATS IN THE BREADALBANE HILLS.

Year of Publication: 2014

Background

Site Condition Monitoring (SCM, JNCC 2008) assessments of some of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), within the Breadalbane hill range, indicated that a number of the upland features were in unfavourable condition and potentially ‘at risk’ from herbivore impacts. The following sites were identified in 2007 by the agencies (SNH, DCS, SGRPID and FCS) as ones where Joint Agency Working could help to deliver sustainable deer/herbivore management: Ben Lawers, Ben Heasgarnich, Meall na Samhna, Meall
Ghaordie and Carn Gorm/Meall Garbh, all of whom entered into a section 7 agreement in 2010 to deliver the required targets.

A grazing and trampling impact survey was carried out in August/September 2007 to gather information in relation to the nature and distribution of herbivore impacts on a representative range of the designated interests. This was repeated during the summer (June to August) 2011 and then again in 2014 to provide up to date information on impacts and to show changes in impact levels since the original survey. This report covers the results of the 2014 survey and includes an assessment of the 2014 results and an analysis of changes since 2007.

**Summary**

The five sites identified were grazed predominantly by sheep and deer except for two areas by Loch na Lairige from which grazing had been excluded. Four broad habitat types were assessed, smooth grassland, flush, wind-clipped communities and ‘restricted habitats’, the latter category including tall-herb ledge and sub-Arctic *Salix* scrub. A total of 314 quarter km squares (250m²) were surveyed across the five sites; the sample squares representing approximately 20% by area of each site.

For each habitat type, the relevant assessment of current impacts was made as per MacDonald *et al.* 1998 (see Sec 2. Methods). An assessment of long-term impact and trends was made using the standard trend indicators data were compared with the results from 2007 and 2011.

In 2007, it was noted that there had been long-term herbivore impacts throughout the sites. Across many of the lower slopes, e.g. of Ben Lawers and Ben Heasgarnich, heather was relatively sparse and *Nardus stricta* grasslands were abundant. Recent management on Meall na Samhna, Ben Heasgarnich and North Ben Lawers had included reductions in the numbers of sheep run on the hills and some off-wintering of herds, and there were indications of a decreasing impact in these areas. Where sheep stocking levels were still relatively high (>1 ewe/ha) and/or sheep were not off-wintered, such as across south Ben Lawers and North Chesthill, impacts were still Moderate or High. Moderate–Low deer impacts were also noted from across the five sites with some local higher impacts such as on the Tarmachan Ridge and at Inverinian.

The results of the 2011 survey indicated that grazing impacts had decreased across most of the five sites. This was particularly evident on Ben Heasgarnich and Meall na Samhna, but a general pattern of decreasing impacts was recorded across all the SSSIs. Moderate, High and Increasing impacts were recorded from some locations on Ben Lawers and Carn Gorm/Meall Garbh.
The main findings of the 2014 survey were of fairly minor changes and many of the results were broadly the same as those from the 2011 survey. In general the pattern of changes was still a decreasing one, with most assessment squares either showing the same impact level as 2011 or a slightly lower one.

Moderate and High-Moderate impacts were still recorded in some locations on Ben Lawers, including grazing impacts largely attributable to sheep on wind-clipped vegetation across Ben Ghlas and along the main ridge, and grazing and trampling on flush vegetation to the south of Ben Lawers and along the glen east of Meall a Choire Leith and Meall Corraniach. Some Moderate deer impacts were noted from the Tarmachan ridge top and to the far north-east of the SSSI.

On Meall na Samhna, impacts were predominantly Low and Moderate-Low for all habitats although there were still Moderate trampling impacts recorded on flush habitat to the south-west. Another concern is the depth of litter build-up within species-rich Nardus stricta grassland that may result in a less herb-rich sward over time. (Sign of under-grazing BDMG- Comment)

On Ben Heasgarnich, grazing impacts were mostly Low or Moderate-Low, with very occasional Moderate impacts, mostly in the eastern part of the site. Trampling impacts were slightly higher than grazing, especially trampling in flushes which had increased to near 2007 levels. Impacts on restricted habitats had decreased most, with most grazing impacts recorded as Low and trampling as Moderate-Low, with some Moderate grazing impacts restricted to the most accessible stands.

Likewise on Meall Ghaordie, the trend for most habitats assessed indicated a decrease in herbivore impacts though there were a few sites where grazing impacts were still notable on wind-clipped vegetation along the ridge and this was reflected in the dung frequency across the site.

On Carn Gorm-Meall Garbh, herbivore impacts on wind-clipped and smooth grassland habitats had also decreased since 2011 although there are still a few Moderate and High grazing impacts on wind-clipped vegetation along the ridge to the north-east of the site, with corresponding high dung frequency around this north-eastern margin.

Overall, impact levels have maintained a decreasing trend, though this is less marked than between 2007 and 2011. There are still locally higher impacts on some habitats, for example on wind-clipped vegetation on high ridges on Meall na Samhna, Meall Ghaordie, Carn Gorm/Meall Garbh and Ben Lawers and on flush habitats to the east of Meall Corranaich on Ben Lawers.

Grazing levels on these sites are still high enough to restrict tall herb and montane willow vegetation to poorly accessible cliff slopes, but they are too
low in places, especially on Ben Heasgarnich and Meall na Samhna, to maintain a floristically and structurally diverse calcareous grassland. *(This is our dilemma, grazing levels are too high for some habitats, too low for others-BDMG comment).*

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