

PE2151/G: Grant protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders

NatureScot written submission, 2 October 2025

Thank you for your correspondence in relation to the Committee's consideration of petition PE2151: Grant protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders.

As requested, this response provides further information about the basis on which NatureScot has come to its views regarding the protection status of primitive goats, or feral goats as they are more commonly known. In doing so we would also draw attention to the Scottish Government's submission in May, in which they outline the current legislative context and confirm that they have no plans to provide full legal protected status to feral goats.

Firstly, we acknowledge the strength of feeling that exists on this matter and the considered views that have been put forward by the petitioner and those who have provided evidence. We know that the feral goat population that has been highlighted as part of this petition, in Langholm and the lower Scottish Borders, is valued by the local community. We also recognise the cultural and historical significance of feral goats in the Scottish Borders, and across Scotland.

As highlighted in the Scottish Government's response, feral goats have both positive and negative impacts on the environment. Benefits include the role they can play in managing vegetation and providing food for eagles and carrion feeders.

However, feral goats are an invasive non-native species that can cause serious damage to the natural environment and forestry interests through browsing and bark stripping. We have recorded browsing and trampling by feral goats as a negative pressure on twenty-nine nationally important Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The habitats most affected are woodlands, montane scrub, juniper and tall herb ledges, and the impacts are usually in combination with other large herbivores. Browsing and bark-stripping by feral goats can also have a negative impact on young trees and forestry.

Feral goat populations also have the potential to increase in size rapidly if they are not properly managed. For example, the number of feral goats in Snowdonia increased from 230 in the late 1960s to 1,100 in the early 2000s, despite ad hoc management. It is for these reasons that feral goat populations often need to be managed to best keep their numbers in balance with the environment.

In relation to the specific circumstances at Langholm, under current legislation, the culling of goats is not an activity that requires a licence from us. Therefore, it is for the landowners to manage the environmental impacts of goats and to consider how any reduction in the feral goat population should be achieved in practice. We continue to engage proactively on this matter, including meetings with representatives from land managers and the Goat Conservation Trust.

We understand that nobody has any intention to eradicate the local goat population and have recommended collaborative engagement between landowners on a sustainable goat management plan as a potential option for consideration, in a similar way that deer are managed across multiple ownerships.

We hope that the information provided is of use to the committee's consideration of this petition.