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Graeme Dey MSP  
Convener  
Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform  
Committee  
Room T3.40  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
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31 May 2017

Dear Graeme

I am writing to inform you that the report *Analyses of the fates of satellite tracked golden eagles in Scotland – Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 982* will be published by Scottish Natural Heritage at 2.30pm today.

As you will be aware, I ordered this review in August 2016 to find out more about the suspicious disappearance of a number of satellite-tagged golden eagles in north-east Scotland.

The report can be downloaded from the SNH website at: <http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/publications/new/>

The key findings of the report are:

- Of 131 young eagles tracked, as many as 41 (31%) have disappeared under suspicious circumstances. These disappearances are significantly connected with contemporaneous records of illegal persecution.
- The suspicious disappearances occurred mainly in six areas of the Highlands (predominantly in the central and eastern Highlands). Some, but not all, areas managed as grouse moors were strongly associated with the disappearance of many of the tagged eagles.
- Tagging revealed that the persecution of young eagles is suppressing the golden eagle population in the central and eastern Highlands, and hampering overall recovery from historic, widespread, persecution.
- Wind farms were not associated with any recorded golden eagle deaths, and there were very few records of tagged young golden eagles near wind farms.

- Operations associated with tagging had no discernible adverse effects on the welfare, behaviour or survival of the birds.

In light of the conclusions of this report and your letter to me of 24 May setting out the Committee's thoughts and recommendations regarding the petition on the licensing of shooting businesses, I am today announcing a package of further measures to address this ongoing problem which is blighting our natural environment and Scotland's reputation. These measures are as follows:

- I am publishing a map showing the clusters of disappeared birds, with grid references confirming the last location fix for the tagged eagles which disappeared.
- I will ask Scottish Natural Heritage and my officials to explore options, using existing powers, which could be used to order the temporary or permanent cessation of activities linked to grouse moor management where we have good reason to believe that they are harming highly protected raptor species.
- To enhance enforcement and prevention, I will work with Police Scotland to recruit a team of Special Constables focused on wildlife and other rural crime, starting with a pilot scheme in the Cairngorms National Park. After careful consideration, I have decided that this is a better route than giving further investigative powers to SSPCA inspectors. I am very grateful to the SSPCA for their public-spirited offer and their patience while we have considered this proposal.
- I will establish a group to examine how we can ensure that grouse moor management continues to contribute to the rural economy while being environmentally sustainable and compliant with the law, including consideration of licensing this type of shooting business.
- I am commissioning a research project to examine both the benefits and costs of large shooting estates to Scotland's economy and biodiversity.
- I am keen to examine ways in which we can protect the employment and other rights of gamekeepers and their role in enhancing biodiversity, not just game interests.

Further details on each of these proposals, which add to those we have already implemented or are committed to delivering, will be made available in due course. I believe that we are sending a strong message to wildlife criminals and the general public that the Scottish Government will continue to do all that it can, including working closely with partners, to tackle the illegal persecution of our protected wildlife.

Yours,



**ROSEANNA CUNNINGHAM**