OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 29 January 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 29 January 2025

CONTENTS

RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)
*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Malcolm Combe
Richard Cooke (Scottish Venison Association)
Ross Ewing (Scottish Land & Estates)
David Fleetwood (John Muir Trust)
Donald Fraser (NatureScot)
Lea MacNally (Scottish Gamekeepers Association)
Duncan Orr-Ewing (RSPB Scotland and LINK Deer Group)
Graeme Prest (Forestry and Land Scotland)
Tom Turnbull (Association of Deer Management Groups)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 29 January 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:07]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the fourth meeting of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee in 2025. We have received apologies from Evelyn Tweed and Emma Roddick. Before we begin, I ask everyone to turn their electronic devices to silent.

Under agenda item 1, I ask committee members to agree to take item 3 in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Deer Working Group Report

09:07

The Convener: The next item of business is a round-table discussion on the implementation of the deer working group's recommendations. We are joined by nine stakeholders, and we have up to two hours for the discussion.

As we have quite a few participants, I ask everyone to be succinct in their questions and answers. Please indicate to me or the clerk if you wish to participate at any point, but there is no expectation that everyone will speak on every point, especially if you feel that your point has already been made. Likewise, if you feel that a part of the discussion does not relate to your area of expertise, please do not feel that you need to participate at that moment.

We will begin by introducing ourselves. I am Finlay Carson, the convener of the committee and the MSP for Galloway and West Dumfries.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands region.

Richard Cooke (Scottish Venison Association): I represent the Scottish Venison Association.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for South Scotland.

Duncan Orr-Ewing (RSPB Scotland and LINK Deer Group): I am the convener of the Scottish Environment LINK deer group and head of species and land management at RSPB Scotland.

Tom Turnbull (Association of Deer Management Groups): I am the chair of the Association of Deer Management Groups.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands region.

David Fleetwood (John Muir Trust): I am director of policy for the John Muir Trust.

Donald Fraser (NatureScot): I am from NatureScot.

Lea MacNally (Scottish Gamekeepers Association): I am from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands region.

Malcolm Combe: I am a senior lecturer at the University of Strathclyde, and I was an external adviser to the deer working group.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am the MSP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley.

Ross Ewing (Scottish Land & Estates): I am the director of moorland at Scottish Land & Estates.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I am the MSP for the Shetland Islands, where there are no deer.

The Convener: So, some level of success there.

Graeme Prest (Forestry and Land Scotland): I am the director of land management and regions for Forestry and Land Scotland.

The Convener: Good morning. You are all most welcome.

I remind everyone that you do not need to operate your microphones yourselves. The operator over there is very good at seeing who wants to speak and will turn on your mic for you.

I will kick off with a broad question. What are your views on the impact of current deer densities in Scotland? Can you touch on the effects on the economy and on environmental issues?

When I was elected, my dear late friend Alex Fergusson told me that there were two things that I had to avoid as an MSP: deer management and land reform. I have managed to avoid land reform in this session of Parliament, but here we are dealing with deer again. It has always been one of the most important topics.

I open up the discussion to anyone who would like to kick off.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: The deer population in Scotland is estimated at more than 1 million animals, which means that the population has doubled in the past 20 years.

On environmental impact, the Scottish biodiversity strategy emphasises that we need to reduce deer densities across Scotland to less than two deer per square kilometre in priority woodland habitats, five to eight deer per square kilometre in the Cairngorms national park and 10 per square kilometre across the rest of Scotland. In reality, though, and given that many of us who are trying to manage deer sustainably on our properties require lower deer densities than 10 per square kilometre in the neighbouring environment, we probably aim to have fewer than five per square kilometre across Scotland. Many of us suffer from deer incursions when, in line with Government policy, we are trying to manage deer populations to sustainable levels.

The Convener: For what reason do you control deer numbers? What are you protecting?

Duncan Orr-Ewing: A number of things. We are engaged with peatland restoration, so we need low deer populations to prevent trampling and damage that would waste the public investment that has gone into peatland restoration. We are also trying to achieve native woodland expansion, in line with Scottish Government targets and, if you do not have low deer densities in those circumstances, you are not going to deliver native woodland expansion without fences. Obviously, the benefits that come from that management include biodiversity.

This is a cross-cutting issue, with major benefits to a wide variety of public interests, including ones that I have not touched on, such as reducing road traffic accidents and the incidence of Lyme disease.

Tom Turnbull: There is no doubt that deer affect peatland restoration, woodland creation and existing woodlands, but we should not lose sight of the fact that, particularly in the Highlands, there have been reductions in deer numbers. Indeed, the Highlands are perhaps the only area of the United Kingdom in which there has been such a reduction.

Deer numbers are closely monitored by NatureScot. Across the Highlands, the average is already below the 10 per square kilometre figure that is referred to in the deer working group report—I believe that the average in the area is 9.3 deer per square kilometre. In 2023-24, there was the highest cull of deer in Scotland since NatureScot started recording, in 1996. I think that the direction of travel is clear but, obviously, some work needs to be done in certain areas.

We should also not forget that deer are of important economic benefit to rural communities and to employment. We have been hearing about that increasingly of late, because we have been doing a lot of work in talking to stalkers and deer managers, and there are fears out there about the impact of reducing deer numbers. A balancing act is, therefore, required.

Graeme Prest: Forestry and Land Scotland is the biggest land manager in Scotland, managing 9 per cent of the country. We cull around 43,000 deer a year, which is about a third of the recorded annual cull in Scotland. We have also been doing thermal imaging to look at incursions into land that we manage. There are still quite a number of areas across Scotland where we are doing a good level of cull but where we are getting incursions of deer from areas with higher deer densities.

As has been said already, the impact of deer densities goes across the whole of Scotland. You cannot just look at the impact on an individual property; you must look at the whole landscape.

Deer do not respect ownership; they move across the whole landscape.

09:15

The question was about the impact of deer densities. Our target is between two and five per square kilometre. There is lots of evidence that it needs to be at that sort of level if you are to get, in particular, the natural regeneration of trees, habitat restoration and the protection of peatland. We know that we have further to go to achieve that. Across Scotland, as has been said, deer numbers have a big cross-cutting impact on the natural environment.

Ross Ewing: It is really important that, when we discuss deer impacts, we do not characterise the problem as a national one. Duncan Orr-Ewing mentioned that there are 1 million deer across Scotland. A lot of people would dispute that figure, but it is also important that we do not talk in national figures when we discuss deer impacts. NatureScot, which is the subject matter expert, characterised talk of 1 million deer as being misleading and unhelpful. It is important that we frame our discussion around the local and regional impacts of deer, as opposed to characterising the issue as some sort of national problem, because I do not think that that is the case.

We need to be cognisant of factors beyond the management of deer. Deer are doing better in Scotland, if you like, as a result of woodland expansion, which has been characterised by the deer working group as a "dominant factor" when it comes to expanding deer range. However, we also need to acknowledge that the climate is warming. A scientific study that was published in 2017 by Albon and others said:

> "climate warming has seen earlier springs, longer growing seasons, and hence higher plant productivity, as well as more benign winters, all of which should enhance birth rates and survival".

The question is therefore not simply about management intervention. Other factors are expanding deer range in Scotland and, ultimately, resulting in increased densities in some localities. We need to be cognisant of that.

Finally, as Tom Turnbull has touched on, there is a differential situation across Scotland. In the Highlands, deer management occurs collaboratively at the landscape scale, predominantly through deer management groups. The situation is different in the lowlands, where, predominantly, we rely on recreational deerstalkers to do the management. In addition, in the lowlands of Scotland, you do not have such large contiguous landholdings; they tend to be smaller, and there are more of them.

There are distinct challenges across Scotland, which make it very difficult to come up with a national solution. However, it is important that we do not just talk about management interventions and that we acknowledge some of the other things that are resulting in the expansion of deer range in Scotland.

David Fleetwood: The question was about the impact, and I will add a couple of statistics to illustrate a little bit of that. We would focus perhaps less on the absolute number of deer and more on the ability of the habitats to recover and rebound. Duncan Orr-Ewing and others have referred to peatlands and natural woodlands, which involve carbon. Eighty per cent of our peatlands are degraded, and they cannot regenerate fast enough because of deer trampling. That evidence was put forward by the Scottish Government. Cover from native woodland is currently at around only 4 per cent, and it cannot regenerate and colonise, because of deer eating young saplings. That gives a little bit of a sense of the scale of some of the issues that we are trying to tackle, and the impact on the outcomes that we are seeking to achieve.

Donald Fraser: It is important also to look at the context of biodiversity and climate crisis in which we now operate. The outcomes that we are looking for from deer management have changed over time. We have been looking for enhancement and improvement in condition. It is important to look at that context when it comes to deer management. The challenge is to understand population and impacts across Scotland. A lot of work has been done on that. Graeme Prest has mentioned the technology that is now available. The methods that we use are improving, and our ability to collect data online has improved. A lot more, and better, information is collected now on impacts and populations, which improves our decision making on deer management in Scotland.

The Convener: Before I bring in Duncan Orr-Ewing, we have heard about landscape-scale management, but we have also heard about encroachment and competing priorities. How significant is the conflict between different land managers for different outcomes? Is that a big issue?

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I will respond to that question in a minute, but I want to come back to Ross Ewing's point. The Scottish Government's response to the deer working group's report made it clear that deer populations and densities are important factors. As David Fleetwood said, we must also consider the damage aspects, which, as described, can affect a variety of public interests.

I remind the committee that, over 80 years, we have had seven inquiries into deer populations in Scotland. All of them have, pretty much without

exception, come to the same conclusion: the population is too high. The chair of the Red Deer Commission in 1989 said it was too high at that stage, when it was estimated to be 300,000, and we have moved on significantly since then.

In response to your point, convener, yes, it is very difficult to grow trees and restore peatlands if you are sitting next to an estate that is trying to manage high deer populations, particularly if that involves sporting stags for clients to shoot. If a neighbouring estate is maintaining deer populations at the levels of 20 to 30 deer per square kilometre, as can be the case—I am not saying that that is the case across all of Scotland—it is almost impossible to achieve your objectives without deer fencing, which comes at a cost to the public purse, given that the public pays for deer fencing to separate competing interests. Ideally, you want deer populations to be reduced across the whole landscape, so that everybody can fulfil their objectives.

Tom Turnbull: Our organisation tries to facilitate collaboration. Our members' estates cover about 3 million hectares of, largely, the Highlands. Their intentions, which can relate to the environment, agriculture, sport and forestry, often compete with one another. The challenge is to get people to have a conversation around deer management on a landscape scale. That is vital, as has already been alluded to.

Historically, doing that has been a challenge, but recent work undertaken by the Common Ground Forum has led to there being a huge step forward. We are now able to discuss those challenges far better through mediation and other methods. Importantly, we are starting to hear the voices of deer managers, who are the people on the ground who have to undertake this work in very challenging conditions, day after day throughout winter. Collaboration is not straightforward, but it is becoming better.

To react to what Duncan said, it is increasingly unusual to find a purely sporting estate. Most estate owners or landholders would like to leave the ground in a better condition than they found it. Most landholders are planting trees or thinking about restoring peatlands if they have not already done so. Things are changing, and deer numbers in the Highlands are coming down. The 1 million deer figure is an estimation, because we do not know how many deer there are in our woodlands across large parts of Scotland. Deer management is a challenge, and it is nuanced, depending on the landscape that you are operating in.

Richard Cooke: To add to what Tom said, there is a very structured approach to deer management in the red deer range and among the 50 deer management groups. The different parties all have deer management plans, which set out their respective objectives. They develop a population model that reflects the requirements of each deer management group member, and there is a negotiated compromise process in establishing the population model to deliver a certain level of cull.

It is important to stress that the management of red deer in the Highlands is not a haphazard process; it is a structured and voluntary process. All who sit around the table, which includes people from right across the spectrum, from those who want levels of two deer per square kilometre to those who want 10 per square kilometre, do so in a spirit of co-operation in almost all cases and arrive at a compromise that delivers the best balanced outcome for all interests. In a sense, that is what the Common Ground Forum's approach is beginning to introduce on a broader national spectrum basis.

The Convener: I think that we are straying into territory that Emma Harper is going to explore. I ask Emma to come in with her question, and then I will bring in those who have indicated to me.

Emma Harper: Good morning, everybody. My question relates to what Richard Cooke was talking about with regard to the structures and how we manage deer. How do we currently manage deer in Scotland? Is it different in the Highlands versus in the south-west, for instance? Everybody can answer, but I am looking at Richard first, because he started that ball rolling.

Richard Cooke: I am not the best person to answer that question—you should probably direct the question to Tom Turnbull. As an introduction, I would say that it varies very much, depending on circumstance and species. As Ross Ewing alluded, there is a wide range of different approaches and people who do it.

I defer to Tom on the question.

Tom Turnbull: There are 50 deer management groups covering the vast majority—perhaps 90 per cent—of the Highlands, and, as has been stated, those groups have publicly available deer management plans in place. They have five-year population models and they regularly count their deer, sometimes with the help of NatureScot and its helicopter counts. Increasingly, people are using thermal counting to monitor deer populations. Although the population models that are in place are not imposed by NatureScot, they are agreed by NatureScot and there are NatureScot representatives at every meeting of every deer management group.

As I mentioned, it can be challenging. Opposing objectives can create challenges, but that is sometimes more about personalities than about the objectives. There is quite a structured approach in the Highlands, and the deer working

group's report regularly brought up the fact that there is a less structured approach in the lowlands. As Ross Ewing alluded, there are smaller and more fractured landholdings there. Increasingly, leases are used for deer management, so people are sometimes travelling considerable distances to undertake deer management across the lowlands. We do not have an idea of what the population is, and we have less of an idea of what the culls are, whereas—as was evidenced in the deer working group's report—the red deer cull is pretty well recorded to NatureScot every year.

Ross Ewing: As Tom Turnbull alluded, the way that it generally works in the lowlands is that the stalking arrangements tend to be much more informal than they are in the uplands of Scotland. By that, I mean that there are generally trained recreational deer stalkers undertaking stalking in their own time, for their own enjoyment. There are a number of motivations for that. Obviously there is the sporting side, but people are quite often motivated by the venison side and sometimes by the prevention of agricultural damage, which features quite strongly. The arrangements are informal. As Tom said, there is generally an annual rolling lease, with one stalker or a group of stalkers—known as a syndicate—who will partake in deer stalking in a lowland context.

I can draw on my own experience, because I do that myself. I have a couple of permissions in Perthshire whereby I pay a small amount of money every year to be able to go out and take a certain number of deer from particular properties. I mainly eat all of the venison myself, but some of it will go to the game dealer.

A real issue in the lowland context at present is the lack of community infrastructure for deer management. I am talking, in particular, about larder facilities and chillers. I am very fortunate in that I have access to a community deer larder near Dunkeld, which is fantastic, but a lot of people do not have such access. If you do not have access to the infrastructure to process the venison, you are not going to be able to execute the management of deer in the way that you might want.

I am very fortunate in that I have shot 10 roe bucks this year and 10 roe does, so I am doing okay, but I could probably shoot a lot more than that if there was greater availability of infrastructure. I imagine that a lot of other lowland stalkers are in a similar position to me in that regard.

The Convener: We will come on to that in more detail a bit later.

Graeme Prest: Forestry and Land Scotland is a member of every deer management group in Scotland, given our extensive landholdings, so we have a lot of experience. As can be inferred from what has been said already by most of the witnesses, there is a big variation. The range of success and common objectives varies greatly around the Highlands—I think that everyone would agree with that.

In one area, in particular, success has been achieved in delivering on biodiversity, the wider natural environment and climate change through the Cairngorms Connect partnership, which I was involved in establishing. It is successful because a group of neighbouring land managers have common objectives and aim to achieve the same ambitions. That means there is involvement on a big scale from the private sector, non-governmental organisations, the RSPB, Wildland, NatureScot and us.

09:30

Interestingly, we are able to manage the deer in that area without fencing. We used to have fences but they have now been removed. Due to the sheer scale of it—it is a vast area in the Cairngorms—the results of co-ordinated deer culling over many years can now be seen. However, there are not many areas like that. If we look across the Highlands, that is the example that we tend to use. We need to see more of that, and we need to question how we make that happen. In other areas that we manage, we do not achieve that.

I made a point about incursions from neighbouring land. If those happen, we have to put fences up. Fencing is expensive and it takes only one hole in it to let deer in; so, if there is snow in the wintertime that causes a hole, for example, deer can come in. We need landscape-scale deer management without fences and people with common objectives, and we need to know how we can make that happen.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I will not repeat what Graeme Prest said, but he made a point that I was going to make, so I will add to it. As Graeme said, we are members of a number of deer management groups across Scotland and, to be honest, collaboration is patchy. In some places it is good and in other places it is not good. It is not a very good system for resolving some quite difficult conflicts.

For example, we have now had 25 years of voluntary control agreements in the Caenlochan area, in the Cairngorms National Park, and still the deer densities are way above what is needed to regenerate an important natural heritage area. Caenlochan is part of the Cairngorms special area of conservation, so it is an important botanical

area not only to the uplands of Scotland but to the UK.

Another example of where the deer management group system has not helped to resolve conflict between organisations that are trying to do the right thing—what the Government is asking them to do—is Assynt. The John Muir Trust can speak to that better than I can. It has been trying to do the right thing to regenerate SAC habitats there for woodlands, and it has been frustrated in its objectives by high deer densities on neighbouring ground.

David Fleetwood: Duncan touched on a couple of the points that I was going to make. Coming back to the points about partnership, scale and pace, I agree with what has been said in the discussion that we have had so far—that the best way to tackle the issue is through partnership working. That needs to be done on a sufficient scale, and the issue with our land management in Assynt, which Duncan mentioned, relates to what is, in effect, the importation of deer from surrounding areas of land. We could very significantly increase our cull rates but continue to import stock from surrounding landscapes without partnership working on that scale.

I would contrast that with some of the work that we have done in Ben Nevis, where we have partnership working on a sufficient scale and we see the regeneration of natural woodland with much less use of fencing and so on. However, it takes a significant amount of time to develop a partnership and to get it in place at the relevant scale. I guess that one of the questions we need to consider in this discussion is whether five or 10 years of building such partnerships and developing activity on that scale is a speedy enough response to a problem the scale of which we talked about in answer to question 1.

Tom Turnbull: Going back to the concerns about some of the deer management groups, it is a challenge to collaborate in any field, and competing objectives create problems, but we have come quite a long way. Duncan referred to Assynt, and I was involved in the work in Assynt. The deer management group had the objective of getting deer numbers down to seven deer per square kilometre, which is considerably below what the deer working group is doing. It had population models in place, it had deer counts with NatureScot to try to achieve those densities, and it is on the right path. The fallout in that situation was difficult, but I do not think that it is insurmountable. We should revisit it.

Although it is challenging to collaborate, it is vital. What has been achieved at Cairngorms Connect is admirable, but it is five large landholdings that all have the same objectives. Further, if you are going to achieve those objectives, it needs to be done at scale, and that is not always possible.

If you have a smaller landholding and rely on some form of income to ensure that you can employ your deer manager, you may be relying on sporting income. That is vital to some very remote communities in the Highlands. It is important that we do not alienate those deer managers or condemn them for undertaking what is an extremely difficult job.

Richard Cooke: I will first respond to Duncan Orr-Ewing's example of Caenlochan, which has been a difficult area for a long time. Looking forward rather than back, it is worth making the point that the deer population there, after a big cull in recent years—particularly this year—is now edging towards 10 deer per square kilometre. There is a strong likelihood—Donald Fraser may confirm this—that the section 7 agreement that has been in place there for some considerable time will be lifted in the very near future.

The point that I really want to make, however, is that, when we talk about deer impacts, we very often talk about deer as though they are the only herbivore in the Highlands, and that is simply not the case. There are large sheep populations in the red deer range. A population of around 300,000 red deer sits alongside 600,000 sheep. The sheep are not evenly spread and are not there throughout the year, but their impacts are just as significant as the deer impacts. There are also hares, rabbits and goats in some areas. If we are going to address herbivore impacts, it is important that we think about the whole picture and not just the bit that happens to catch the headlines at the moment.

The Convener: I have a question about that, which is perhaps for Donald Fraser. I remember dealing with deer management in a previous session of Parliament, with the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee. A very contentious issue was how we calculate deer densities—whether by looking at hoof prints or at deer or sheep droppings, and trying to distinguish between the two, or by using helicopters. Are we any further forward in relation to having a consensus around the method of calculating the density of deer or of sheep or other herbivores?

Donald Fraser: There are a number of parts to that question.

The data and information that underpin the decision that I talked about earlier are key. There are a number of methods out there for assessing deer populations or densities, from dung counting—which the convener alluded to—through to new technology such as drones and helicopter census work. The different methods that are used

and applied in the different circumstances depend on the species and the habitat that they are in.

A range of techniques out there are peer reviewed and have good evidence and robust information to support them. There are tools out there to do it, but doing it obviously comes at a cost, which is an issue.

We are keen to stress that it is about not only the populations but the impacts that deer cause. We are keen to gather information about the impacts, because the density and impact relationship is key. For example, if we are trying to get woodland establishment, we need very low densities of deer. If we are looking to have upland habitats in good condition, however, we might be able to sustain a slightly higher density of deer. There are different aspects to that, too.

In the context of the wider discussion, I would also raise a point about the differences between species and where they occur, the methods that might be used for assessing and monitoring their impact, and the management that is in place for that. Red deer in the uplands have been a herding species, so the need to collaborate in order to manage that shared population is much stronger. Roe deer are a more territorial species, and there is management required for that. Those considerations, mixed with the different land uses and land management that are out there, mean that there are different ways of managing deer populations across Scotland, and that is absolutely right.

The technology and the methods are there, but there are resource implications and costs at a local, regional and national scale.

Graeme Prest: I will make a couple of comments that pick up on Richard Cooke's comment about sheep. From things such as our thermal imaging and impact assessments, we know that sheep are an issue on some parts of the land that we manage. However, in most cases, the primary issue is deer damage. There is a lot of evidence for that.

From my own experience over many years, and from what I hear from people I speak to and from what we see on the ground, I know that there are many areas in the Highlands where there are fewer sheep now. There are areas that used to have quite a high density of sheep that do not have them any more. In some cases, when there is a reduction in sheep numbers, there can be forest regeneration or expansion in the neighbouring land that we manage.

However, all the evidence that we gather says that deer have the primary impact on trees, biodiversity and peatland in the areas that we manage.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: As we have heard, collaboration is not always possible. The public interest needs to be asserted. Over past decades, what is now NatureScot has not used its full range of available powers to intervene in such circumstances, and that is urgently required in many places. That is why we strongly support the concept of deer management nature restoration orders—or DMNROs. We think that recommendation 97 of the deer working group's report would be really helpful in that context, whereby we would have a planned cull approval system, working through NatureScot.

The Convener: Tom, do you want to come in briefly on that subject before we move on?

Tom Turnbull: Yes. DMNROs were not a recommendation of the deer working group; the idea seemed to come from somewhere else.

At Caenlochan, the most recent agreement under section 7 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 was asked for by the deer management group there to help it with its management. Most deer management groups might have entered into section 7 agreements reluctantly in the past, but they have been successful and those people who have entered into them have had a positive experience.

We are not opposed to regulation; the issue concerns the quality of the regulations that are being used and how they are imposed.

Elena Whitham: Good morning. One of the most emotive and worthwhile events that I have been to as a parliamentarian was the one that Tim Eagle hosted for the Common Ground Forum's final report. This has already been touched on this morning, but I would like to explore what that offers with regard to the structures and the possibility of collaborative working. The Centre for Good Relations helped to facilitate that initiative and brought together stakeholders from across the country, including stalkers, deer management groups and all the other organisations that are involved in deer management.

Some of you were part of the Common Ground Forum. Could you speak about the benefits of it? What do you hope that it will achieve for the representation of deer management right across the country? Sometimes, voices do not get heard. Earlier, Ross Ewing spoke about lowland issues, which sometimes get completely lost in the conversation. We know that numbers of roe deer are increasing in the Lowlands. Could you comment on the Common Ground Forum and say how we, as parliamentarians, can help with that message?

Ross Ewing: The Common Ground Forum has been a huge success, and it is not a surprise that it has been award winning. It has been a fantastic

conduit for bringing people together to discuss difficult issues. We need to acknowledge that it has been a huge success, particularly in the upland context.

You will not be surprised to hear me bang the drum again for the Lowlands. That is where we need some serious action. Over the years, it has been a dominant feature of legislation that has gone through the United Kingdom Parliament and then the Scottish Parliament that the focus has always been on the Highland context. That is all well and good, but if the Centre for Good Relations and the Common Ground Forum are to take forward publicly supported additional work, focusing on the Lowlands and on how to make meaningful progress there would be a really worthwhile endeavour. There are difficulties in the lowland context, too. Believe it or not, there is a shortage of stalking opportunities for some people in the Lowlands. Some people struggle to access such opportunities, even though we know that there are lots of deer in the Lowlands.

There are definitely opportunities, and I would say that focusing on the lowland context in the future might be a really good thing for the Common Ground Forum to do.

Richard Cooke: I have been involved in the Common Ground Forum since the outset. As I have said in this room a number of times with a number of other people around the table, because we do not agree with one another, the deer sector presents itself as being at war, which cannot be helpful for parliamentarians who are trying to develop policy and legislation.

In recognition of the fact that we all largely want the same things, albeit that we have differences on the detail, the spirit behind the Common Ground Forum was that we would bring together the people who are interested in policy at this level, who include those who are in this room. It has certainly been a great surprise to me how widely the message has been valued by people beyond the policy level.

09:45

Elena Whitham referred to the event that she attended, which was one of two; there is another one coming. What has been really extraordinary is how the deer management ground-level community has emerged, got involved in that process and found it rewarding. A lesson for us to learn is that, prior to that, the organisations that we represent did not feel that they were well represented by us.

With regard to the just transition, involving the people who actually do the deer management job has been eye opening for a lot of people, not least the Scottish Government teams that have attended the events, who have made it clear that they really value the new contact that they have had with those people. It is the beginning of a really important culture change. That is not to say that we will not disagree about things in the future, as we have done in the past, but we will do so while recognising the things that we can agree on and being respectful when we cannot agree.

The Convener: Lea, can you share with the committee your experience of how the forum has worked? As a practitioner on the ground, what is your view on that?

Lea MacNally: The forum has been a great success. We have held two events on estates, which were organised by the deer stalking community for deer stalkers. Those events gave those guys an opportunity to come along, voice opinions and ask questions, which they would normally be reluctant to do if they were in a bigger forum, such as the one that I am at today. Certainly, at the second event that we held on the estate, there was a panel of civil servants who took on board the points that were raised and the questions that were asked. It is possible that, previously, some of them did not know to speak to groups such as the SGA's deer group.

We have moved on a lot since then. We have had meetings with civil servants and the minister. I would like to think that yesterday's decision came as a result of the work that was done by the forum to get the civil servants to understand what the practitioners on the ground think.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful.

Donald Fraser: NatureScot has been heavily involved in supporting the Common Ground Forum work that Tom Turnbull and others have been involved in developing. I reiterate the point that it has opened up the communication flow on the big and significant issues across the piece by involving practitioners—stalkers on the ground. There are different views on some of the issues among people who undertake control for conservation and those who are involved in traditional sporting aspects. The forum has allowed discussion and engagement to take place on the policy issues that we are talking about. New legislation is coming up, and the forum has afforded such opportunities. It has been a really worthwhile exercise in that respect.

As Lea MacNally alluded, the engagement of senior civil servants in that process has been really helpful in getting grass-roots discussions going. When legislation is coming up, such events often lead to a polarisation of views on deer management, but the forum has shown that there is a lot of commonality in that area—a lot of people are coming from the same place and trying to get to the same objective. As Duncan Orr-Ewing

mentioned, the issue is the scale, the pace and the timeframe over which the process takes place, the resource that it involves and the value to it of people on the ground. The forum has been helpful in that regard, and it has brought people together on some of the bigger issues.

The Convener: Is the Common Ground model a good blueprint for co-development and co-design? There has been a lot of criticism, from not only NatureScot but Government agencies across the board, when previous approaches have not worked. Is the Common Ground model a good blueprint for success?

Donald Fraser: Yes. There are different ways of doing things, but, from a NatureScot perspective, the Common Ground model is absolutely in line with the "Shared Approach to Wildlife Management" principles and other species management projects that we are involved in. It is a model that we are looking to apply.

Tom Turnbull: I have already mentioned that the Common Ground Forum has been a step forward. If someone had told me five years ago that I would be a signatory to a letter to the minister, along with Duncan Orr-Ewing, that highlighted the values of venison and the need to support the venison sector, I would have laughed. However, the Common Ground Forum has enabled us to look at where there is common ground, and venison is a really important sector in that respect.

There is a drastic need for incentives and support for deer management, whether that is for—as Ross Ewing alluded—larders in the Lowlands or some of the work that is undertaken in the Highlands, such as habitat impact assessments, deer management, group counting and so on. At all levels, deer management is undertaken at a loss, and it receives considerably less support than any other rural sector. I think that those of us in the Common Ground Forum can agree that proper support needs to be provided for deer management.

Ross Ewing: One of the most striking commonalities that emerged from the forum was the united view that incentivisation is definitely the way forward. There is a lot of talk about carrot and stick when it comes to deer management. In the past, things have been heavily orientated towards the stick, and I think that the upcoming legislation will again be quite regulation orientated. That is not the right approach; it is certainly not the right approach in the Lowlands.

The Common Ground Forum was extremely valuable in that it highlighted that everybody feels that incentivisation needs to happen. There are a couple of pilot incentive schemes going on to the south of Loch Ness and to the north-east of Glasgow. Those schemes are a good start, but the reality is that the current incentivising schemes are nowhere near ambitious enough to meaningfully incentivise deer management. We need to properly incentivise people to cull more female deer—that is what needs to happen for us to take meaningful action. At the moment, the schemes that are out there are not nearly ambitious enough to deliver on the Government's objectives.

David Fleetwood: I have a couple of points to make. First, I come back to the challenge that Ms Whitham put to us about what the politicians can do to help. Several people have mentioned their support for the Common Ground Forum, and I have already said that collaboration is important in this context. I come back to the issue of pace and how we can translate the common ground that has been created by the co-signed letters that others have referred to into actions and specific outcomes that will help us to tackle some of the issues that have been identified.

Ross Ewing touched on the need for a balance between the stick and incentivisation. We think that there is an opportunity to create a blend of both. If we are moving in the direction that we have all signed up to in the Common Ground Forum, that set of sticks should be a backstop for areas where, for whatever reason, the agreed management is not happening, and the incentives should be supporting a direction of travel that we are all signed up to. Meetings such as this one and the bills to come can help us to move forward in that space.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: The backdrop to the deer Common Ground initiative is clearly the delivery of the recommendations of the independent deer working group report, as accepted by the Scottish Government. As everyone else has said, the Common Ground Forum has been very useful in enabling people to come together to discuss the issues. There is marked common ground around venison and incentives. When it comes to venison, what we all collectively want is for all the arms of Government that have some involvement with venison to get behind the sector. Venison is a healthy product. We currently import a lot of venison. The system for venison supply, and getting more communities involved with venison, is just not working—

The Convener: We will be covering that in another section.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: That is an area on which we could spend a fair bit of time.

Malcolm Combe: I have a quick general point—it is almost a soundbite—to make about law making. If you can get bottom-up rather than top-down law reform, you tend to be more likely to get something that will be accepted. There will be

moments of urgency when top-down law making is what you need to do, but if you have a process that allows for bottom-up law making, that is all the better.

The Convener: In our next theme, we will look specifically at the deer working group report.

Tim Eagle: Good morning, everyone. This is a broad question about the recommendations in the deer working group report, the Scottish Government's response and the timeline for implementation, and I would also like to hear your thoughts on deer management nature restoration orders. That should take up another couple of hours. [*Laughter*.]

Ross Ewing: Thank you for the question, Mr Eagle. I will not beat about the bush. There is a huge amount of trepidation about what is likely to feature in the bill that we think will land next month. I will paint a picture of what we think that it will look like.

You mentioned the deer management nature restoration order, which would, in essence, give the state, through NatureScot, the power to compel a landowner to cull deer based on something that might happen—namely, nature restoration or nature recovery. That is a departure from what has gone before, whereby intervention has predominantly been predicated on damage that deer have caused. This is charting new territory for regulation.

We think that what is really happening is that ministers are trying to make it easier for NatureScot to compel action. That is all well and good. Tom Turnbull and I would probably be united in saying that there are circumstances in which regulation is required, and we have supported regulation where it has been imposed.

However, the power, as it is proposed, is causing a lot of anxiety and anguish, because it will not be clear to people in what circumstances it could be imposed. You could feasibly say that the nature capacity of any part of Scotland could be recovered in some way, shape or form. Therefore, people are in the dark with regard to which places might be subject to such an order. The consultation mentioned the potential for people to be imprisoned for three months or to receive a fine of up to £40,000 if they do not comply, which are stark implications. Cost recovery also needs to be considered. The order needs to be looked at again. There are major legal difficulties with it. If it features in the bill, it will reverberate significantly.

I urge ministers, instead of charting new territory with a deer management nature restoration order, to look carefully at the existing powers and consider what works and what does not work. Section 8—of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1959 and the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996—which gives ministers the power to establish a control scheme, has never been used. It has existed for more than 60 years. Why are we creating a new power without first understanding the limitations of the powers that we currently have? It is absolutely absurd. We need to look carefully at that.

We make a plea to the committee. When you scrutinise the provisions—if a bill is introduced and that is what ends up happening—please look carefully at the DMNRO, if it features in the bill, and at our current powers. Why has NatureScot never used section 8? Why has section 7 always been there? Under the reforms that the Government is looking to make to provisions in section 10 of the 1996 act, which have been characterised in the past as emergency measures, they will no longer look like emergency measures and will be used much more frequently.

As I said before—this is my final point—regulation is one part of the equation; incentivisation needs to be the other part. Regulation absolutely has a place, but, for goodness' sake, we must not lose sight of incentivisation, which is the only thing that will result in meaningful action in this regard.

My final final point is that these powers will not work in the Lowlands of Scotland, because they will not complement the land ownership structures that exist there. It is no surprise that, in the past, the use of section 7 of the 1996 act has been confined to just two Lowland circumstances; section 10 has been used in the Lowlands once, I think. Such powers do not work well in a Lowland context, where we know that there are issues. The Lowlands need help, and these powers will not achieve the action that is required. We might be looking at a bill that is almost exclusively focused on the uplands, where collaboration is already happening relatively well, and I do not think that it will go particularly well.

10:00

Donald Fraser: On the wider point about the deer working group's report, there were 99 recommendations, 92 of which were accepted by the Scottish Government.

With regard to the detail on the update, we have taken ownership of that and a strategic deer board has been set up across Government agencies to ensure that that is managed and that there is a direction and leadership for it. Reporting on it is done quarterly, and updates on the 99 recommendations and the actions that are being taken forward are on the NatureScot website. To date, 22 of the recommendations have been delivered.

About half of the recommendations were associated with legislative change. There is a

natural environment bill coming, and we will talk about the detail of that. There is an action plan—a programme of work across Government agencies and the Government—to deliver on that, and we try to do that in an open and transparent way so that we are accountable. The NatureScot website has the detail on it.

With regard to recommendations around legislation, they ranged from specific technical detail to more substantive policy aspects of legislative change. The DMNRO aspect was raised. The principle goes back to the point that I raised at the start of the evidence session about the context in which we are operating of the biodiversity and climate crisis and the need to move beyond the prevention of damage to ensure that we can underpin the enhancement, improvement and restoration of natural processes in habitats. That is the principle behind it.

The regulated process that is set out starts with trying to get voluntary agreement, ratcheting up to schemes that involve enforcement. That is the principle that is being explored in the DMNRO concept. However, going back to Ross Ewing's point, the principles of better regulation are that it must be targeted and specific and that the context in which regulations are used must be set out in guidance. I am sure that that is the expectation.

The Convener: David Fleetwood, Tom Turnbull and Duncan Orr-Ewing want to come in, but I will give Ross Ewing the right to reply first.

Ross Ewing: I have a quick point, which comes back to the existing powers. With regard to the consultation, Donald Fraser just characterised the situation as damage having to have been caused before the state can intervene. That is not the case in the 1996 legislation, which refers to the damage that deer

"have caused, are causing, or are likely to cause".

The mechanism already exists for the state to intervene when deer might become a problem, yet that mechanism has never been used, and we need to understand why sections 7 and 8 of the 1996 act have not really been escalated on those grounds before. Strict reading of the legislation suggests that you can intervene before deer have caused damage. There is no need for this new draconian power, which people are quite worried about. We need to look at why the current powers do not work before we start to create new ones.

Donald Fraser: I will reply to that. Section 7 has been used for prevention on the basis of the wording, "likely to cause ... damage". Some cases have been escalated to the use of section 8; a current case has been escalated to section 8 and ministerial approval is being sought to go through that process. However, issues were raised in the deer working group report about the process and timescales for that, which are barriers to effective regulation.

David Fleetwood: I will pick up both of those points. Our sense is that sections 6 to 8, and particularly sections 7 and 8, have struggled to meet the objectives that we are collectively seeking. While they have been in place, whatever the limitations of their current use, we have seen significant increases in deer numbers. The switch that has been talked about from damage to the restoration of habitat is an important point to pick up. Reference to damage assumes that the baseline that we are setting for a good habitat is the baseline that we have at the moment, and we know that that is not the case. I go back to the statistics that I used earlier: 80 per cent of our peatlands are degraded and we have only 4 per cent cover of natural forestry. If we are setting the baseline there, that is a pretty low baseline.

On the point about carrot versus stick, I go back to the difference between the potential response that we might need—given the very high deer numbers at the moment and a climate and biodiversity emergency—and the management of a sustainable population over a longer period. You might see two different types of approach—first, to address the current overpopulation and, then, to support management of that sustainable population in the future—and you could see regulation sit more against the backdrop of the latter with more incentivisation to help us to get to that sustainable level in the first place.

Tom Turnbull: I would contest the success of some of the section 7 control agreements. Early last year, NatureScot made an announcement on the success of the section 7 agreements that had been implemented in Caenlochan and North Ross. It would appear that, in the competent authorities' views, the reductions in deer numbers are being achieved through section 7 agreements.

We do not contest that there should be some changes to the existing legislation. Ross Ewing has highlighted well the concern about DMNROs, which seem to have come from out of left field. There is very little clarity about what would be involved. There has been mention of incentives. However, a question about incentives for DMNROs was on the PDF of the consultation that was not in the online consultation form, so it was excluded from the consultation. That was frustrating because, if people are to be encouraged to get the numbers down to lower levels, there will need to be support and incentivisation for that.

We have big concerns about enhancement and restoration. They sound very good but they are subjective and they rely on evidence of damage, which would still have to be measured. The deer working group report alluded to the fact that it is a

challenge to demonstrate what can be achieved through enhancement. It states:

"However, there remains a significant degree of ambiguity that could give rise to challenges over what constitutes altering or enhancing the natural heritage and remedying damage to the natural heritage."

We need clarity. Bringing in new legislation would be unhelpful and would cause a great deal of concern in people, particularly in the Highlands, who are already trying to deliver deer management and to achieve targets.

I suspect that we can all agree that, at a time when we are trying to achieve those targets and when we are being encouraged to plant trees, things like the forestry grant scheme being cut and the budget being cut are not helpful. We need to look differently at how we do things, as was alluded to earlier. We need a little bit less stick and a little bit more carrot in deer management. Regulation is vital in some circumstances, and it has been successful in some circumstances recently, but new regulation coming out of the blue late in the day with little consultation is unhelpful, and it is also very unhelpful to voluntary collaboration.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I am afraid that there is a bit of a rosy glow being put around section 7 agreements. Recommendation 75 of the independent deer working group report says:

"the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee of the Scottish Parliament should consider holding a short inquiry into the use of section 7 Control Agreements"

at Caenlochan, but that has not happened so far. It feels to me as though NatureScot has not used its powers over the years largely because they are unworkable.

Proving prevention of damage has also proved to be extremely difficult, which is why we are moving to the suggested new approach of enhancement. All the tools in the toolbox should be directed towards enhancement. Sections 6 to 10 of the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 focus on the prevention of damage rather than enhancement, as do deer management nature restoration orders. If public money is being deployed in that arena, is it not right that it should be used for enhancement rather than damage prevention? As we heard earlier, deer management is one of the tools in the toolbox that delivers a wide range of public benefits, such as peatland restoration, woodland expansion, prevention of human damage through road traffic accidents, Lyme disease and so on, as well as enhancing biodiversity. It is one main action that the Scottish Government can take that delivers a range of cross-cutting rural benefits.

The Convener: Listening to that, I am filled with fear about who will decide where should be enhanced and where should not and to which sectors it should apply. Should it apply to foresters or people who are involved in agriculture, agritourism, tourism or infrastructure? If you are applying it to the deer sector, who decides who is the final arbitrator, and what should the levels be restored to?

Duncan Orr-Ewing: Other countries do it.

The Convener: It sounds as though we will open Pandora's box if we have to make decisions about enhancement.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: Other countries manage it. For example, in Norway, landowners are required to manage deer numbers to levels that do not compromise the public good.

Moving on to agricultural damage, in some states in Germany, if populations of deer and other herbivores, such as wild boar, are not managed sustainably, agricultural producers can claim compensation from hunting groups. Systems have been set up in other countries to deal with precisely that issue.

Graeme Prest: I will pick up on the points about enhancement, restoration and baselines. I will also pick up Duncan Orr-Ewing's comment about looking beyond Scotland. When it comes to biodiversity, Scotland is one of the most degraded countries in the world. We must bear that wider context in mind when we have such discussions.

With regard to the outcomes that we are trying to achieve, I always think about what we are trying to achieve at the bigger scale and work backwards. We have examples of success in Scotland. I have mentioned Cairngorms Connect, and there is also the Great Trossachs Forest, which is another partnership that involves us and Scottish Water. You can go and see real examples of success in drawing together, particularly in that case, native woodland regeneration and expansion, which is free beyond the deer management. You are not having to do tree planting, cultivation, fencing and all those costly operations. That shows that the potential of being a forester is tremendous, because you get—on a big scale—native woodland expansion in Scotland.

The main issue that hampers that is deer densities. You will all have seen photographs that show the difference between areas inside and outside the fence. There is lots of regeneration that comes in naturally as long as you have seed trees. If there are high browsing pressures outside the fence, you do not get that regeneration.

We have good evidence of what restored and enhanced habitats can be when you work at the landscape scale and bring browsing pressures

down. We need to take advantage of that and keep it in our minds.

The Convener: I had not noticed all the hands going up, but my clerk is keeping me right. I will go to Richard Cooke first and then to Ross Ewing, Donald Fraser and David Fleetwood.

Richard Cooke: I am sure that I can say without fear of contradiction that everybody in this room wants to see environmental improvement on a steady plane. Having been an observer of the countryside, I believe that that has been the case for some decades. Although the improvement is perhaps too slow, it is going in the right direction.

On the subject of incentives and penalties, if you were a farmer or a forester and were expected, under Government policy, to deliver restoration or enhancement, there would be grants available to help you to replace hedges, restore wetlands and put in conservation headlands. Why should the deer sector be different? As others have said, we need the carrots as well as the sticks.

Ross Ewing: The big problem with predicating this on nature restoration is that deer management interventions are not the only things that deliver nature restoration, so it is difficult to use it as the basis on which these powers are imposed. There is every chance that, even if you deliver the cull targets that are expected under a deer management nature restoration order, nature still might not be restored because, for example, there could be a whole load of sheep on the hill. There are issues there. It is interesting that, in the consultation paper, Scottish ministers acknowledge that problem but do not give a solution as to how they will deal with it. That is a really important point.

The second point is a boring, procedural one, but it is important. If I am a landowner and the order is imposed on me, there is a right to appeal to the Scottish Land Court, which is all well and good, except that it is difficult to appeal against something that might or might not happen. What do I have in my arsenal to say whether deer management will deliver nature restoration? It is a subjective, ambiguous thing.

10:15

If the power was imposed in the Lowland context, for example on the land of a farmer whose deer I shoot for him, the farmer would be given a cull target by NatureScot. The farmer would have a complement of recreational stalkers, but how is he to compel them to kill more deer without any of the incentives that Richard Cooke spoke about? That is just not going to happen.

All those issues, taken in the round, demonstrate why the deer working group did not recommend this. The proposal was introduced a year ago, during the period of the Bute house agreement. I commend the then minister Lorna Slater for a lot of the really good stuff that is in the consultation, because there are loads of really good ideas for modernising things, but I do not think that the proposal will help the deer management sector in Scotland in either the Lowlands or the Highlands. I think that it will hinder more than help and that it should be dropped.

Donald Fraser: To go back to a point that the convener made about opening Pandora's box, the whole principle of good regulation is that it should be proportionate, targeted and accountable. We will see what comes through in the bill, but the principle is that there should be grounds and clear criteria for where and when the power would be applied and in what circumstances. The public interest test would be the basis for that.

There is a good rationale and objective, and there is a clear, open and transparent way for land managers to decide where and when that kind of approach would be taken. There is an expectation that we would go through the voluntary principle, moving to regulation at some point if that was not achieved, but it is important to balance regulation and incentives.

David Fleetwood: I have a couple of points about the Lowland model. There has been a mention of the analogous context of south-west Norway, where the model of community hunting works pretty well.

My substantive point is about spending public money, which should be well targeted and done efficiently. There is a model that might help to illustrate the improvement of habitat. If we put a 50m buffer around all areas of native woodland, we would create an additional 320,000-ish hectares of native woodland for colonisation in Scotland. Fencing that, over a 10-year period, would cost the best part of £1.25 billion, but an equivalent 10-year period of managing deer to sustainable levels would cost roughly £500 million, which is £50 million a year less if you include the potential income from that.

I support the point that was made earlier about cuts to the forestry grant scheme, but that is an £80 million pot, so you might spend £25 million of that on deer control and have a significant impact on the deer problem that we have at the moment while creating 320,000 hectares of native forestry. That is something for us to consider regarding how best to target spending in that area.

Tom Turnbull: I contend that deer fencing is a vital tool for deer management and is absolutely necessary in some circumstances, particularly in areas where Sitka spruce plantations have been established and deer management is difficult. I

believe that deer fencing is absolutely vital if you are trying to protect native woodland in those areas. I also encourage people to look at the cost of employing full-time deer managers.

In the deer working group report, NatureScot estimates that the income every year from deer management is £15.8 million, against an expenditure of £36.8 million, which is a big difference. The private sector undertakes 80 per cent of deer management. A lot of money is being spent and I go back to the need for increasing support.

Donald Fraser raised the importance of voluntary deer management, which NatureScot sees as the way forward, particularly in the Highlands. We already have that voluntary structure in place, but the people who are voluntarily managing deer collaborate regularly with NatureScot. If the regulations that are put in place are too draconian, people will be less willing to collaborate voluntarily, which is a risk.

The Convener: We will move on to the final question on this theme.

Ariane Burgess: Some of you have started to touch on what I want to ask. I want to get into some of the detail on the recommendations, but I am very glad that we have started to talk about the carrot in a bit more detail; that is helpful. I remember having a conversation not that long ago with people who have been involved with the Common Ground Forum, who are knowledgeable and thoughtful about these things, about the idea that we could spend £15 million to save £640 million. If we invest in doing deer management properly, over time we could save a great deal for the public purse. Having conversations with the Government about that is difficult, because of budget constraints. David Fleetwood has touched on some specifics, but it would be good to hear from others what kind of things we need for the carrot. It has been proposed to me that, if we delivered a subsidy to estates for the venison price of at least £3 per kilogram of the venison that is produced over and above the annual total—

The Convener: Ariane, sorry, I will have to stop you—

Ariane Burgess: I think that this is important—

The Convener: We are coming to the venison market.

Ariane Burgess: It is all connected, convener, which is what people have been trying to get at.

The Convener: Could you bear it in mind that other members will be asking those specific questions?

Ariane Burgess: I understand that. I will not talk about venison—but we have to talk about the venison.

How can we get the Government to subsidise deer management and give us that carrot? What would that look like on an estate? I see that Ross Ewing is signalling that he would like to answer that.

There is another piece that is not connected to that, but I really want to understand why the Lowlands are different and why they need help. I feel as though that was not cleared up when it was raised earlier. We do not need to go too deeply into that but, for our future work, I want to understand why the Lowlands are being tackled differently.

I want to understand what kind of carrot we really need, because, as a committee, that is the kind of thing that we are interested in. I am hearing that we do not necessarily want strong measures, but we would want there to be more motivation for people. I have heard from people who work with Common Ground, including deer stalkers who work on the ground, about the cost and effort that is required to take one or two deer off a hill. I understand that you can only take two deer off a hill at a time. There is a lot to it that we need to understand.

Ross Ewing: The critical difference with the Lowlands is that full-time deer managers do not generally operate in a lowland context, although there are some exceptions on, for example, publicly owned land. Trained recreational deer stalkers generally manage farm land. They do not have the ability to commit themselves to managing deer full time in the same way as someone who is working on an upland estate. Similarly, quite often, they are paying for the privilege in the form of an annual let.

I also briefly touched on the infrastructure. Recreational deer stalkers would not necessarily have the same access as a large estate to a comprehensive deer larder facility. Quite a lot of their own time and money would be involved in undertaking deer management which, ultimately, would result in fewer deer being culled than you might expect from a full-time deer manager on an upland estate.

On incentives, I think that two things need to happen urgently. First, there should be an incentive per kilogram of venison, particularly for female deer, because we know that that is the principal issue. Many of the current incentive schemes are predicated on having met an average annual cull over the past five years, and the incentive would be triggered once 100 per cent of that target was met. I think that we need to do better than that and apply an incentive wholesale

for every beast that goes through the door if a female deer has been culled.

My second point, which I have already touched on and which is probably more specific to the Lowlands context, is that a network of community deer larders and community chillers in Scotland's Lowlands would allow more people to be able to manage deer and, ultimately, put them into the food chain. At the moment, we do not really have that. There are some good facilities, such as the FLS larder and other community larders that are run by a number of organisations, but they are few and far between. We could do with greater investment in them.

It is worth putting it on the record that, last year, there was talk of having a fund for investment in that kind of infrastructure for the first time. That was dashed at the last minute due to budgetary constraints, which is understandable. I know that that was a real disappointment for those of us in the sector who have been lobbying quite hard for many years for greater investment in community infrastructure, because I think that that could genuinely make a real difference in the Lowlands context.

Richard Cooke: I was the chair of Lowland Deer Network Scotland when it was set up, in 2011, and I had that role until 2018, so I have a bit of an insight into the murky world of deer management in the Lowlands, which, as Ross has said, is very different from what happens in the Highlands, where there is a structured approach.

I will concentrate on the things that we do not know. We do not know who is doing it, except that we know that it is largely a recreational activity. We do not know how many deer there are. We do not know what the cull is. NatureScot does not get statutory returns from the people who are doing the culling. The only record that we have is the firearms register of people who own rifles that are suitable for managing deer.

The deer working group has identified the lack of knowledge as a serious problem that needs to be addressed in the areas of Scotland outwith the Highlands. It is pleasing to hear that there is a general recognition that, if anything, the problem in the Lowlands is greater than it is in the Highlands. One would hope that the forthcoming legislation will find ways to deal with that, but the absolute priority is getting information about where the deer are, what the species are, who is doing the culling and where the hotspots are. We will then have a basis for a much more structured approach to management.

Donald Fraser: We recognise that deer management is generally undertaken at a cost and the only way to offset that cost is through some kind of sporting income or venison sales. There needs to be an understanding that deer management is an expensive, time-consuming and resource-intensive activity that needs to take place.

The nature of the support that is provided is the key thing. Venison, which we have not touched on too much although we will come to it, is one way of looking at that. Other pilot schemes are looking at how to support the deer culling that is taking place—Ross Ewing mentioned them earlier. There are the NatureScot schemes in south Loch Ness and the central belt. There is also a Cairngorms national park scheme that is running to test the approaches to see what incentives can be delivered to boost and support the numbers of deer that are culled to deliver on those outcomes.

Infrastructure is also different in the Lowlands. Generally, in the Highlands, the uplands and the estates that are involved have good infrastructure—larders and other facilities—to support the culling. In the Lowlands, there generally is not the infrastructure. We are just about to launch a scheme to support that, albeit that it is constrained because of the funding that is available for it. We will try to test that in the next week or two.

The issue is the scale of all of that, as well as the sums of money that we are talking about—the £15 million. Those are not amounts that we operate in. There are different aspects to the schemes that NatureScot is running, but if we are serious about deer management, it is integration with the wider future rural support mechanism and its larger amounts of funding that is required. We know that wider biodiversity climate benefits can be delivered through deer management, which is one of the key tools to do that, but it is about more integration with the other, more holistic approach to land management and support.

Ariane Burgess: Can you give a bit more detail on the pilots? It would be helpful to understand what is going on there.

Donald Fraser: There are three pilots. Essentially, they are looking to incentivise the culling of more deer than have been taken previously. We set a baseline of the number of deer that were taken, largely by the private sector and the estates and properties involved. Where they have agreed to increase that cull, we will pay £70 to support that, on the basis of the number of deer shot.

Ariane Burgess: Is that £70 per deer shot?

Donald Fraser: That is right, yes, and it is targeted at female deer, because, as was alluded to earlier, that is how we control populations most successfully.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I agree with Donald Fraser's point about the better integration of deer management into rural development schemes. The incentives that we are talking about here also need to be given a fair wind. We are only in year 1 and I gather that the uptake has not been great so far, but the history of these things shows that the uptake will probably develop over the years.

The other important point is that we are not necessarily talking about new money. For example, in most other European countries, woodland expansion is delivered through natural regeneration through herbivore management, rather than through planting. Looking at the forestry grant scheme, the current expenditure on deer fencing that we talked about earlier is between £10 million and £15 million per annum. Would those moneys be better directed, for example, at enhancing stalking effort? We need to look at where the existing funding is going and to get better integration.

10:30

We are talking about increasing the cull target by 50,000 animals per annum in order to bring the deer population down from the 1 million animals that we have now and get us on a downward trajectory. However, we really need somewhere for those carcases to go, and that has been lacking when it comes to venison. We think that there is a big market out there, but we are not exploiting it properly. We need to involve other arms of Government, such as Scotland Food & Drink and Quality Meat Scotland, whose assets could be brought to the table.

The Convener: I ask everyone to be brief.

David Fleetwood: Duncan Orr-Ewing has spoken to one of my points on the forestry grant scheme, and I reiterate that we could spend as little as £25 million of that to significantly increase the level of native forest cover and address the current population of deer.

I also seek to broaden the discussion out a little. We should distinguish between the initial Government support that might be needed to address the problem that we have, and longer-term sustainability and viability going forward.

To pick up a little on Donald Fraser's point about how we integrate that into wider land management practice going forward, I will give a couple of stats on economic contribution. Shooting estates create about 6 per cent of the direct jobs and 13 per cent of the indirect jobs that the forestry sector creates. That is a £43 million contribution compared with a £1 billion contribution. We can begin to think about how we bring together a more integrated management between traditional stalking and some forestry that takes us towards longer-term sustainability and drives the revenue that we need in order to maintain those sustainable levels going forward.

Tom Turnbull: I will be brief. As well as incentives, which will be vital, we need to consider some of the barriers to change that are in place. Anyone who has applied for the agri-environment climate scheme, FGS or peatland restoration and nature restoration funds will know that there is an element of application fatigue out there. It is expensive, time consuming and difficult, and it can take months—if not years—to get into some of those schemes. Once you have done that a couple of times, you are shy of doing it again.

Lea MacNally: The SGA proposed an urban deer pilot, which is still on the table if folk or the Government are interested. It would cost in the region of £10,000 to set up a larder. Ten qualified stalkers—level 1 or 2—would share that larder, and they reckon that they could cull 100 deer per year. We think that that is cost effective for the taxpayer, and that offer is still on the table.

Richard Cooke: The proposal to the former minister for a venison support scheme was signed jointly, under the auspices of the Common Ground Forum, by Duncan Orr-Ewing, Tom Turnbull and me, as Scottish Venison Association chairman. We were pleased that it was well received. It was quickly made known to us that there was no money for a national scheme. What we proposed was a subsidy of £1 a kilo for all females and juveniles across the board, which would have been just about enough to make deer management break even.

Having said that, we welcomed the pilot schemes because they set a precedent for Government support for deer management, which had never happened before. However, we were critical of the design of the schemes, which were based on paying for the uplift in the cull on a headage basis. In the case of the Cairngorms scheme, the cull was known, so that was possible.

In the case of the other two schemes, as I said before, we do not know how many deer there are, who is culling them or what the cull is, and there is no baseline, so it is impossible to calculate the uplift. If, as is likely, a scheme were to be introduced on the basis of headage, the most practical way of doing that—as Scottish Venison's chair, I hate to say so—would be, at least for an initial period, covering the whole of the female cull and not just the uplift, because we have no means of measuring it. It is just far too difficult to try to create a complicated formula that deals with that.

The Convener: Before we move on to our next theme, we will have a short break. However, first, I invite brief comments on progress on the working group's recommendation on data and research,

which you touched on in your last responses. Are we making enough progress on collecting data and conducting research on which to base our future policies?

Ross Ewing: Progress could be better, convener. However, I commend NatureScot for the work that it has put into the app that it is developing. Donald Fraser will be able to say more about that. It could be a bit of a game changer as far as record keeping is concerned.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: FLS led the way on data collection with its wildlife management dashboard, which is a very good system. As Ross Ewing said, latterly, NatureScot has developed a deer data collection app.

It is absolutely critical that we have good deer population data to inform management approaches and the targeting of effort. Most other similar countries that have effective deer management structures in place rely on such data to a large extent, to inform them about where culling effort should be concentrated. We need to see investment in gathering such data. However, we also need to have one system that covers the whole of Scotland. We cannot have both an FLS system and a NatureScot one. It is to be hoped that the two systems can talk to each other.

The Convener: Three people want to contribute. We are now only weeks away from considering the legislation on deer management. Do we have sufficient data and research to back up our views, so that we can be confident that we will make the right decisions? It would be helpful if you could cover that in your responses.

Donald Fraser: That aspect is included in existing updates. We have done a lot of work on online licensing for deer management, which was one of the recommendations from the deer working group's report. The authorisations aspect has been delivered for the cull return system, which has been a pretty significant development.

As was mentioned earlier, we are looking to extend our reach on cull returns. So far, our primary focus has been on about 4,000 upland properties. This spring, we hope to extend that, with links to the rural payments and inspections division system, so that it will have a much broader reach and cover around 18,000 properties throughout Scotland, picking up both upland and lowland deer.

The app that Duncan Orr-Ewing mentioned is being piloted as part of the schemes that we have discussed so, again, the ability to use technology to obtain better data and information already exists.

My final point is about the wider technology that is being developed. The use of drones, satellites and technology for studying habitats is really coming on stream. The ability to use such data and technology is adapting and developing all the time. We are getting better information. As is the case with most environmental, nature and wildlife issues, I suspect that we will never have perfect information. However, we already have a good basis for discussing the legislation that is coming through. There will always be gaps; the solution is to understand what they are and then work to fill them.

Graeme Prest: I thank Duncan Orr-Ewing for mentioning our wildlife management system, which has been established for several years now and is based on various data sources. It is used for population modelling and the subsequent setting of culls. We are always happy to share such information, so following the meeting we could share that with the committee.

We now have a lot of experience and knowledge. We manage, say, 9 per cent of Scotland's land area. Only around two thirds of that is forested, which means that we manage a lot of hill land, including a pretty good, diverse range of habitats. We would be happy to share our knowledge and experience, which cover a big chunk of Scotland, if that would be helpful to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you.

Lea MacNally: Could I ask a question? Does any council in Scotland have a deer management plan?

Donald Fraser: A number of councils have deer management plans. I do not know the number off the top of my head, but I think that about a dozen have such plans and actively manage deer. Certainly, not all local authorities do so.

The Convener: That is an interesting avenue for the committee to explore.

Tom Turnbull: I will back up what Duncan Orr-Ewing said. Having data is vital. Many of us in the Highlands are gathering data through habitat impact assessments, woodland assessments, population studies and so on. Having support on disseminating such data, putting it into maps and utilising it properly would be helpful. Not all deer managers are computer whizzes, so having help with that would be useful. Although NatureScot offers support on data dissemination, in the future it would be good to have more of that.

The Convener: That is a good point for us to take a short break. I suspend the meeting until 10:50.

10:40
Meeting suspended.

10:51

On resuming—

The Convener: We will continue our discussion of the deer working group's report, and we will move on to the theme of the rural economy and the venison sector.

Rhoda Grant: We have touched on the venison sector during today's discussion, which is not surprising. People have talked about the costs of deer management and about importing venison, and it seems to me that we are missing a trick. We could use the venison—it is incredibly wasteful not to use it. How can we make sure that the venison is used and gets on to the market in a way that offsets some of the costs without wasting it? It is obscene that a good, healthy source of protein is being left to rot on a hill.

Richard Cooke: That question is music to my ears.

Rhoda Grant: I was not going to sing. [*Laughter.*]

Richard Cooke: To pull back a bit from the question, venison sales are, as was referred to earlier, the only income stream for deer management, with the exception of the hunting element to supplement the income—or to ameliorate the loss, so to speak. It is a smallish percentage of the available income—probably 20 per cent.

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation did a study about two years ago in which it calculated that the cost of producing a kilogram of venison from culling a red deer was £2.58. The price that we typically get per kilogram is between £1.50 and £2, and that price applies to all species of deer. The cost of culling a roe deer, which is a smaller deer, in the Lowlands is actually over £7; the conversion costs are very much the same.

The net cost of culling deer, which falls entirely on the producer and is not relieved at present by any subsidy, is considerable. In other words, we are being encouraged to increase our cull, but that just increases the shortfall in the deer management business, because every deer that is culled is an extra cost. We have talked about incentives, but that is a disincentive to increase culling. I am not saying that the disincentive prevents culling in many cases, because people do the job where there needs to be population management. However, the disincentive certainly does not have a positive effect.

Rhoda Grant mentioned imports of venison. Currently, the overall output of Scottish venison is something like 3,500 tonnes. It is true that we import about 1,000 tonnes and that we export about 1,000 tonnes. That sounds a bit half baked, but there are reasons for that. Our exports tend to go to Europe, where people like the stronger-tasting venison that is produced around the time of the rut, which is when most of the males are culled.

What we bring in is brought by the processors—largely to meet market demand. Seasonality does not work for them when they are dealing with multiple retailers, so they want venison throughout the year. In order to have continuity of supply, New Zealand venison, for example, is brought in to meet the main processors' on-going orders. That is why there is a rough trade-off between what comes in and what goes out.

If we shoot an extra 50,000 deer, as Nature Scotland is pressing us to do—the cull size is increasing all the time—that would add 1,000 to 2,000 tonnes of venison to the mix. Therefore, it is essential that we have markets that will take that venison. To compare venison with other red meats, the first point is the quality difference, because it outperforms all other red meats when it comes to healthy eating. However, if you set it against beef, cattle and white meat, it makes up a very small element of meat production. It is a small industry that is spread very widely across Scotland, and the infrastructural aspects are a big cost that other industries do not bear.

It has been said before, but deer management is basically a net-cost exercise, and that point is the absolute core of the venison trade. Scottish Venison has a big job to do if it is to grow the market and close the gap in relation to value over the coming years, which is a really important aspect of increasing the cull size. The whole deer sector is linked, and the deer economy is closely related to the value of venison.

I cannot remember what the other part of your question was.

Rhoda Grant: What do we need to do?

Richard Cooke: At the moment, the issue is money. We have talked a lot about incentives and penalties, so I will not go over all that again, but we need to find a way to introduce money into the system. If you were to subsidise venison, that would send out a very good signal about the product's quality and would help with marketing it. That would trickle down through the whole deer sector—right down to the blacksmiths who shoe the ponies that take the deer off the hill. It would lift the whole sector.

With regard to the just transition, such subsidies would cost relatively small amounts of money. In our joint proposal with the ADMG and Scottish Environment LINK to the Scottish Government, we calculate that the cost of subsidising venison across all females of all species, all over Scotland, would be £3 million to £5 million per annum,

which, compared to the subsidy that goes into agricultural production, is so small as to be just a comma in a sentence. The money was not available at the time, although the argument was accepted. The issue is the money.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I agree with Richard. We have a really healthy food product, provided that the deer are shot with non-lead ammunition, and we are well on the way to most deer being shot that way in Scotland. However, there needs to be a total ban on lead.

We should also look at public procurement. There are already some relatively small-scale examples of deer venison being provided to schools, hospitals and so on, but that area needs to be carefully looked at.

Another thing to highlight is community venison initiatives. At the moment, two main venison providers—Highland Game and Ardgay Game—take most of the carcases in Scotland. There is a genuine appetite for smaller-scale community-type providers but, at the moment, there are quite significant barriers to setting up community initiatives.

In other countries, community venison provision is quite routine—in Norway, for example. We have discussed the idea with Food Standards Scotland, which is looking into some such things, but the issue needs far greater scrutiny. In Norway, individual hunters, who often work in quite remote areas, as some of our stalkers do, are allowed to butcher animals on the hill, take the best cuts of meat, transport them off the hill and, if they are accredited, provide them to friends, relatives and local folk. They cannot supply to supermarkets and so on. That is precisely the kind of arrangement that we need to look at.

11:00

David Fleetwood: I will be brief because others have covered the ground. I agree with Duncan Orr-Ewing about lead shot.

To add a bit of colour, I note that examples of community initiatives that have been covered in the press this week include schools in Argyll and Bute, on Islay and Jura, putting venison on school dinner menus, and the work that Cairngorms Connect has been doing to build skills in local communities to manage and butcher venison. Those things are good, and if we are looking to significantly reduce deer numbers, there is a significant opportunity ahead of us to develop those initiatives and others.

I have to sound one note of caution—perhaps I am channelling a former life. On an overall market subsidy rate, we would need to think carefully about how that would be compliant with legislation such as the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and how we would manage such requirements. However, we would strongly support any measures to get more venison into local supply chains.

Ross Ewing: In response to your question, Ms Grant, I point out that there is a key issue that is not a constant problem but that emerges at some points in the year. At the back end of the stag season this year, there were issues with processing capacity in some parts of Scotland. We are aware, for example, of an estate that lost a full week of hind stalking—that is, managing the females—as a result of the backlog that was being processed at the end of the stag season. There are people who are willing to process venison in Scotland—some of them have been mentioned already—but there is a capacity issue that emerges at some points in the year, which it would be helpful to address.

In the Lowlands context, it is fair to say that it is difficult for recreational stalkers to put venison into the food chain. The price per kilogram has been mentioned; it is not exactly fantastic. A lot of people spend their own time and money on putting venison into the food chain, although they are not being paid.

There is a significant cost to getting into stalking, even if you want to do it recreationally. You have to get a firearms certificate, which, as a result of recent changes, costs near enough £200. Then you have to buy a rifle—that is £1,000; a scope—that is another £1,000; a moderator, and so on. There are costs for entering the sector in the first place. It is worth considering the matter in the round.

I support the point that was made about local supply chains. It would be fantastic if we could find more ways for local venison to be consumed locally. That is hard to do, particularly in a Lowlands context. Investment in community facilities would be helpful. Then, we could try to join them up with more local businesses to sell the venison.

The Convener: I am sure that you are looking forward to the good food nation plan—

Ross Ewing: Yes.

The Convener: —and to when the Government might have to abide by its recommendations. Those are coming soon, to a committee near you.

Ross Ewing: That is great.

Donald Fraser: NatureScot's perspective is that we have an interest in Scottish venison and are keen to support it. Other public bodies, such as Scotland Food & Drink and Food Standards Scotland, are involved with venison specifically.

We see the venison market as being an inherent part of supporting effective deer management. We recognise the benefits of the income stream and, more widely, of good nutritional products and healthy food getting on plates.

We are keen to support the schemes that are starting, although, as David Fleetwood alluded, there are issues with market intervention. It is a relatively small market, so adding £1 to the price of a kilogram of venison would create issues that would need to be worked through in order to decide whether that intervention would be possible.

There are pilot schemes to help the supply of venison come on to the market through producers' work on the ground. That is where we have put our support. That is where our locus is and where there is a rationale for our input.

To move on from the resource cost, I point out that there are significant benefits and added value to moving from production through culling to production to supply venison and generate income from it. That would require investment in existing skills, training, infrastructure and equipment. There is growth, at a local level, in people supplying venison and benefiting the community and their own properties. It is a growing area, but we will still be reliant on big game dealers for the biggest chunk of throughput that comes from growth.

Tom Turnbull: The problem is that venison has historically been considered a luxury product. We need to get our heads around that. I support those who have suggested getting venison into schools and hospitals, which members and ministers should be able to help with.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that venison should be a high-quality product and that food safety should be at a premium. I will never forget someone from Food Standards Scotland standing up at an ADMG annual general meeting and saying that, if there was an E coli outbreak in the venison industry, it would be shut down overnight. We must ensure that there are quality controls. High-quality wild Scottish venison should be encouraged.

At the risk of hyping Scottish Venison too much, I note that it is run on a shoestring budget, so more funding to support Richard Cooke and the association would be extremely helpful. Our members have doubled their funding to Scottish Venison this year. The body is largely supported by the industry. Although the Scottish Government was extremely generous and very helpful to the venison sector during Covid, continued support for Scottish Venison and marketing would be helpful.

Graeme Prest: To go back to Richard Cooke's points, the net cost to FLS for deer management is £9.4 million each year, which is not insignificant and does not include the cost of damage to trees. We will spend a bit of time on that this year to try to get a better understanding of the probably far bigger cost of replanting.

I have mentioned some examples already and can give a few more. Most of our venison goes to Highland Game, which is based in Dundee. That was decided through a tender exercise. It is an interesting operation, because it is not a game dealer. Christian Nissen, the managing director, describes it as food processing that use every single bit of the carcase. I will do a little bit of promotion, because we can all do our bit. Products include sausages that are sold by the main supermarket chains and have our logo on them. Christian is doing a lot of good work and is a big player in Scotland, but there is potential to grow the sector.

As others have said, we need work at that sort of scale, but we also need the community end of things. Cairngorms Connect holds the "Hill to Grill" event with local people, to which 800 people turned up this year, which was pretty incredible. We took a stag—a beast from the hill—through butchering and the whole process. That goes into the local supply chain, where demand is outstripping supply. There are some really good examples around Scotland; I have mentioned a couple. We can take advantage of those and find out why they are working and how we can support and encourage other initiatives across Scotland. There are some great examples.

I can also mention an example of public sector procurement in England. NHS Blackburn with Darwen, in Lancashire, has worked with our counterparts in Forestry England to get venison into hospitals. That has been really well promoted.

My final example is from last Saturday's *Press and Journal*, which had a front-page story about deer management and the value of venison to Cairngorms Connect. The story covered things that others have mentioned, such as the fact that venison is healthy and beneficial to the environment.

There are good examples, and it would be good to draw from them and expand that work across Scotland.

Richard Cooke: I will make a few points that I did not make earlier. Some green shoots have been referred to, but the industry is still fragile. I would characterise it as being two-tier. The main dealers that have been mentioned are supplying multiple retailers and wholesalers at the commodity end of the industry, but there is also clear demand for local production of venison. In addition to the schemes that we spoke about earlier, we have three pilot community larder

schemes—two are already operating and one is just about to start.

The cry that one constantly hears is, “I love venison, but I can’t get it. Where do you get it?” I heard that from the previous minister when we were having a venison meeting. She lived in Edinburgh. If there is a perceived problem with the market, we have to address that, so we are addressing the infrastructure and outlet issue. We are going through a professionalisation process. Scottish Venison—which has substantially raised its funding, as it needed to, as well as its aspirations and its engagement with other organisations—is merging with the quality assurance scheme. A lot of venison is still produced that is not quality assured, but we are making progress on that because it needs to be able to compete with other red meat and food products.

Due to pressure from the various organisations around this table, reference to venison production in terms of Scottish food output was included in the recently passed Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 at stage 2. That was an important step and a small foot in the door.

England is important. If you think that there is a deer problem in Scotland, as some people say there is, you have only to look south of the border, where it is out of control in many areas. There are videos on YouTube of thousands of fallow deer trampling fields. The English have a real problem and they are miles behind where we are. They are also miles behind where we are in thinking about the markets, but Forestry England is taking a lead on that. That is important to us, because we need to grow the market sufficiently not only to take an increase in culling in Scotland but to take account of the much-increased supply that will come from England and Wales.

The Convener: That is interesting.

Malcolm Combe: We have heard a couple of examples: I will offer a couple of anecdotes.

My first is about probably the only at-scale interaction that I know of in relation to venison in the urban Lowlands. It relates to the GalGael Trust in Govan—which someone from the SGA might be able to speak to, as well—and deer management near the M8. The trust has been able to use venison for its community meals, for example, which is interesting. Such an approach could be spun out. Obviously, there are issues about getting the venison into the food chain.

My second anecdote is possibly not helpful—it is random. Two years ago, I was at a cricket test match between India and Australia at the Oval. All the burgers on the stalls were venison, because of the Indian community’s attitude to beef. There is a market there for you, perhaps.

Beatrice Wishart: I understand that the Scottish Government does not currently collate data on the number of deer that go to venison dealers. Would it be beneficial to gather that information? If so, what would be the best methods of gathering it?

Donald Fraser: As it stands, a venison dealer licence is required for that. There are reporting aspects to the licence that can come through under the current legislation.

The issue that we have in collecting and managing that data is in understanding what comes from the producer—where the deer is shot. After being shot, the carcase goes into a venison dealer licence environment, the requirements of which are to record where that carcase goes all the way through the process. However, there are issues with the most effective way of gathering that information. The current legislative set-up is not fit for purpose and is not an efficient way of doing that. There might be benefits to examining how that can be done, but, as it currently stands, a venison dealer licence is probably not the best way of doing it.

Ross Ewing: Although a lot—probably the majority—of beasts that are shot go through a VDL of some form, some people decide to take one for the pot and will process and eat venison themselves. If we are talking about data, it is important that those carcases do not get overlooked, because a number of people do that. If we are talking about data collection more broadly, it is important to encapsulate that as well, because we ought to acknowledge that people consume one for the pot.

11:15

Richard Cooke: Last year’s consultation paper suggested that the venison dealer licence might be suspended, but the Scottish Venison Association’s view is that that should not happen until there is an adequate system to replace it. As we have discussed, data is very important in understanding what we are dealing with in deer management.

Elena Whitham: I am interested in exploring the impact of the evolving management of deer on rural economies and jobs. I am also interested in exploring policy coherence and how we make sure that we read across policies, because we do not always do that as effectively as we should. To take the example of venison, which we have just discussed, when we think about the community wealth-building models, the anchor institutions, the local supply chains and the reduction of food miles, we should also think about alleviating food poverty.

Malcolm Combe gave a very good example involving community meals. We think about local skills, traditional ways of life, community regeneration, community cohesion and making sure that communities exist beyond the here and now and into the future, but how can we ensure that we, as parliamentarians scrutinising policy, get deer management right and get jobs in that space for the linked rural economies?

I know that there is a lot there to think about, but who wants to kick us off?

Tom Turnbull: There is a lot in that question.

Elena Whitham: Sorry.

Tom Turnbull: You do not have to apologise—it is a very pertinent question. The rural sector has real concerns about jobs, and deer managers have real concerns about what the future holds, particularly in the short to medium term. If we establish all the habitat that we aspire to, the deer problem now will be a small problem compared to what it might be in the future.

In the short to medium term, many deer managers in the Highlands are fearful about what enforced reductions in deer management might mean for their jobs. Those fears have, so far, not been allayed by anything that we have heard in the consultation. When you combine that with other changes that are taking place in the rural sector, those fears are ratcheted up even further.

I am sure that Lea MacNally, through his work in the Common Ground Forum and the SGA, could talk about that much more eloquently than I can. On policy, it seems to us, from the outside, that things are managed in Government in silos and there is not enough conversation between those silos—there needs to be more.

Richard Cooke: It is a very good question, and I agree with everything you say. Donald Fraser referred to the fact that we will shortly get the agricultural return requiring deer culls to be registered. That co-operation, for which we have been pressing for years, has been urgently needed and will be hugely helpful.

As I also mentioned, venison getting into the agriculture bill was a huge step forward. There is a long way to go, but we are pointing in the right direction.

Lea MacNally: We reckon that, if you reduce deer numbers to five per square kilometre, you will not have sustainable employment on estates, although I do not think that that will happen. As has been said, there are grave concerns among the stalking fraternity.

We also have to consider communities and community schools. If there are no jobs, there are no communities and the whole thing is gone. If there are no full-time jobs, there could be the scenario of a contractor coming in to cover an area. It is possible that one contractor could cover perhaps 10 estates on a moving, rotational basis, and there would obviously be nothing in that for the community. He would come in to an estate, shoot there and then move on to somewhere else, and it would just go round in a circle. We would have lost the jobs and the skills of the indigenous folk, as somebody said earlier. I do not know whether we are allowed to call them indigenous, but I think we are indigenous. We would lose everything—all those things.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I can speak only from the NGO land management perspective, but, generally, across the NGO estate in Scotland, we are shooting more deer than we have ever shot and at more sites, to reduce numbers. For example, we have been involved in deer management at RSPB Scotland's Abernethy site in the Cairngorms national park for more than 20 years, and we have reduced the numbers there quite significantly. We are now part of the Cairngorms Connect project that Graeme Prest mentioned, and, last year, we took part in the biggest deer cull that we have ever taken part in on that ground, largely because there is still a huge population out there and we are getting deer incursions from neighbouring ground.

Our experience, in general, is that we are employing more people to do deer stalking than we have ever done. Remember that, once we get deer populations down, we will still have to maintain those populations, and that will create jobs, most of which will be in rural communities.

We have heard already that, in order to get the deer population down from the current population of more than 1 million animals, we need an enhanced cull of over 50,000 animals a year to get us on a downward trajectory. To my reading, that will mean more jobs in local communities, but we need people who are upskilled, trained and able to do those jobs.

Ross Ewing: I will pick up on Lea MacNally's point. We should not underestimate the importance of deer stalking in rural communities. Estates are increasingly diversified, but that should not nullify the extent to which deer stalking is an important income stream for some estates in balancing their books. We have heard about how loss making it can be, but it provides income nevertheless.

An estate's ability to bring international visitors to Scotland to embark on country sports tourism and deer stalking is important for the rural economy more broadly. Those visitors generally spend quite a lot of money in hotels, restaurants, gunsmiths and so on. That is an important point.

We are also experiencing a significant lack of new entrants—professional wildlife managers—coming into the sector. A game and wildlife management skills group has been set up and will meet for the first time next week, with support from Lantra, which is fantastic. We are starting to see some of the political pressures that have been described today having an impact on the ability of people to come into the sector. It is not as appealing as it once was, however—we need to be cognisant of that.

On the need for joined-up policy, I go back to the carrot and stick. I totally respect the Scottish Government's intention to achieve nature restoration and nature recovery, but deer management alone will not achieve that. We need to take a joined-up approach that looks at the impact of all herbivores, not deer in isolation. Unfortunately, the coming legislation looks and feels as though it will deal with deer in isolation, and deer are only one part of an increasingly complex jigsaw.

Donald Fraser: I will pick up on the policy cohesion point. We are a Government agency, and I mentioned earlier the deer management strategic board that has been formed to oversee the work. In my experience, that has brought the public policy areas together in better understanding deer and not treating the issue in a species-specific silo. We are looking at the issue in the wider context of agriculture and forestry, and the national parks are involved in it, too. We are not looking specifically at whether it is Scotland's biodiversity strategy, land reform or other aspects that are being taken forward.

There is a recognition that a lot is happening in the rural sector with transitional land use and the climate and biodiversity priorities. That cohesion is happening, and there is an understanding of that. Linking the plethora of areas that deer fit into is a challenge, but it is where we want to be in making sure that there is a more holistic look at deer management and that it is not treated in isolation.

On the jobs front, jobs are important in the context of our discussion about incentives. We want to support jobs and the people on the ground who are doing the deer management. That support needs to filter down into employment, so that we can support rural communities and the rural economy. We need to make sure that the support is targeted in such a way that it filters down.

The point has been made that a lot of the focus has been on reducing deer numbers. That comes at a cost, but there is also a return from it. Our challenge is that, where there are low numbers of deer, we need to maintain and sustain that in the long term. The effort that is required to maintain the numbers is as much as, if not more than, the return, so we need to make sure that we continue with that. That is where the challenge is in terms of getting income streams and support—not just public support, but also, more widely, the type of green-economy money that is coming through—and to make sure that we can deliver.

The Convener: I am very conscious of the time, but I am also conscious that a number of people want to respond to some of the comments that have been made. Forgive me for jumping around a bit, but I think that Tom Turnbull wants to respond to a comment that Donald Fraser made, and then Tim Eagle has a supplementary question.

Tom Turnbull: I just want to mention the deer management strategic board. There has been little direct interaction between the industry and the board, so it would be useful to have some deer management representatives on that board and to have a bit more transparency about what happens in the meetings.

Tim Eagle: Tom has just beaten me to my question, which was about the deer management strategic board. When the board was mentioned, Tom and Duncan Orr-Ewing turned and smiled at each other. I know that Donald Fraser sits on the board—it is only representatives of Government agencies who sit on it. For clarity on Tom's point, how effective is the flow of information from the practitioner level to discussions at the strategic level?

Donald Fraser: As I said, the board is there to make sure that the recommendations of the deer working group are delivered and that the action plan, which, as was mentioned earlier, is on the NatureScot website, is being delivered in an open and transparent way. The reporting mechanism is through the deer management round table, but after every strategic deer board meeting we also meet with Tom Turnbull and Duncan Orr-Ewing, as representatives of the key organisations that have an interest in the work that is being developed.

It is a public agency board that exists to manage and oversee the work that is done on the action plan. However, I take the point—and I am sure that the strategic deer board will take the point—that we need to make sure that there is openness and transparency.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: I am on the same page as Tom Turnbull. The updates from the strategic deer board are helpful, but that is not the same as being in the room. The minutes, frankly, need to be significantly improved, as you can tell little or nothing from them about what went on. I make a plea for better minutes and for us to be a bit more involved, along with Tom and the Association of Deer Management Groups.

Tom Turnbull: I agree.

David Fleetwood: On the economic point, I will dig into the viability of the current system. The statistics suggest that 80 per cent of current culling is carried out at a net loss. Therefore, notwithstanding any action that we will take to reduce deer numbers, there is a question about whether the current system is economically viable and giving communities the returns that they might expect.

There is also a risk that we are getting into a polarised debate about either keeping the existing system or having nothing. Ross Ewing mentioned diversification, which is the key word. There is scope for elements of the existing model to continue to evolve, as they have done for the past 200 years, alongside future changes to the role of deer management.

To support one job, sport shooting can require up to 330 hectares whereas agriculture requires 183 hectares, forestry requires 42 hectares and horticulture requires only three hectares. There is plenty of scope within our landholdings to have a diversified palette of activities that will generate a much more sustainable economic impact for communities as well as preserve some elements of the traditional model that we have all talked about.

Graeme Prest: I will add two points to what has been said about bringing deer numbers down, lowering deer densities and the concern about there being fewer jobs.

In our experience, it gets harder to cull. If anything, you need more people, so we use our own direct staff and contractors, and we see no sign of what we need to achieve a cull reducing, including in areas of lower deer density.

The issue is actually how we bring people into the industry. We need more people stalking, as has been mentioned. A good example is our having taken on apprentices as wildlife rangers to go stalking. There has been a lot of interest in that, with a lot of applications and good people coming in. We have done that over the past two years, and we are encouraged to see that we are getting local people interested in going into a career in deer stalking. There are some green shoots there.

11:30

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Tom Turnbull briefly.

Tom Turnbull: I will be brief. As soon as you reduce deer numbers to below a certain level, less income will come in through venison—as we have discussed, that income is already very low—or the alternative, which is sport shooting. Covering the costs then becomes extremely difficult for most estates.

Emma Harper: Given what Malcolm Combe said about Govan and what Lea MacNally said about an urban deer pilot, deer management isnae just in rural highland or lowland areas but in peri-urban areas. There are also challenges around the jobs or skills required to cull deer in an urban area. Is that a concern? Do you need extra skills or a higher level of skill to cull deer in an urban area?

Graeme Prest: There are woodlands in Glasgow, including right in the centre, in Cuningar loop, beside Celtic Park. We have experience of deer culling in very urban settings, and, when we do it, we liaise with the police, given the safety concerns. More is required to do deer stalking in an urban environment, and we have staff with particular expertise. It requires a lot of stakeholder engagement and working with others.

Donald Fraser: The principles are the same: we want to make sure that deer management is carried out safely, humanely and in line with best practice and welfare standards. There are clearly more challenges in an environment where there are more people around, and you have to carry out appropriate risk assessments. The key, though, is communication and making sure that people understand the need for deer management—the benefit that it will bring and why it needs to be done in the circumstances.

Emma Harper is right that it is not just a rural issue; there are deer across Scotland, in our cities and urban environments, and there is a need to manage them not just from an environmental point of view but from a road safety and public safety point of view. There are a number of reasons why we have to manage deer in Scotland, and we have to communicate that effectively. In a big urban environment, it is a challenge to get that message across.

The Convener: I have a couple of questions. I will direct one to Richard Cooke and the other to Malcolm Combe.

Is there scope to look at getting rid of the venison dealer licence and to consider a licensing scheme for trained hunters? That could get more difficult-to-reach venison on to the market and open up an income stream to further incentivise the work for hunters.

Richard Cooke: As I said earlier, the present system is clunky and could be better, but we need a transition that will not throw the baby out with the bath water. We could move to a system such as the one that you referred to, but, as I have said several times, before we move to a better system, we need more information about the hunters—who they are and where they are operating.

The Convener: Okay. That is helpful.

My next question is for Malcolm Combe. You acted as an adviser to the deer working group on its report. Back in 2023, the committee did something that does not normally happen: we annulled a Scottish statutory instrument. I think that it was the first SSI to be annulled in the Parliament. It was on changes to the close season for male deer and amendments to the Firearms Act 1968. Do you believe that those changes will eventually make significant changes to deer densities in Scotland?

Malcolm Combe: I am afraid that I am not qualified to answer that question. I am sorry to immediately dodge it.

The Convener: I will open that question up to the other witnesses before I come back to you. Does anyone else have comments on that SSI?

Tom Turnbull: I think that the people who were using authorisations in the previous system to shoot male deer will continue to do so. The consultation on those changes was disappointing for the sector and the process was very hurried. I do not think that those changes will make a difference, if I am honest with you. People can still shoot deer under authorisation if they need to.

Duncan Orr-Ewing: As we mentioned earlier, one of the main provisions on firearms was to facilitate the use of non-lead ammunition, and we need to move further in that direction. That has been a good move, and we need more non-lead ammunition to be used in order to have healthy food products, as was discussed earlier.

We think that the changes to the male deer season have been helpful, mainly because, as we have discussed, we need more flexibility within the deer management system to allow those who want to cull deer at different times of the year to do so. There are no particular welfare issues with male deer provided that the standards that Donald Fraser outlined are met. We all meet those standards, and accredited people shoot the deer. We have the flexibility to cull deer, should we choose to do so, but some people still may not want to cull male deer during times that they perceive to be out of season.

Donald Fraser: First, on sighting devices for night shooting, we need to keep up with the use of technology and ensure that we are not putting in place barriers to effective control, which is the reason why that change was made, due diligence having been done to ensure that there were no welfare issues and that standards were in place for that.

The second aspect, which Duncan Orr-Ewing alluded to, was about ensuring that the Deer (Firearms etc) (Scotland) Order 1985 was amended to make non-lead varieties of ammunition more accessible, once we had ensured that there were no associated welfare issues. The proof will be in the pudding on the male deer close season. The detail that comes back on that will inform our understanding of the effect of that change.

We have removed barriers to effective control, and we have gone through a process to ensure that there are no associated welfare issues. On that basis, from a regulation and effective governance perspective, there was no reason to maintain the male deer close season.

The Convener: Finally—this is hot off the press—the Government has said that it will not make changes to the female deer close season. What are your views on that in relation to the deer working group's recommendations?

Duncan Orr-Ewing: Going back to Donald Fraser's point, we need more flexibility in the deer management system to allow effective culling. Everyone accepts that there is a welfare issue with the female deer season. The LINK deer group's position is that any consideration of the female deer season should be based on hard evidence, using all the scientific data that is available and the advice of the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission as to when it is sensible to have female deer seasons without compromising deer welfare. The issue will probably come up again, because we think that the Government's announcement has been made prematurely. A pertinent conversation needs to be had about that during the next steps for the proposed natural environment bill.

Ross Ewing: It is a really difficult issue. It is important to acknowledge that what we are asking some deer stalkers to do is potentially quite unpalatable—that is a nice way to put it. We need to be cognisant of their views and their feelings, as well as the potential implications for their mental health, so we welcome the minister's announcement. For people who want the flexibility to manage female deer out of the close season and for circumstances in which that is required, there is still a mechanism that allows that to happen, with the authorisation of NatureScot—that flexibility has not gone away.

On balance, the minister has done the right thing. He has listened to concerns that were headed by my colleagues at the Scottish Gamekeepers Association, who pulled a blinder in highlighting the potential implications of the issue.

Tom Turnbull: We should welcome the decision. It is an emotive subject and views are split among deer managers, whatever their background. You could put 10 deer managers in a room and you might get 10 different views on it. As Ross Ewing has alluded, it is possible to continue to shoot deer during restricted times of the year, with authorisation.

Graeme Prest: I agree with what has been said. Welfare comes first, and the individual stalker must be given room to make a judgment, as every situation is different. As Ross Ewing has said, the authorisation system is available. We are comfortable with that.

David Fleetwood: I agree with Duncan Orr-Ewing that the committee should revisit the issue for discussion. There is science and evidence on the welfare impact, and we have talked about the requirement to reduce deer numbers. If we are going to reduce them significantly, we need to reduce the female population.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their contributions. They will be pleased to hear that there is no doubt that we will see them around the table again in the not-too-distant future. The session has set out some of the groundwork that the committee will have to cover before the proposed natural environment bill is introduced.

11:41

Meeting continued in private until 11:49.

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