

RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 June 2000
(*Morning*)

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RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

21st Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)

*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

*attended

WITNESSES

David Henderson-Howat (Forestry Commission)

Mr John Home Robertson (Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs)

Steven Lindsay (Office of the Solicitor to the Scottish Executive)

Mike Watson (Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department)

CLERK TEAM LEADER

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Tracey Hawe

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Tuesday 27 June 2000

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:53*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): I apologise for the late start of the meeting. Unfortunately, a combination of circumstances, including trains missed and trains running late, has resulted in my not being here earlier. The deputy convener is in Westminster today, so the meeting was unable to start sooner. I can only offer my apologies.

Forestry Strategy

The Convener: Item 1 is the forestry strategy, which we have had on our agenda before. The purpose of including it on today's agenda is to consider the outcome of the public consultation that the Executive has been carrying out on the draft strategy. I am delighted to welcome back the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs, Mr John Home Robertson, who has responsibility for forestry. He is accompanied by David Henderson-Howat, chief conservator of the Forestry Commission in Scotland.

Members will recall that the minister launched the final stage of the consultation on the forestry strategy by presenting a draft strategy document to the committee on 14 March this year. The paper that has been circulated outlines the key issues emerging from that consultation. I invite the minister to introduce the final document.

The Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs (Mr John Home Robertson): Perhaps it is I who should welcome you to the committee on this occasion, convener, but we can gloss over that. I came to Edinburgh last night to be absolutely certain that I would not be late for today's meeting, but anyway, here we are.

You referred to the fact that we launched the final stage of the consultation on the Scottish forestry strategy at the committee meeting on 14 March. In fact, the consultation has been going on for much longer than that, as the initial consultation began in March 1999. The consultation has been long-running and we intend to take it very seriously. Following the launch on 14 March, 1,700 copies of the final draft document were distributed and public meetings were organised in six locations. About 300 people attended those meetings, which is quite a lot—I

was impressed by that. The consultation period closed on 6 June, and I am told that we have received 150 formal responses, which are now being analysed.

There seems to be a general acceptance of the draft strategy, but a number of important issues have emerged from the discussions, as one would expect. There has been keen interest in the next steps in implementing the strategy, which is obviously important. We are likely to need to review grants in the light of the strategy priorities—we shall have to consider that. We will also use the opportunity afforded by the quinquennial review of Forest Enterprise. Quinquennial is not a word that is frequently used in East Lothian, but I understand that it means five-yearly.

The Convener: It is a well-known word in the Church, I can assure you.

Mr Home Robertson: Is it? It takes me back to my O-level Latin. At any rate, we shall use the five-yearly review of Forest Enterprise to ensure that that body is delivering the priorities of the strategy on the Forestry Commission's own land. The Scottish Enterprise cluster strategy is also playing an important part in facilitating and co-ordinating industry development in the areas in which we can take the greatest advantage of forestry's contribution to the local economy.

Another issue that has provoked comment during the consultation period relates to funding and targets. There is a link between the two—there is no point in setting targets if the funding is not available. At present, the Scottish Executive funds forestry to the tune of more than £30 million a year, including £17 million through the woodland grant scheme, £4 million through the farm woodland premium scheme and £7 million for recreation and conservation work on the Forestry Commission's estates. Resources for the Forestry Commission have obviously been affected by the all-time low prices for timber products globally, but we are determined to keep things on track and the Scottish Executive is allocating extra resources where necessary.

Another matter highlighted during the consultation exercise was the vexed question of timber transport. Transport problems are being addressed locally by timber transport groups, on which the industry and local authorities are working together to develop pragmatic solutions. Argyll and Bute is one area in which that is happening, but there are others.

Meanwhile, there are promising developments on rail and sea transport; I am grateful to Sarah Boyack for finding an extra £1 million this year for freight facilities grants. However, as I said in response to a question in the chamber last week, it is disappointing that the main freight train

operator, English Welsh and Scottish Railway, does not appear to be rising to that challenge. That is something that we will want to pursue.

I will say a quick word about the challenge of achieving greater community involvement in forestry, which is another major theme that has emerged in the consultation, particularly in submissions from community councils, local authorities and some non-governmental organisations. I was particularly impressed—if I may say so in Cathy Peattie's presence—by the community forestry work that is going on at Limerigg in her constituency. I know that there are other initiatives elsewhere in Scotland. There is a lot of scope for community involvement in central Scotland. Last Friday, I announced that the Forestry Commission would establish a panel, which will be called Forests for People and will be under the chairmanship of Andrew Raven, who is one of the commissioners, to ensure that we make more progress on community woodlands.

11:00

Concerns were raised in the consultation about the quantity and quality of timber that will be available in future. Quantity should not be a problem, as there has been an immense increase in production from our forests and production will double again in the next 15 years. The immediate challenge is the successful marketing of the increased timber supply over the next 10 or 15 years. The Scottish Enterprise initiative on forest industry development is addressing that. I am delighted that the newly formed Forestry Industries Development Council has agreed to work closely with Scottish Enterprise on that initiative.

Some respondents to the consultation emphasised the need for integration between forestry and other land uses. That is an important objective, as is recognised in the draft strategy and in other work such as the development of our agriculture strategy.

Local authorities are asking for clarification about the relationship between the Scottish forestry strategy and their local indicative forestry strategies. I regard those indicative forestry strategies as an opportunity for them to highlight local priorities and opportunities. There will be different priorities in different areas. In some areas, tourism and landscape will be the biggest priorities, but in other areas more commercial considerations might come further up the pecking order. Local authorities can have an input on those priorities locally.

More detailed analysis of the consultation responses is being undertaken. We have had many helpful comments, which will be used to refine and improve the strategy. We certainly

welcome input from the committee.

Following this discussion, the strategy working group will discuss the responses in detail and develop a final version of the strategy for consideration by the Executive. I expect that to be concluded in the autumn. I have appointed two external assessors to the working group to balance different interests: Peter Wilson from the Forestry Industries Development Council, and Jim McCarthy, who is an environmentalist. It is important to balance the strategy in that way.

This process started in March 1999. It has been a long process, in which everybody has had the chance to have their say. We are now entering the final stage of the consultation. We will end up with an agreed strategy, under which I hope everybody can work together to achieve better woodlands and forestry and a better contribution to the local landscape and economy.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): From the feedback that I have had, I know that the draft forest strategy for Scotland, which is out for consultation, is being well received, certainly in the north-east.

I would like clarification on one aspect: the strategy to create a diverse forest resource for the future. I am interested in how problems with deer management will be tackled. In particular, my interest is in the planning of new forests in my neck of the woods. The problem that exists was illustrated recently by the decision by the factor at Balmoral not to plant the woods that he had intended to plant. The fact that he was going to put up deer fences around the woods caused controversy. A petition from one of my constituents, Jimmy Oswald—on saving the capercaillie, which is endangered by the deer fencing that is put around all forest plantations—is before the Transport and the Environment Committee. A debate is raging in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine about the damage that the protection of forest plantations by deer fences is doing to wildlife and in particular to the capercaillie, which is an endangered species. I hope that the Transport and the Environment Committee will consider the petition fairly soon. Can the minister shed any light on this dilemma?

Mr Home Robertson: Thank you for your opening remarks. It is very helpful for a member for a constituency such as yours to acknowledge that there is broad support for the objectives that are set out in the draft strategy.

When I was at the committee previously, I think that I admitted that I had never seen a capercaillie. Happily, that has now been put right. The Forestry Commission and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds kindly invited me to the RSPB reserve at Nethy Bridge. They got me up at 3

o'clock in the morning and, lo and behold, there were capercaillie and black grouse to be seen. Capercaillie are magnificent birds, and it is worrying that the Scottish capercaillie population is in a critical state. It is obvious that they need to be protected. Mike Rumbles is right to say that deer fences are a problem because capercaillie fly headlong into them and get killed.

It is a chicken-and-egg—or a capercaillie-and-egg—situation. If we do not have trees, we do not have the capercaillie, because they feed on pine needles. Ideally, we need to establish native pine forests as a habitat for capercaillie and other native species. Those trees will not be established if the young trees are immediately clobbered by deer. The deer have to be controlled to have the trees, and there have to be the trees to sustain the capercaillie. The fences are necessary, but they should be kept to a minimum and when they are redundant they should be removed. We should examine ways of siting and constructing fences that will minimise the risk to the capercaillie. We should consider using different materials. At Nethy Bridge, I learned that paling-type fencing, which is more visible, could be used.

The problem is not easy to resolve. We will not get the extra plantations that we need unless we can protect them against deer and that requires a certain amount of fencing. We have to fine-tune that method of protection.

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): I acknowledge what you say. I know that there are differing views on fencing and afforestation. Groups such as the Deer Commission for Scotland are of the opinion that there are too many deer in Scotland, but I do not subscribe to that view. The Deer Commission has suggested that the fencing grants might be restricted if the deer numbers were reduced to something like seven per hectare, or some ridiculous figure like that. It is suggested that, instead of spending vast sums of money on fencing, Forest Enterprise could spend that money on other activities. What are your views on that?

Mr Home Robertson: There are many deer, as you will know from your constituency. I am advised that the optimum sustainable population, both for deer and trees, is five red deer per 100 hectares, or 50 acres per deer. To get down to that level will require the culling of an awful lot of deer. That is being done in some areas. The deer population needs to be managed. I do not think that anybody would be enthusiastic about exterminating deer, as deer are important in the Highlands. This is a question of balance. Even if there are relatively low populations of deer, unless very young trees are protected, planting trees can be a waste of money because they get killed off in the first winter. I am sure that David Henderson-Howat can

give more professional advice about that. In certain areas, and on certain types of plantation, there is no alternative to protecting trees with fencing.

David Henderson-Howat (Forestry Commission): I would just make the simple point that it takes just one night's damage to wipe out the trees.

Mr Munro: I want to respond to a statement that was made about access to the forests. I do not need to tell you that, in huge areas, timber is coming to the stage at which it requires harvesting to prevent it from being lost altogether. Much of that territory is served by tortuous, winding and substandard single-track roads. Governments used to fund forest-access roads, but that is no longer the case. That creates a problem for local authorities in rural Scotland, where the roads are deteriorating at too fast a rate for them to respond to. Is there some way in which local authorities, Forest Enterprise and fish farms might co-operate to fund jointly the improvements that are required to those roads?

Mr Home Robertson: That is a big problem. Scottish forests produce about 400 million cu m of timber, a figure that will double in the next 10 or 15 years. That will mean that there will be a huge number of vehicle movements on some of the smallest and most remote roads in Scotland. That is why we are keen to work up alternatives to road transport, whether that means moving the timber by sea or by rail.

I welcome the fact that local timber transport groups—made up of Forest Enterprise, private forest owners and local authorities—are examining solutions to the problem. In some areas, alternative routes of access to main roads can be provided by constructing roads or tracks in the forest. Of course, local authorities and the Scottish Executive transport department must provide a road network, but we want to take account of the differing needs of different areas. Perhaps David can add some detail about forestry transport.

David Henderson-Howat: I emphasise the point that solutions to the general problem can be found locally by finding ways of using roads jointly and by identifying roads for upgrading. Of course, I accept that roads and bridges can be upgraded only if money is available.

Mr Munro: It might be useful if Forest Enterprise, the local authority and the other commercial operators in those remote areas got together to come to some sort of agreement on jointly funding some of the required improvements.

Mr Home Robertson: We want to promote constructive discussion. I would like timber from islands such as Raasay and Skye to be taken by sea to the railhead at Kyle and shifted from there.

We can help to promote that. There are things that we can do to promote that, but it is disappointing that English Welsh and Scottish Railway seems less than enthusiastic about taking that opportunity. We want to follow that up.

Mr Munro: That is commendable. However, the point is that getting the timber to the harbour for loading will destroy sections of substandard single-track road. What you say is acceptable and correct. Transporting timber by rail would solve a lot of problems.

Mr Home Robertson: I understand the point that getting it to the railhead would involve a journey by truck. That point is well understood.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): When the committee was out and about, it took evidence up in Assynt, where native woodland schemes were being discussed. Although people there were happy to plant native woodland, they felt that the balance between replanting native woodland and planting trees that could be used as a cash crop was not quite right. Has any thought been given to the kind of species that could be planted? In Scotland, Sitka spruce tends to be used as a cash crop. Has there been any attempt to find alternative species that might fit in better with the native woodland? Will money be available to people who want to plant such trees with a view to harvesting them in future years?

11:15

Mr Home Robertson: We must try to strike a balance. Clearly, it is desirable that there should be as much planting as possible of native species. That means Scots pine, as well as broad-leaved trees. The figures that I have to hand indicate that each year 4,000 hectares of conifers, 4,000 hectares of broad-leaved trees and 2,000 hectares of Scots pine are planted. The balance is shifting in favour of native species, which is welcome.

However, we need the commercial species as well. Sitka spruce is required by the paper industry and other major industries that are important to the rural and urban economy in Scotland. We can get that balance right. In the past, the forestry industry has got a bad name for planting Sitka spruce from horizon to horizon. That may be commercially sound, but it is not good for the landscape and it does not create a good impression with tourists or local residents. We have come a long way from that. It is possible to design plantings in a way that allows people to get the Sitka spruce and other commercial species that they need but that incorporates broad-leaved trees and native pines. Planting can be planned to take account of contours and other aspects of the landscape, and to leave a margin on either side of water courses, rivers and roads. It can be done attractively. That

is the direction in which we are moving with this strategy.

David Henderson-Howat: A considerable amount of work is being done on this by Highland Birch Woods, for example. We also have the Scottish hardwood timber market development group. Those bodies are seeking to explore ways in which we can add value to some of our native species through processing. That is partly a question of how the trees are grown. To put it very simply, if we grow a straight tree, it is more likely to be usable. We need to manage trees properly for quality and to develop appropriate processing techniques and marketing to add value.

Rhoda Grant: That is good, because I understand that much of the hardwood that we grow is used for fuel and is not processed. We import most of the hardwood that we need for furniture and the like. That seems wasteful. We have this resource and we could make better use of it.

David Henderson-Howat: Exactly. There are one or two excellent examples of places that are taking hardwood that would otherwise be dismissed as fuel wood and, through good craftsmanship, are turning it into first-class furniture.

Mr Home Robertson: During visits over the past year, I have seen some good examples of that. David Henderson-Howat has referred to Highland Birch Woods, which is doing some good work in the Highlands and at Munlochy. I remember seeing the work that it is doing on birch in particular. In the Borders we have Woodschool and other initiatives. Until recently, the timber that they are using would, as Rhoda Grant said, have been used as firewood and would have gone up in smoke. Potentially very valuable timber can be made into furniture, into finishes inside buildings and a range of other things, which could create jobs in rural areas. I hope that we can use our new Scottish Parliament building as a shopfront for Scottish timber.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I welcome the commitment to the better use of woodland by communities. The minister spoke of Limerigg, in my constituency, which is a good example of people living alongside forests and having a real involvement with them. Some of the developments of the past couple of years have led to genuine ownership of local forests and to much work being done in education. There is an opportunity to develop that approach in my constituency and in other areas, and there are good examples of economic development and the creation of jobs to allow communities to participate in the development of the local forest. Such developments should be sustainable in rural areas, so that people will not only enjoy the forests

but get some economic benefit.

Mr Home Robertson: The concept of community ownership of forests could be developed throughout Scotland, but especially in central Scotland. Wide areas of central Scotland are affected by post-industrial dereliction—areas that have been used by the mining industry for open-cast mining and quarrying—where the land is not good for agriculture. There is much potential for tree planting in those areas. I am delighted that British Petroleum has been involved in helping to fund community woodland projects in central Scotland. That makes sense from BP's point of view and helps the communities.

I have seen the planting and the way in which the woodland is being managed at Limerigg. It is not just woodland in a commercial sense; there are walkways through it and there are plans to acquire land adjacent to it, to extend it along the edge of the loch. The woodland is not only economically valuable but valuable to the landscape and the local community. People are enjoying it and feel that they own it. The woodland is well worth developing and I would like it to be expanded.

Cathy Peattie: It is important that people in the community—younger people and older people—are enjoying the woodland. In the past, those people would never have considered that an experience that they could enjoy and in which they could participate.

Mr Home Robertson: I shall not speculate on what your constituents are doing in the woodlands, but I am sure that they are happy.

Cathy Peattie: They are looking for birds.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I apologise for sounding like Marge Simpson—my cold did not prevent me from getting out of bed to catch my train.

I want to address your priorities for action, specifically the maximisation of the value of the wood resource. You have talked about competitiveness, but there is a difference between the price of timber that is produced in this country and the price of timber that is produced in eastern Europe. Do you have any thoughts on the way in which we can deal with that problem?

Transport costs are part of the problem. John Munro mentioned some of the issues concerning the minor roads. The problems do not disappear when the lorries enter the main roads system, however, and the issue is often brought to my attention of transporting timber on roads through villages in my constituency, where not so long ago there was a fatal accident involving a timber lorry. Has thought been given to ways in which timber can be processed near its source, instead of

having to be transported in its raw state to points of production?

You may be familiar with the reasonably successful Steven's Croft development at Lockerbie, in which Dumfries and Galloway Enterprise has invested fairly heavily. In that development, timber is processed locally and will eventually, it is hoped, be transported from the site by rail. Do you have any thoughts on the way in which that type of development could be encouraged and on what role the various players could take in encouraging it, to add value to timber production? It is estimated that timber production will double in 15 years but, unless we solve the problem of our timber being more expensive than other people's, there will not be a market for it.

Mr Home Robertson: It is not a question of our timber being more expensive than anybody else's. Timber is a commodity for which prices are dictated globally. Anybody in forestry is a market taker, rather than a market maker—when their forest reaches maturity and is due to be felled they must take the world price for timber whatever it is. This is an awful time. I am advised that timber prices are at an all-time low. I am not sure how far back that measurement goes. Presumably if we went back to medieval times, we would find that timber was cheaper. However, the value of commercial timber has fallen by 40 per cent in four years.

There are huge supplies of rather good-quality timber becoming available from the Baltic states and Russia, and the bottom has fallen out of the market as a result. Those countries are desperate for hard currency and will sell at almost any price. That will not go on for ever—it is in neither their interests nor ours. Sooner or later, they will recognise that the timber that they have should be more valuable. A historical cycle operates in the timber market and, currently, we are right at the bottom of an extremely deep trough. It is difficult from everyone's point of view—from forest enterprises to private foresters. Perhaps David Henderson-Howat will look into his crystal ball and tell us when it is going to get better. It is fair to assume that timber prices will recover at some stage and we have a plan for that. Indeed, I keep being told that the first swallow of spring has been seen and that things are about to get better.

We must make our timber processing industry as efficient as possible. I have been very impressed by what I have seen of the industry. For example, there are some huge timber processing operations in Dumfries and Galloway that are well placed to take advantage of the timber that comes out of the forests in that area. Again, it is disappointing that not as much material is travelling by rail as might be the case—that is something that I want to follow up. There is much

long-term planning to be done. We know what is going to come out of the forests and we must work with local authorities and our colleagues who know about transport to get it right.

David Henderson-Howat might want to comment on the vexed question of the market.

David Henderson-Howat: Unlike agricultural commodities, which are traded through the European Union, timber is traded on international markets and exchange rates have a direct impact on its selling prices.

Mr Home Robertson: I am not allowed to say that.

David Henderson-Howat: There is a trade-off between cost-effectiveness and local processing. To be cost-effective on international markets there must be economies of scale. However, as the Steven's Croft development at Lockerbie demonstrates, places such as Dumfries and Galloway have a critical mass of forestry. That allows the industry to invest in the knowledge that it is going to get large supplies of timber. That means that value can be added relatively locally, although within 50 miles of the forest rather than five miles. The industry must then compete on the international market, something that it has been doing very successfully.

Mr Home Robertson: I am sure that the convener will agree that when we can enter the European single currency at the right rate, such things will be much easier.

The Convener: The convener might not agree with that point.

Dr Murray: Various people raised that point last week at the Royal Highland Show.

The Convener: There is one question that I would like to raise, minister. When you covered the issue of timber supplies you almost dismissed it, and rightly so, because there are no timber supply problems, although one could argue that there is oversupply. All the timber that is likely to be harvested in Scotland within our lifetimes is probably already in the ground. There is an issue about continuity of supplies in the future. I would be interested to know whether there are any bombshells lurking in the supply chain that are likely to cause disruption in the continuity and quality of supply, related to plantings during the period leading up to the harvest.

Mr Home Robertson: You are right. The timber industry is a very long-term process. The lead time between the planting of a tree and the sawing of a log, even in softwoods, is perhaps 30 or 40 years. On page 21 of the draft plan, figure 2 shows a graph of projected output from our forests. That output rises up to 2020, but dips for the next 20 years. However, we are still talking about

substantial output. The projected output will increase again between 2045 and 2065. That illustrates the importance of continuity. We must keep planting in order to sustain supplies and the processing industry.

David Henderson-Howat will comment on the dip in 2040.

David Henderson-Howat: There is no one answer. It is partly a question of continuing to plant trees for future production and partly a recognition that, as we reach that dip, there might be some advancing and delaying of fellings in response to market conditions. Processing in Scotland might never reach the highest peak, but as we approach that point there may be some export of surplus material.

11:30

Mr Home Robertson: Or even holdover.

David Henderson-Howat: Indeed. The processing industry will be geared towards a sustainable supply, rather than a short-term peak in supply.

The Convener: In that projected production output, is there anything to indicate a change in the quality of timber available in that period? Will the shortage of quality timber remain a problem over the period that you mentioned?

Mr Home Robertson: I assume that that depends on the management of the woods. If the woods are managed properly, protected from deer and thinned at the right time, that should not be a problem. However, it is no good just sticking a tree in the ground and forgetting about it for the next 60 years—it must be looked after.

David Henderson-Howat: Timber quality is an important issue. To enter the higher value markets, one needs better quality in terms of strength classification. One of the priorities that we have set ourselves is to improve timber quality. That will mean addressing issues such as stocking density—ensuring that the trees are planted closely enough together—to get the strength characteristics needed for access to the higher value markets.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I understand that some of the respondents were a little critical because although the strategy is positive and moves in the right direction, there was not a clear enough indication of what Scotland's forested landscape would be like in the future. It might have included more specifics about the extent and relative importance of native forest, for example.

How would you respond to the suggestion that there is a lack of clarity in the sections that outline

what needs to be done, what the indicators would be and what the targets are? Do you intend to take on that challenge and try to be more specific on crucial elements, such as employment opportunities, an underlying concern, and community involvement? That would allow a better assessment of what the strategy will provide.

Mr Home Robertson: I am not sure that that criticism is entirely fair. If we had put out a draft strategy that was extremely specific—so that it said that from now on every forest should be planted with a certain species in a certain way—you would have been right to criticise us. We need to establish a set of priorities to be taken into account when people are deciding how and where to plant—that is what the strategy does. Those decisions will be different in different parts of Scotland; it depends on the climate, landscape and the local community. We depend on input from all those points of view. It would be wrong for us to have tunnel vision on this matter and to say that all we want is just native woodlands or Sitka or whatever. We need to mix and match, and that is the approach of the strategy.

Irene McGugan: Perhaps the respondents were looking for more of a middle ground. I accept that such specifics would be counterproductive, but perhaps you would accept that the strategy does not go into sufficient detail to allow an analysis of its impact or how it is to be achieved.

Mr Home Robertson: I hope that we are striking a balance. We have gone to enormous lengths to consult, to give everybody a chance to have their say and to pool all the information into the strategy. I hope that I have conveyed my belief that getting the landscape right is a high priority. We all acknowledge the mistakes that have been made in the past. We must take proper regard to giving native species their place, and we must design woodland planting in a way that is sensitive to the landscape and ecology of Scotland. All of that is in the strategy document; it will be taken into account when decisions are made on plans and woodland grant applications.

David Henderson-Howat: I have with me a small section of the submissions that we have received, which we are reading in great detail. I appreciate the points that are being made. Our job during the rest of the summer will be to consider carefully what people have been saying, and to decide what we can incorporate into the final version of the document, which I hope will be refined and improved. However, I do not want to be criticised at the end of the process for producing something that is all things to all men, so to speak. Decisions will have to be taken somewhere along the line.

Mr Home Robertson: The general principles are mapped out in this document. There is a broad

consensus in support of those principles. However, in any scheme, final decisions have to be made on what is right and what is wrong, and we will have to make those decisions. The buck stops here, or with the Forestry Commission. If we are criticised on the one hand for being too general, and on the other for being too specific, perhaps we are not going too far wrong.

Irene McGugan: I believe that there were calls for a strategic environmental assessment to be carried out on this strategy. Is that idea being considered?

David Henderson-Howat: I understand that there is some European law about strategic environmental assessments in relation to policy, but I do not think that it has been transposed into UK law. I will need to check that. However, my understanding at the moment is that there is no legal requirement for a formal strategic environmental assessment.

Mr Home Robertson: In general, quality tree planting is environmentally beneficial, for obvious reasons, as a way of sequestering carbon dioxide. However, if planting has a negative impact on the landscape, or if it contributes to acidification of watercourses and lochs, that clearly has to be taken into account. I am not aware of any formal requirements for assessment.

David Henderson-Howat: Not in UK or Scots law.

The Convener: We have referred to the list of priorities for action given in the summary of your submission. You say that you are interested in the views of the committee on those priorities. Is there anything that you feel the committee has not yet addressed?

Mr Home Robertson: I cannot remember any precedent for a minister being given an opportunity to tell a committee what to say. I think that that would be entirely improper. David, are we looking for a particular steer on anything?

David Henderson-Howat: We have 23 priorities for action, and I can understand it when people ask whether that might be too many. I have not heard anyone say that we should delete a few priorities, but I have heard suggestions for there to be even more.

The Convener: The issue of imports has come up today, and it is not in your list. Should it have been, or do imports not come under the forestry strategy?

Mr Home Robertson: Our forestry strategy is for the management of Scottish forests and woodlands. There is not a lot that we can do about imports in a free market in the European Union. If timber is available to be imported, people will do it whether we like it or not. We have to manage our

forestry in such a way that it can compete with imports, certainly in terms of quality, but also in terms of price. That is difficult, but that is what we want to help the industry to do.

The Convener: As there are no further questions on this item, I thank John Home Robertson and David Henderson-Howat for coming along to present the summary of the forestry strategy. We are grateful for your continued support on the issue. We realise that forestry is a high priority in the rural economy, and are keen to ensure that we understand the issues connected to it and keep a broad, two-way communication going with the minister.

Before you leave, I apologise again for the late start of the meeting. I hope that it has not delayed you too much.

Mr Home Robertson: Thank you. I understand that quite a lot of trees are felled to print railway timetables. I shall try to ensure that you get one for future reference. [*Laughter.*]

Digital Scotland

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is the "Digital Scotland Task Force" report, which has been a specialist interest of Elaine Murray. If the committee wants to respond to the consultation, we have to do so before the end of June, so it has been put on the agenda as a priority. I have asked Elaine to put together a few comments on the report and speak about them. After that, we shall discuss them briefly and decide whether we want to respond in the terms that she has set out. Elaine, could you speak to the paper that has been circulated?

Dr Murray: I shall do my best. The "Digital Scotland Task Force" report runs to about 50 pages, and considers the possibilities for Scotland to make the most of the new technology. I felt that the Rural Affairs Committee should investigate how well the report deals with issues affecting rural areas, and that we should respond with comments on the issues that we think should be highlighted as having an impact on rural areas.

The report identifies four main areas on which further action should be taken, and makes other suggestions as to how that might be progressed, such as the appointment of an e-tsar. We should ensure that rural areas benefit as much as possible from the new technology. There is a danger that, in developing new technology to serve the needs of Scotland as a whole, the central belt's needs could be met but the rural areas could fall further behind and become more disadvantaged if action is not taken.

I have split my document into four sections. I tried to think about possible recommendations, which the committee may or not agree with.

The first section is about e-commerce. As we know, rural areas tend to rely more heavily on small and medium enterprises for employment than urban areas do. One rather worrying factor is that, although Scotland and the UK as a whole are doing reasonably well in taking advantage of internet access, small and medium enterprises are not tending to sell so well on the internet. Some action must be taken to rectify that situation and assist smaller enterprise to become more active in using information and communication technologies.

One of the problems relates to infrastructure. That is an issue that has been mentioned in debates in Parliament. Communications infrastructure tends to be poorer in rural areas than in urban areas, and can be considerably more expensive to bring into sparsely populated areas. The report refers to various developments such as asymmetric digital subscriber lines, which

will become accessible in the major cities. Mobile broadband communication technology will become available in the central belt, but there is no indication that such technologies will spread out into rural areas, so it is possible that rural communities could be left behind in business and educational opportunities. Even very basic ITC services, such as integrated services digital network lines, can be expensive in rural areas. Certain types of technology, such as satellites, are better for rural areas than fixed networks are.

11:45

The report comments strongly on the need to examine the infrastructure. I suggest that we endorse recommendations R60 and R61, which require the Executive

“to review telecomms infrastructure capacity”

and to work with the various partners to ensure that the appropriate technologies are available in different areas of Scotland.

I felt that the report was a little weak on the application of education and training opportunities through ICT in rural communities. I am sure that Cathy Peattie can tell me more about that, as she has just been investigating rural schools in Argyll and Bute. There is a lot of experience among local authorities. Argyll and Bute is particularly well ahead of the game in getting ICT into its schools, as are North Ayrshire and South Ayrshire, the authorities in the west of Scotland with which I am more familiar.

Work has been done on supporting rural schools with ICT. It has been a problem in small schools to expose children to ICT at the same age and stage. There tend not to be many pupils in such schools working on the same part of the curriculum. There is the possibility of using videoconferencing to support rural schools and education in remote rural areas.

There is also the question of the higher still exam. To support the entire curriculum, a secondary school needs a population of about 800. That is obviously less likely to be the case in remote rural areas, but there are ways in which ICT can be used to deliver a curriculum from another school. Some local authorities are already doing work on universal timetabling, and it would perhaps be worth while for the Executive to review current initiatives in school and adult further education to find out how ICT is being used to support education and training. We will see what we can learn from that.

The University of the Highlands and Islands uses distance learning to try to educate people in their own environment. The same approach has been taken via the Crichton campus in Dumfries. If

people are receiving further and higher education in their own communities, there will be less of a drift of young people going away to get skills elsewhere and not coming back. In summary, there are rural issues that I feel could have been highlighted more strongly in the report.

Another area covered by the report was e-public services. It noted that the commercial sector has commercial pressures concerning the new technologies, but that there was not the same stimulus in the public sector. There could, however, be great benefits in the delivery of public services through the use of those technologies. They could benefit the infrastructure of rural areas, with online health services, online consultation and even e-voting, which it might be suitable to pilot in rural areas.

It strikes me that one of the problems for someone living in remote rural areas is that the documents for planning applications or for a national park plan, for example, might only be available at the council headquarters, which might be tens of miles from where that person lives. It is possible to put such documents on the internet so that people can access them from local centres. That could help better involve citizens in rural communities.

The issue of rural post offices has been raised in debate. Post office services are being put online, which could help with banking through rural post offices. Could we consider the delivery of various other public services through that post office computer network? People could pay their council tax or get information about planning applications that way, for example. I am sure that all members here want to support rural post offices—the concern about them has been clear. The Executive might consider the opportunities that are afforded by an online post office system to find out how other public services could be co-ordinated with that.

The report considers how social inclusion is impacted upon by ICT. As rural areas can be excluded from ICT, so can social groups. Figures in the report show the percentages of households in high-income areas with their own personal computers compared to households in council areas. There is clearly the possibility of a divide. Wealthier people are more likely to be information-rich, which could lead to the exclusion of people on lower incomes. There may also be an impact on rural communities, because in many rural areas incomes are lower than average.

I have also made various recommendations about training. On page 3 of the draft report members will see that recommendation R42 tries to encourage the provision of

“affordable Internet access in community based facilities”.

The hope is that people who do not have internet access at home will be able to get access at, for example, their local community centre or school.

Recommendation R43 is more slanted towards the social inclusion partnership areas, and suggests that social inclusion programmes should look for gaps in ICT provision. I wondered whether we ought to recommend that some projects should consider the gaps in provision in rural areas where there is social exclusion.

I was not really sure how to express the main thrust of my recommendations. However, we may want to say to the Executive that, for all ICT development strategies in Scotland, we must consider the impact on rural communities. In many such developments, the issues in rural areas will be different from those in urban areas. When considering the development of digital technologies in Scotland, we should ask some standard questions: how will this development apply in rural areas, and how can we ensure that rural areas are not left behind?

The Convener: Thank you for that comprehensive report. It was so comprehensive that I feel quite guilty for having asked you to do it at such short notice.

Cathy Peattie: It is a smashing paper—thank you, Elaine. I want to follow up on some of the education issues. I agree with Elaine that it is important that people should have access to education and should know how the systems work. There is an opportunity for rural schools to be regarded as lifelong learning centres—places where everyone can learn. Local authorities have to face the issue of schools not being at full capacity. Education could be going on in those schools beyond the education that is just for primary or secondary schoolchildren.

If we are serious about this, everyone needs to have the opportunity to access education. Having information about services online is wonderful, but if elderly people, for example, cannot use it, or are worried about using it, or cannot get access to it, there are problems. There are opportunities for people to access services that they would not otherwise have known about. Training and education are vital. This committee has to consider rural-proofing. Whatever we do in the Parliament, it is vital that we have the opportunity to proof policies for rural communities. When education, economic development or community planning happen, there have to be partnerships to ensure that all the community benefits.

Rhoda Grant: I read about training in the first draft of Elaine Murray's report, but I cannot find it now.

Dr Murray: It should be there.

Rhoda Grant: It was about training people how to use computers.

Dr Murray: Yes, it is in the section headed "E-inclusion and e-communities". Recommendations R42 and R43 relate to training.

Irene McGugan: I would like to ask about the section on e-commerce. Rural areas could capitalise on e-commerce, because it is possible to sell products or to liaise with colleagues without having to be near anywhere in particular. However, it is worrying that the figures in your report seem to show a slow growth in rural areas because they were not able to access the infrastructure and the technology.

Could we emphasise the importance of e-commerce for rural areas, because the indications are that things will not improve and that the central belt will get the new technology first? Things may change, but there is no guarantee whatsoever that firms, and especially the SMEs, in rural areas will be able to access new technology anything like as quickly as their competitors or colleagues in the central belt.

Dr Murray: There has to be positive action.

Irene McGugan: You have certainly included a recognition that rural areas could be further disadvantaged unless efforts are made to prevent that. I do not know how much more strongly that could be put in the report. Nobody seems to be making firm commitments to ensure that e-commerce opportunities are rolled out more quickly to rural areas.

The Convener: Is the committee broadly content with the contents of what Elaine Murray has prepared, and, if so, does the committee agree to this response being made in the name of the committee as a whole?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Elaine, for your effort.

Subordinate Legislation

The Convener: We have three negative orders before us today. The first is the Transport of Animals (Cleansing and Disinfection) (Scotland) Regulations 2000 (SSI 2000/167). A number of papers have been circulated in connection with the order, including a copy of a report from the Subordinate Legislation Committee.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee discussed the order at its meeting on June 20. The committee has drawn to the attention of Parliament what it considers to be a serious instance of defective drafting in regulation 5. Paragraph 9 of its report explains the committee's concerns. It suggests:

"Regulation 5 actually purports to impose a **positive** duty to carry out the duties described".

The Convener: We have with us today Miss Nancy Logan and Mr Mike Watson of the animal health and welfare branch of the Scottish Executive rural affairs department. They, together with Steven Lindsay, from the Scottish Executive solicitors branch, will explain the order. Do the officials wish to make any comments on the order further to what is already in the notes that we have received?

Mike Watson (Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department): No, but we are happy to answer questions.

The Convener: Are you aware of the statement that was made in the report of the Subordinate Legislation Committee?

Mike Watson: Yes.

The Convener: Do you feel that the order requires clarification on that point? I am inviting you to justify it, if you feel that you can.

Mike Watson: The order merely says that whoever is asked to remove the waste is responsible for removing it as explained in the regulations, but we do not specifically say which person should do that. That gives us the benefit of ensuring that, where a transporter uses a third party to remove the waste, it is the third party that is responsible for waste disposal in accordance with the regulations.

Mr Munro: The document is quite clear and distinct about the proposals. I think that most operators who are currently engaged in all forms of livestock haulage are well aware of the implications of not complying with the regulations. For several years, there has been an arrangement in operation whereby hauliers were required to clean or wash down the vehicle in which the animals are being transported. I think that what

you are saying is that, if a haulier hires another party to undertake the work, the responsibility for cleansing passes from the haulier to the third party. Is that right?

Mike Watson: Yes.

12:00

Mr Munro: I do not think that there is anything in the order that would be detrimental to the trade.

Cathy Peattie: This may be a daft question, but it is fairly important to me. If there is negligence, and no one carries out the cleansing, are there any sanctions? The hauliers can claim that it is not their problem, because it is the contractors that they have engaged who have not carried out the work. That might mean that animals are travelling in hellish conditions. What sanctions can be used to prevent that?

Steven Lindsay (Office of the Solicitor to the Scottish Executive): Regulation 8 of the order, which covers criminal offences, says that anyone who fails to comply with any of the requirements becomes guilty of an offence and is punishable by a financial penalty. If you are asking whether a person can be compelled to remove matter from the lorry, that is a much more difficult point. I imagine that the courts would have considerable powers to impose sanctions on someone who continued to fail to comply. On every occasion when that person appears before the court, if it is the same mess in his lorry, he will continue to be punished until the lorry is cleaned.

The Convener: This regulation is essentially a grouping together of regulations that have existed previously. We have examined similar orders in the past, and our main concern has always been to ensure that there is nothing in the order that reinterprets or adds to the orders that were in place before. Is there anything of that nature that we ought to consider in relation to this order, or is it simply a reintroduction of previous regulations?

Mike Watson: This order just pulls everything together under one regulation covering all aspects of cleansing and disinfection of animal transport. Now, all those aspects are under one umbrella.

Mr Munro: There is a reference to a travel distance of 50 km. Is that a new regulation? I was not aware of it before.

Mike Watson: You are right. That is a new regulation.

The Convener: I have been asked to remind members that we have the option to approve the order today, but we have time to consider it further if that is appropriate. There are one or two committee members who are not present today who might want to become involved in the debate.

Mr Munro: I do not have any difficulty with the order. As you said, it just brings together previously existing legislation, with some minor adjustments. I have no hesitation in agreeing that we should approve it today.

Dr Murray: I agree with John Munro. If other members of the committee are not here to discuss it, that is their decision. It was on the agenda, so it is appropriate to make a decision on it now.

The Convener: Are members content with the order and, if so, do we agree that we should make no further comments on it in our report to Parliament?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next order on the list is the Loch Moidart, North Channel, Scallop Several Fishery (Scotland) Order 2000 (SSI 2000/173). In addition to the Executive note from SERAD, members will have seen the attached chart of the area under discussion. The order confers on the Sea Fish Industry Authority the right of several fishery for scallops in part of Loch Moidart for a period of 10 years. It confers on the authority the exclusive right to deposit, propagate, fish for and take scallops within the area specified by the order.

The deadline for parliamentary action on the order is 16 September 2000. The Subordinate Legislation Committee discussed the order at its meeting on 20 June and determined that the attention of the Parliament need not be drawn to the instrument.

Is the committee content with the order and, if so, are we agreed that no recommendation need be made to Parliament?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final order on the list is the Bovines and Bovine Products (Trade) Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2000 (SSI 2000/184). These regulations amend the Bovines and Bovine Products (Trade) Regulations 1999, and permit the dispatch of beef on the bone from premises approved under the date-based export scheme to the domestic market.

The deadline for parliamentary action on this order is 16 September. The Subordinate Legislation Committee discussed the order at its meeting on 20 June and determined that the attention of the Parliament need not be drawn to the instrument. Are there any comments on the instrument?

Mr Munro: Does this order cover exports to the UK domestic market or to the European domestic market?

The Convener: It covers exports to the UK domestic market. We are unable to export beef on

the bone, I am afraid.

If there are no other questions or comments, are members content with the order and, if so, are we agreed that no recommendation need be made to Parliament?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition

The Convener: The final item on the agenda is petition PE148, in the name of William Anderson, co-ordinator of the Organophosphate Information Network (Scotland). This petition has been referred in the first instance to the Health and Community Care Committee, to which we are required to pass our comments. This might be a good time to ask for any declarations of interest. You are not a sheep dip user, are you, John?

Mr Munro: No.

The Convener: A most useful research note from the Scottish Parliament information centre is attached to the petition, and sets out relevant information on the subject. As the covering note points out, committee members should consider whether they want to express support for the principles of the petition, or highlight any issues contained in the petition, to the Health and Community Care Committee. Are there any issues that members want to highlight?

Rhoda Grant: This is an important issue and much more research must be done. At the moment, most of the information about organophosphates is speculative. Many people are suffering from illnesses whose cause cannot be pinned down. We should support the petition and ask the Health and Community Care Committee to investigate the issue.

Mr Munro: I wholeheartedly support Rhoda Grant's point of view. There is a great deal of concern and apprehension about organophosphates. Until extensive research has clarified the situation, people will suggest that the organophosphates are responsible for many of the illnesses that currently affect people.

Rhoda Grant: If organophosphates are responsible, we must find out about it and take steps to ensure that people are protected. That is the danger. If there is a problem, nobody has yet pinned it down. There is still no way of dealing with the problem, and more people could be affected by it.

The Convener: There is pressure from certain quarters to make organophosphates available as a sheep dip again. The House of Commons Select Committee on Agriculture supported that view, and it was certainly a great surprise to me that it took that step, given the level of knowledge and understanding behind that decision. I have no personal objection to supporting the principles behind the petition.

Cathy Peattie: I think that we should support the petition.

The Convener: Let us therefore express to the

Health and Community Care Committee our support for the principles of the petition. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Meeting closed at 12:11.

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