

RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 February 2001
(*Afternoon*)

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

† 5th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Mrs Margaret Ewing (Moray) (SNP)

Alex Fergusson (South of Scotland) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

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

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Richard Davies

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Tracey Hawe

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jake Thomas

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

† 4th Meeting 2001, Session 1—held in private.

Scottish Parliament

Rural Development Committee

Tuesday 27 February 2001

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:03*]

The Convener (Alex Johnstone): Good afternoon. As far as I understand it, today we will have no more members than we have already. We have received apologies from Margaret Ewing, Jamie Stone, Richard Lochhead and Alex Fergusson.

I propose to proceed with today's agenda but, as we are significantly short of members, if we think that more members should be present before we make a specific decision or if we want to have the benefit of the opinion of a particular member or members, I am prepared to move over items and bring them back to a later agenda.

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I suggest that we do that with item 6, as four members are not here. We should return to that issue at a later meeting.

The Convener: In the past, we have dealt with the draft report on the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Bill in private and I propose that we do that today to allow us to decide whether there is anything the clerk needs to sort out. I take your point, Mike, and I think that it would be sensible for any discussion on that agenda item to be brief. Are we agreed on that?

Members indicated agreement.

Foot-and-mouth Disease

The Convener: The issue of foot-and-mouth disease was added to the agenda at a late point and did not appear on the first agenda that was published. I wrote to the Minister for Rural Development and offered him the opportunity to come before this committee if he felt able to do so. Unfortunately, because of his responsibilities, he is not able to attend today but he was grateful for the offer and has ensured that all the latest information has been made available to us.

Members should have papers before them, including the Scottish Parliament information centre research note that gives information on the disease and a note on a discussion that took place at the British-Irish Council meeting. There is also a bundle of press cuttings that should help to bring us up to date with the latest press information. At the moment, there is no confirmation of whether the tests that are being carried out on a sample from a farm in Fyvie in Aberdeenshire are positive or negative. We believe that it might be possible to have that information made available to us during the meeting. Should it become available, I understand that Richard Davies, the clerk, will be paged with that information.

The reason for putting the issue on the agenda is that it is of grave concern to the rural community and, although we have discussed what we have called the committee's firefighting activity, I believed that it was important to give members the opportunity to comment at this stage.

I understand that the minister has agreed to make a statement to Parliament at 2.30 tomorrow, so we will have an opportunity to question him then.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Everyone agrees that the farming community is placed in a desperate position by the outbreak and I am sure that we all support the steps that have been taken so far by the Westminster and the devolved Administrations in seeking to contain and eradicate this most horrific and contagious of animal diseases. I particularly want to pay tribute to the work that has been done by the staff of the agriculture departments and the veterinary surgeons who have had to deal with things that I am sure they would never have wished to see again.

I look forward to the minister's statement tomorrow—we all do—and I hope that we will have slightly longer than normal to raise questions with him about steps that have been taken and steps that might need to be taken.

I want briefly to canvass a few areas of concern. First, I understand that despite the absence of

cases of infection in Scotland, many if not most farmers are taking proper steps to disinfect at the farm gate. However, there is a question about whether farm gate disinfection should be made either semi or fully compulsory as a precautionary measure.

Secondly, concerns have been relayed to me—they were repeated on Newsnight last night—that there may be a shortage of disinfectant. If so, that would be extremely serious—I am absolutely sure that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Scottish Executive rural affairs department are aware how serious that would be.

Thirdly, it would obviously be premature to consider a partial lifting of the export ban until we know whether attempts to stamp out the disease have been effective. However, the ban on the transportation of livestock is a secondary element. I understand from veterinary texts on accepted practice when dealing with foot-and-mouth disease that it is possible, in certain circumstances, to allow the limited movement, under licence, of livestock to abattoirs. I am sure that the Executive will be considering that issue, because there is a need to get beasts to the market, particularly cows that are coming up to the age of 30 months.

Many hauliers are staring bankruptcy in the face, as are many in the farming community. As soon as practicable, hauliers must be given an idea of whether limited movement under licence of livestock to abattoir for slaughter is to be allowed, perhaps from farms in areas that are free from infection or that are not identified as having any infection.

I hope that the Executive will be able to pursue those areas of concern.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the minister is to make a statement tomorrow at 2.30. It is clear that matters can develop quickly. For example, a farm in my constituency is currently under observation. Part of the problem for the south of Scotland is its proximity to the markets through which we know infected beasts have gone.

What arrangements are in place to ensure that members of the committee are kept up to date with the situation as it develops and receive information as quickly as possible? You may not know the answer to that question, convener—we may need to ask the minister.

The Convener: I hope that the comments and questions that members of the committee raise today will help to advise the minister about the issues on which we wish to be informed during his statement tomorrow.

Mr Rumbles: That is an important point.

I welcome the opportunity to put on record the supportive views of the committee—I am sure that the committee will be fully supportive of the measures taken both by the UK Government and by the Scottish Executive to contain and to eradicate this disease.

I heard and accept Fergus Ewing's comments about livestock movements, but first and foremost we must contain the disease, identify where it exists and destroy it. That is the most important issue and I believe that members of the committee are fully supportive of both the Government in London and the Administration in Edinburgh.

The Convener: My view is that there are grave difficulties in ensuring that Scotland is kept free of the disease, not least of which is the fact that southern Scotland inevitably operates as part of a single market with the north of England. There is considerable movement of livestock to markets across the border.

Huge amounts of meat are to be imported into the country to offset the likely shortage that will occur in a short time. I am concerned to ensure that if it can be proved that areas of Scotland and other parts of the UK are free of the disease, those parts of the country should be allowed to supply markets as an alternative to importation. For that reason, I am keen to develop ways of moving cattle and other livestock to abattoirs, whether through some form of licence or under another procedure. I would be keen for the minister to address the possibility of such action in his statement tomorrow.

I propose to write formally to the minister, asking him to keep the committee informed of the latest position at all times. I would intend to bring this matter back on to the agenda, if necessary, for a brief discussion at any subsequent committee meeting during the on-going crisis.

14:15

I would also take the view that, although the committee will wish to remain involved in considering the latest news on the crisis, the main part of the committee's work will probably to consider the aftermath of this outbreak. If we feel it appropriate in the latter stages, we could look over the actions taken during the outbreak of the disease and could consider whether there are any longer-term considerations that need to be taken into account to prevent problems in the future.

Agriculture Inquiry

The Convener: Item 2 is the agriculture inquiry, which we plan to do over the coming months. Members have received copies of the clerk's paper, which deals with the options for the 2001 inquiry. The paper covers two main areas. First, it outlines the general direction of the whole inquiry; secondly, it outlines the more detailed suggested terms of reference for investigating issues regarding the less favoured areas in the short term.

If members are happy with the broad direction of the inquiry, the Scottish Parliament information centre and the clerking staff will further liaise with a view to producing more detailed terms of reference and a programme of evidence taking for the inquiry. Do members have views that they wish to express on the general direction for the inquiry as proposed?

Mr Rumbles: I am sorry to sound critical of the note from the clerk, but it does not seem to reflect the session that we had—admittedly in private—

The Convener: I think that we would describe that as an informal discussion—I think that that is what we had.

Mr Rumbles: Okay. The note does not seem to reflect that discussion, during which I made the point—as did several other members—that we should be looking at a snapshot of the state of Scottish agriculture in the round. Scottish agriculture existed before any Government schemes or direction.

By all means we could then consider the rural development plan and rural development regulations and how the Executive is applying them. I thought that we would also consider new ideas and research that could show us different options. The note, given the way in which it is written, seems almost to be a critique of the rural development plan. That is not how I envisaged an agriculture inquiry set up by this committee. I am not happy with the general thrust of the note.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): As members are aware, I am not an expert on agriculture.

The Convener: You soon will be.

Cathy Jamieson: In some senses, I hope not. I want to see the inquiry in the context of rural development. I would like the inquiry to cover a range of issues regarding the current position of agriculture in a Scottish context. What will its position be in the future and what systems and resources need to be put in place to ensure that we have an on-going agriculture industry in Scotland?

The clerk's paper refers to the European rural development agenda. Should we be considering the European context and the possible impact of European Union enlargement on the availability of funding streams in the future?

The Convener: Are there any other comments?

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I agree with what we have heard so far, but I thought that we were going to look forward a wee bit. We agreed that everything that we have done about agriculture has been firefighting. Just spending our time looking at what is in place and whether it is good, bad or indifferent is simply more firefighting. We need to take a new look at the situation, especially given the enlargement of the European Union. We should also consider how we are using rural development funding and what impact agriculture has on rural economies.

I feel that we encourage big farms, which push people off the land rather than keep them in rural areas. The fewer people there are living on the land, the less need there is for health services, schools, housing and everything else. We should consider the whole picture. Is our approach to agriculture the right way to sustain rural economies?

Dr Murray: It was suggested that the committee should consider the future role of agriculture in the rural economy rather than in individual areas. What is detailed in the paper are a couple of specific topics: the rural development plan and the less favoured areas scheme. There is a big issue about less favoured areas, which we need to look at. We may also need to look at the EU beef commission proposals, as that is certainly an area of considerable anxiety in my neck of the woods. However, that is not a substitute for a much more general and less focused look at the role of agriculture to determine how we see agriculture developing.

The Convener: I am sure that all four of the members who are not here today would have had comments to make on the agriculture inquiry. As we want our inquiry to be of a general nature, would it be in order to ask the clerk to develop the paper a little and bring it back to the full committee?

Members indicated agreement.

Mr Rumbles: I would like to ask the clerks to develop the paper a lot.

The Convener: More than one member of the committee has put pressure on me to deal with the proposed LFA scheme as a shorter-term issue. In the past, it has been suggested that we organise an inquiry on a single day, when we will take the opportunity to get the necessary information from the relevant interested parties. After that, we can

draw up a brief report, which can subsequently be incorporated into the broader inquiry. We are now aware that the statutory instrument that relates to the scheme that is currently proposed for LFAs is likely to pass before us at the end of March or the beginning of April. It has now been published and will be circulated to members in the very near future, if it has not been already.

I shall put together a proposal for an agenda item for a meeting, probably on 27 March, during which we can discuss the specific issues raised by the new LFA scheme. It looks as if we will have no alternative to, and would wish to do no other than, approving a scheme that is proposed by a statutory instrument, unless there is a flaw in that scheme. However, it is important that we also take the opportunity to consider some of the complexities raised by the scheme under a separate agenda item at roughly the same time. Do members approve of that course of action?

Fergus Ewing: We probably have no choice but to approve that statutory instrument, but what troubles me is that we all know just how desperate the effect of the LFA deal is going to be. That is accepted by everybody now. It concerns me that this committee has no opportunity to contribute to a debate at a stage at which we can influence the outcome.

We are again presented with what you suggested is a *fait accompli*. I did not come here to be part of a *fait-accomplis* Parliament. It is a real weakness in our proceedings that SERAD did not consult this committee over the fine detail of this scheme, as we know that the devil is in the detail. Having said that, we must look forward and try to make what we can out of this deal, which is extremely bad for many crofters and farmers with smallholdings.

Mr Rumbles: I am not sure that the case is so cut and dried. If the instrument will come before us only at the end of March, why can we not discuss it before it reaches us? We know the general thrust of the detail. Why must we discuss it only during the meeting at which we are presented with it? Why can we not discuss it before then, as a separate agenda item? That would allay the concerns that Fergus Ewing has outlined.

The Convener: We can do that.

Mr Rumbles: Like Fergus, I am of the opinion that we should not be expected to rubber stamp the instrument.

The Convener: Let us hear a few more views before we decide how to deal with the matter.

Rhoda Grant: I acknowledge and agree with the concerns of Fergus Ewing, Mike Rumbles and you, convener. The problem is that the scheme has approval from Europe. If we do not approve

the SI, no funding will be allocated this year, leaving us in a difficult position. I am no happier with the scheme than anyone else, but 90 per cent of what was received last year is better than 0 per cent. We may have to work on that basis. I agree that we should pursue a short inquiry; however, it may take longer than one day, and I would not like us to limit ourselves to only one day's discussion.

The Convener: No. I propose to invite the interested parties to express their objections to the scheme that has been put in place. We can then consider the SI as part of a more general inquiry into the ways in which support could be allocated to such areas in future. Specific issues have been raised and a number of organisations will want to come to the committee to give their views.

Fergus Ewing: Can we discuss the matter over two days, then, before we receive the statutory instrument?

Richard Davies (Clerk): The instrument could be considered by the committee next week. However, if the Rural Development Committee is to be the lead committee on it, we will be obliged to wait until the Subordinate Legislation Committee has considered it before we dispose of it finally.

The Convener: Does the committee want to gather the relevant interested parties to discuss the general issue at least a week before we address the instrument?

Mr Rumbles: It is important that we do that. We can take evidence from people in preparation for dealing with the instrument. That is the most appropriate way in which to proceed.

The Convener: Okay. We would normally request information from SERAD, but the interested parties in this matter are what we have come to describe as the usual suspects—the National Farmers Union of Scotland, the Scottish Crofters Union and the Scottish Landowners Federation. I propose to invite those organisations to express their views. Are there any other organisations or individuals whom we should consider?

Fergus Ewing: Highland Council and the other Highland councils have built up expertise on crofting and farming. It would be helpful if they were invited to give evidence, possibly as witnesses.

Mr Rumbles: The LFA is a Scotland-wide scheme and I am loth to invite only the councils from the Highlands and Islands. We must consider the other areas of Scotland too.

The Convener: If specific expertise is available, we can ask them to contribute written evidence.

Mr Rumbles: In that case, could we not make

the invitation through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities?

Fergus Ewing: The authorities that are not in COSLA might want to be invited separately.

14:30

The Convener: We will correspond with each organisation that has been mentioned and ensure that their views are available to us. I will attempt to bring those views together so that we can have a discussion and take some evidence at least one week before the final consideration of the statutory instrument.

Dr Murray: Are you saying 20 March?

The Convener: It could be done on the 27th—there would be time to discuss the instrument the following week. I will bring that information back to members as soon as we have confirmation.

Cathy Jamieson: When you mentioned the usual suspects—and the National Farmers Union of Scotland—did you consider inviting representatives of the trade unions that represent other agricultural workers? Are they on your list of usual suspects?

The Convener: Not in this case, as the payment that is being disputed goes specifically to farmers and crofters.

Cathy Jamieson: I appreciate that in this instance, but could it be noted that the Transport and General Workers Union represents a number of agricultural workers? If the TGWU is not on your list of usual suspects, could we add it?

The Convener: We will certainly take that into account.

I have been encouraged to ask whether the committee is content that I should put this item together, so that we do not have to disturb members with the details until we get it organised. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Agricultural College

The Convener: Two weeks ago, I had a meeting with Professor Karl Linklater of the Scottish Agricultural College. He is concerned about the future of the organisation and about its responsibilities. He and some of his senior officials are able to make a presentation to the committee in the near future to explain those concerns. I had hoped to arrange that for a Tuesday on which the committee is not meeting, but if that is not possible, I hope to find an alternative time before the April recess. Are members content to meet Karl Linklater and others from the Scottish Agricultural College for an informal briefing and to agree a date for that by correspondence?

Cathy Jamieson: I would be happy to have the briefing and the background information. I had a brief word with Karl Linklater on a recent visit to the Scottish Agricultural College at Auchencruive. I am concerned that the presentation should cover the widest possible range of work that is undertaken in the college, especially in the context of rural development and the links that are being made in the area of food safety and so on.

The Convener: I understand that that is the professor's intention.

Dr Murray: Given that the presentation will not be part of a committee meeting, would it be worth visiting the college and seeing at first hand the work that is going on there?

The Convener: The Scottish Agricultural College is dispersed throughout Scotland—it would be difficult to meet in a single place.

Dr Murray: I was thinking of Cathy Jamieson's area.

The Convener: At this point, Professor Linklater is keen to come here—with some of his senior people—to make a presentation to us.

Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): The nearest part of the Scottish Agricultural College is probably in West Lothian. Although it is not quite in my constituency, I am sure that the college would be happy to welcome us there.

I support what Cathy Jamieson said about getting as wide a view of the college's work as possible. I am still getting up to speed on all the interests that the college pursues. It would be useful to have a broad view of what it is about and how it can best be used for the benefit of all the people of Scotland. I am keen that we follow the line suggested by Cathy Jamieson.

Rhoda Grant: People will probably know that the Scottish Agricultural College is planning to close its Thurso veterinary centre. Rumours and counter-rumours are flying around about that and

about research grants to different parts of the college. It might be useful to have a report from the Scottish Executive on the research and monitoring work that it commissions from the college before we meet college representatives. I have been led to believe that some of the work that was being carried out at Thurso has been moved to other areas, so it would be important to find out on what basis work is given.

Fergus Ewing: As part of the report from the Scottish Executive, could we have an analysis of the college's funding over the past five years, and projections of its proposed budget over the next three years? I understand that the college faces a possible substantial reduction in its funding. It would be useful to have a clear written statement on its finances before we have the presentation.

Rhoda Grant: It may be worth obtaining views from the NFUS and the Scottish Crofters Union on how the areas covered by the Thurso office would be affected by the closure. I was in Shetland last week and spoke to people involved in farming up there. I felt that, of all the places covered by the Thurso centre, Shetland would be the least affected, given its transport and communication links with Aberdeen, but I was surprised to learn that people in Shetland have grave concerns. It would be useful to get information from Shetland and the other areas that are covered by Thurso.

The Convener: We can do that. I will liaise with Professor Linklater's office and look for proposals to bring back to the committee.

Dr Murray: A more general point is that we have not looked at the role of the Scottish agriculture and biological research institutes, which are funded by SERAD. I know that Cathy Jamieson has been active on a subject concerning one of the SABRIs in her constituency, in which I have a personal interest. That will be coming to an end shortly, so I can talk about it now.

There is a general question about the role of the SABRIs, how they are supported, and SERAD's view on the type of work that they should undertake. That ties in to the issue that we are discussing because the SABRIs do joint work with the Scottish Agricultural College. Although I do not propose that we should not hear from Professor Linklater, we may want to look more broadly at how we support research and development in agriculture and related industries.

The Convener: I will contact Professor Linklater's office and bring back a proposal at the earliest opportunity. Are there any other comments on this item?

Mr Rumbles: I would not mind a request for the Scottish Executive to produce a briefing.

The Convener: Yes.

Petitions

The Convener: The first item for consideration is petition PE272 from the National Farmers Union of Scotland, which should have been circulated to members. I am concerned that we are short on committee members, so although I am happy to discuss the petitions, I would also be content to defer any decisions until next week's meeting, when we will have broader representation, if members feel that that is appropriate.

Rhoda Grant: If we are to delay any decisions, we should delay discussion as well, because we will just have to repeat ourselves next week. If we do not repeat ourselves, the people who are not here will not know what our views are. It will be a duplication to discuss the petitions and not make any decisions.

The Convener: I am keen to emphasise that we have a quorum, and that we are entitled to deal with the petitions. However, if we feel that there are views that would be expressed by members who are not here, I would be keen to defer making decisions.

Mr Rumbles: My view is straightforward. Representatives of all four political parties on the committee are present, but I also support the view that if we are going to defer taking decisions, we must defer discussion as well. Either we get on with it, or we do not.

Fergus Ewing: I agree with Rhoda Grant. It would be better to defer substantive discussion until next week, because some members are not present. However, it would be quite easy for us to make some progress on the petition on the salmon farming industry, because it is obvious that we will want a response to that from the Executive.

Members: We have that.

Fergus Ewing: I am sorry. I hunted for a response. If I did not find it, mea culpa. Fair enough—obviously I have more reading to do.

The Convener: I admit that the response took quite a bit of finding.

Do we agree to defer discussion on petition PE272 until next week's meeting?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We have several petitions that relate to the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Bill. They have been brought together for consideration before we complete our stage 1 report. Are we content to take the same decision on those petitions as we did on PE272 and defer discussion to next week's meeting?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is discussion of the draft report on the Protection of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Bill. We have agreed to take that in private.

14:41

Meeting continued in private until 14:45.

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