

# West Sutherland Deer Management Group

## Meeting via Zoom

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021 at 1pm

### MINUTES

#### Participating:

Alan Balfour (AB)	Chair/Scourie	Claire Belshaw (CB) Joe Land (JL)	Assynt Foundation – Glencanisp & Drumrunie
David Allison (DA)	Reay Forest	Mark White (MW)	Glencassley
Adrian Wayne (AW)	Eisg Brachaidh	Roddy Watt (RW)	Merkland
Robbie Galloway (RG)	Balnagown-Invercassley	Mark Foxwell (MF)	SWT – Benmore Coigach
Don O’Driscoll (DoD)	JMT – Quinag/Kylesku	David Davies (DD)	Inverpolly
Bruce Blackley (BB)	Benmore Assynt	Mark Mackenzie (MM)	Keanchulish
Craig Ross (CR)	Inchnadamph	Jorine Van Delft (JVD)	CCWT - Little Assynt
Fiona Saywell (FS)	CCWT / CALLP	Iain Thomson* (IT)	Sallachy
		Mark Turner (MT)	Oldany

\*no audio/video – text contributions

#### In Attendance:

Kirsty MacLeod (KGM)	WSDMG Secretary	Holly Deary (HD)	NatureScot
Tom Turnbull (TT)	ADMG / AP Sub Grp	Alistair Headley (AH)	Plantecol (consultant)
Tom Chetwynd (TC)	ADMG	Sue Agnew (SA)	NatureScot
Elaine MacAskill (EM)	CALLP / Woodland Tr		

#### 1. **Chairman’s Welcome**

AB opened the meeting by thanking everyone for coming.

CB introduced Joe Land, new board member for Assynt Foundation.

#### 2. **Apologies:**

Andy Hibbert	Loch Assynt Lodge	Derick MacAskill	Forestry & Land Scotland
Michael Ross	Ardvar	Claire Acheson	Galbraith – Eisg Brachaidh/
Margaret Payne	Ardvar	George Vestey	Inchnadamph
Tom Sharp	Lagg	James Vestey	Benmore Assynt
George Woods	Merkland	Phil Jones	Assynt Community Council
Marcus Munro	Ledmore Lodge Estate	PC Daniel Sutherland	WPO
Kenny MacLennan	Badentarbet		

#### 3. **Minutes of the Meeting Held on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

The minutes were agreed. Proposed DA, seconded JVD.

#### 4. **Matters Arising from the minutes of the last meeting:**

All actioned or on agenda

#### 5. **Hinds Review Review 2020/21 Season**

Inverpolly (DD): Number below target. Absence of guests made it harder to get to the difficult places, and DMP up in the air re. Eisg Brachaidh fence proposal.

Merkland (RW): Shot 39 hinds back end of November, some after Xmas. Not in great condition. Missed worst of snow from the east.

Glencassley (MW): Shot 32 or 33. Got full on snow, lost a dozen or so calves. It was possible to shoot poorer beasts with no guests. Grass poor.

Benmore Assynt (BB): 34 hinds 16 calves, not out last few weeks due to drifting snow. Many hinds not pregnant. Latest mortality check 9 stags, 8 hinds and 11 calves.

Reay Forest (DA): Similar to Glencassley. Shot poor animals, left some carcasses for the eagles. Shot 169 hinds, 131 calves. Even poor hinds were in calf in January, fewer afterwards.

Glencanisp/Drumrunie (JL): Below target on Glencanisp, over target on Drumrunie. Some hinds left as not worth retrieving. Tenant (Robert McHardy) carrying out count at the weekend.

Scourie (AB): 5 hinds, condition poor.

Little Assynt (JL): Achieved target, decent condition. Few calves at foot.

Quinag (DoD): 48 hinds, and 3 since with OOS. Much the same as others are saying. Winter mortalities not as severe as others, as closer to the sea.

Invercassley (RG): Shot 21 vs target of 20, and 13 calves. Not many shot before Christmas, conditions were poorer thereafter, hit by snow. Some mortalities after end of season, 6 hinds and 6 stags. Deer in poor condition due to the poor weather.

Ledmore/Keanchulish (MM): Keanchulish end only running about 65 hinds at present, shot 2 hinds and 2 calves. Young population, no old hinds. Only shot the 2 with poor calves.

Eisg Brachaidh (AW): Shot 19 hinds and 4 calves, vs target of 25. Plans are to still continue with the boundary fence, progressing towards that. Further information provided to Scottish Forestry, waiting to hear if that information sufficient for EIA to proceed.

Benmore Coigach (MF): Target slightly exceeded.

KGM – second cull table had been circulated showing actual vs. targets which is hopefully useful. A bit short 2020/21 but will hopefully be made up next season.

## **6. Deer Management Plans**

### ***Sub Group Progress Updates***

#### West (Assynt Peninsula) (TT)

Cull short of target, in line with other DMGs in Scotland, partly due to Covid. Meeting next week to look at population model. Working on HIA, understood that some funding is available which will be used to target those areas not covered.

Deer in Lochinver situation is ongoing, targeted culling around the village, liaising with community.

Working Plan in place, TT and JVD going through that to update. All meetings have been virtual, will be looking for someone to take over the Chair role in due course. A few who might be interested, as long as there is continued secretarial support so need to look at funding for that role going forward.

#### South (DD)

DD said DMP will need major revamp if Eisg Brachaidh fence goes ahead, so slightly in suspense at present. Habitat monitoring is progressing, with outside help.

#### North (DA)

Linzi Seivwright has been approached to update the DMP, quote circulated among the group. Key point is to incorporate recommendations from the Benchmark report (which others also need to keep in mind).

Culls achieved beyond target. On target for 10 deer per km<sup>2</sup>, calving rates improved. Helicopter count can't be undertaken due to restrictions as estate staff not permitted to be on board with SNH staff.

#### East (KGM for IT)

Reaching end of DMP, starting work on 2021-25 next month to be ready by early summer. Note appended.

## **7. Habitat Monitoring**

(KGM) Partly covered above. Covid has delayed progress, short of up to date data for the mapping. SNH data is as old as 2013, so may not be appropriate to include. Once this year's data is in, we should have a clearer picture of where we are as a group, and where the gaps are. HD said although the more recent it is the more useful, but that does not mean it isn't useful for showing change over time. KGM will need to find a way of showing this on the map. HD happy to have a conversation about this.

DA has a chart as part of Alistair Headley's report, showing % of impacts vs deer per km<sup>2</sup>, happy to share this as it was quite interesting.

KGM said data comes in different formats so can take time to collate. AH happy to help by submitting data in the format required.

## 8. Fire Management Plans

FS had asked for this to be added to the agenda. Should this be part of Deer Management Plans?

Fiona then asked if with the expected visited numbers there should be some raising awareness by the DMG.

KGM said the fire contact list needs to be updated, and had not got very far with the asset register.

TC shared link to Fire Scotland Community Asset Register (central register of equipment, argos etc) which estates are encouraged to add to.

<https://www.firescotland.gov.uk/your-safety/community-asset-register.aspx>

CALLP are having discussions on messages to put out “Dos and Don’ts”, and signage has been developed to go out to estates that want them. FS shared Assynt Developement Trust’s “Leave no Trace” seven principles sign, including camp fires. She wondered if the fire section could be beefed up a bit. The signs are only A3, so could probably still be updated. SA said the wording from the Scottish Outdoor Access Code could be used. HD said one sign covering one thing had been found to be more effective than a multi-message sign.

DA said perhaps we should all be putting up signs when the Fire Risk alerts go out. FS although part of access rights to have a camp fire, people have to be responsible. AH mentioned “hot spots” for barbecues as in Europe. SA said on NNRs they would be trying to limit camp fires from sensitive areas. More staff being employed by NatureScot for NNRs, and Highland Council will be deploying Rangers to speak to people. Hopefully it will be a better summer for everyone this year.

FS said Assynt Foundation were happy to share their draft Fire Management Plan which could be used as a template. SA will also share the NatureScot NNR one.

CB brought up the issue of helicopter use for fire control, and wondered if AF should pursue insurance for this or should it be the DMG. Fire service decides on deployment of helicopters, but will want to know who is paying. HD said this is a property specific issue, probably not feasible to get a DMG scale policy which would need complete buy-in from all members. Premiums have gone up significantly in the last five years. AB was happy to ask the broker the question in principle.

CALLP partners are going to agree a fire risk/safety sign, but it would be even better if all DMG members were included. HD recommended keeping it very simple. There are times when you can genuinely say no fires at a particular time or area, but not necessarily enforceable. FS will circulate everyone who wants to be included (notify KM) in this. Sub group representatives will participate.

## 9. ADMG

TC

Venison – difficult time for supply, UK retail sector has performed well during the pandemic. Closure of restaurants has had an impact, mainly south of the border. Alternative routes to market and local supply chains identified.

Non-lead ammunition – requirement is coming fast, market is dictating what is deemed safe.

Wild Game Guide – produced by FSA. New one prepared for Scotland with consultation ahead of Christmas. Must be clear on legal and safety requirements, particularly on a local level.

Trophy export guidance has been published by BASC. Following departure from EU, trophies now need a health certificate signed off by registered veterinary body or local authority in order to be sent to Europe.

TT

DWG update – government response came in at 10am that morning. Almost all 99 recommendations have been accepted, with some nuance and caveats within that. Time needed to go through it in detail, but initially DMGs have been given some credit for the work they have done, and gamekeepers and ghillies are recognised for their efforts.

Highlighted points are commitment to end of lead bullets, use of night sights to proceed, no stag season, hinds not to be extended as yet, assessment process to come to an end and NatureScot to focus on areas of impact. Strengths of collaborative deer management recognised but different approaches are necessary for different areas. Looking like there is continued support for DMGs going forward.

Most significant suggestion is that culls will need to be approved in advance, which looks like a move to a more statutory system.

ADMG will make full response when fully considered, likely this will rumble on for some time.

**NatureScot (HD)** ScotGov response is welcome after waiting for some time. Recommendations were wide ranging, some very broad brush and others very specific in detail in terms of legislation. The context of the DWG report was written in and is now being responded to in terms of the Climate Change Emergency and Biodiversity Crisis sets a different flavour to where we were when SNH did their assessments in 2019, and level of expectation on delivery of actions.

Some of the response may be controversial, closed season, deer density etc. There are areas where densities are high and impacts low, and vice versa, so some work to be done there liaising with ScotGov and stakeholders.

There is a lot to digest in the response, and a lot of work to be done on understanding the implications of some of the recommendations. NatureScot working with ADMG and Environment Link to develop a work programme, some of which already underway.

VC asked if there will be consultation with members before response, there are some significant issues which should not be underestimated – night sights, year round stag season, cessation of the assessment process and pre-approval of cull targets.

HD clarified that DMGs can still carry out assessments themselves, although NatureScot would not be doing it. What is the best way to assess delivery on the ground.

ADMG will ask for response from members, but they will have to issue an initial response.

DA asked whether any OOS applications have been declined. HD said a few have been declined in the last five years.

It was generally agreed that land management in Scotland is changing, a lot of focus on nature based solutions and less emphasis on sporting interests. TT said the debate is becoming more polarised, with differing objectives – we have to acknowledge that and not just rail against it. The trend is towards investment in environmental objectives.

VC referred to the buzz words vs reality, which is record native woodland being planted, bog restorations, focus on getting sites in good condition and we have a means of quantifying that, good means of communications within deer management – and these recommendations will things more difficult. The next two or three years are going to be dominated by argument about this, which will be a distraction to work being done. It's not environment vs deer, with background as a woodland advisor VC sees a mechanism in deer management for getting things done.

HD responded that none of this is new, and agreed sector is well positioned having already been pushed hard to demonstrate its contribution. VC agrees with the majority, there are only four he takes real issue with.

## **10. CALLP Update (FS)**

### *Deer Management Project*

HIA and Woodland impact training delayed to end April/May, if anyone else interested get in touch.

Venison survey which was circulated at end of last year has had 89 responses within Coigach-Assynt area which is good. Report will be circulated. Hoping to produce a venison recipe booklet for local area from that.

## **11. Accounts (KGM)**

Accounts for current year to end of June 2021, although most of the activity is included now it will be approved at the next meeting.

60% funding was received from CALLP in early 2021 for South and AP sub groups for 2020 fees. Fees of £1000 been paid out to each of KGM and JVD as the respective sub group secretaries. Sub groups will need to agree how to fund the DMG contribution for 2021. Both sub groups aware and will be discussing at their next meetings. The 2 x £400 due for 2020 could be absorbed by the DMG, but other members might not wish to do that. KGM had not been paid the second half Secretarial fee for the DMG, so could include South in that and then the shortfall would only £200. AP sub group has 10 meetings so only £40 each for 2020 - TT will take this to the group. South has fewer members so the amount per member would be more. KGM said the two sub groups would need to raise the full £1000 for 2021. FS will check but 40% may be available from CALLP so £600 would be due per sub group. Sub groups also need to decide if separate invoice per estate, or include in the main levy.

KGM hoped to attend the AP sub group meeting next week. North and East are not affected by this.

**12. A.O.C.B.**

DA said Reay have been using non-lead ammunition, and recommended telling guests to keep well into the shoulder when using copper/non-toxic ammunition.

**13. Date of Next Meeting**

Friday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021 at 2pm, hopefully in person. Meetings have usually been in Ullapool. Lochinver might be better in future, if a suitable venue is available. A larger space might be needed with social distancing.

Going forward, aim to have one meeting on line meeting and one in person.

Meeting Closed at 3:35pm

MAIN ACTION POINTS		ACTION
1.	Members encouraged to add to fire community asset register	All members
2.	HIA data to be collated and mapped digitally - ongoing	KGM/JVD
3.	Fire Action Plans for Assynt Foundation and NatureScot NNR to be shared	CB/SA
4.	South and AP Sub groups to agree division of costs for Secretarial fees	TT/DD/KGM