

Inveraray & Tyndrum Deer Management Group

Summary of the Executive Committee Meeting

10am on Tuesday 21st April 2020 by Skype call

This executive committee meeting was held instead of a full group meeting due to Government restrictions on the movement of people to help reduce the spread of Covid-19.

Present

Hugh Nicol – Argyll Estates (Chair) (HN)

David Lowes – Glenfalloch (Vice-chair) (DL)

Helen MacIntyre (Secretary) (HM)

Tom Turnbull – Strone & ADMG Rep (TT)

Martin O’Keeffe – Blarghour (MOK)

1. Welcome - At a time of turmoil, we have taken the exceptional but essential decision to cancel the formal ITDMG spring 2020 meeting. In lieu, this Executive Group Meeting was called, and we shall run through the regular agenda on the members behalf. Following distribution of our meeting notes, all members will have the opportunity to review and comment before a final record of the ITDMG spring ‘review’ is finalised.

2. Matters arising from minutes of meeting 6th November

None. Approval of minutes was proposed by TT, seconded by DL. Minutes approved.

3. Secretary and Treasurer Reports – Helen MacIntyre

ADMG have today advised us that they are delaying the issuing of subscription invoices until October, when they will review the situation with regards to the impact of Covid-19 on the sporting season and venison market. The ITDMG Executive Committee have also decided to delay the issuing of group subscription invoices until October and will review the situation at this time.

The ITDMG 2019-20 accounts show a deficit which is due to the timing of receiving the peatland grant in 2018-19 and paying the peatland consultant in 2019-20. Without these payments, the accounts would show a surplus.

There are still some subscriptions and group HIA contributions outstanding, listed at the bottom of the accounts.

After SNH published their Assessing Progress in Deer Management report last November, Helen spent time checking the ITDMG density trend referred to in the report for ITDMG and identified significant errors with regards to deer count data used and assumptions about areas counted. We have been in discussions with SNH and James Hutton Institute (who carried out the calculations) about these discrepancies, and although Jimmy has acknowledged some of our concerns we are yet to receive any acknowledgement or apology from anyone higher up at SNH. This is the second SNH report where our DMG has been unfairly represented so we decided to write to the ECCLR Committee and Cabinet Secretary Roseanna Cunningham with our concerns. We also included our feedback on the Deer Working Group report. See our letter and response, circulated separately.

4. Chairman’s Report

Covid-19 is the dominating factor resulting in not only the cancellation of our group meeting but also the very tasks we regularly carry out. Deer management at this date is deemed non-essential and is only permitted for crop protection where travel is not required. Venison dealers are closed and tasks such as Herbivore Impact Assessments (HIA) have been cancelled for this year.

Brexit now seems like a distant memory though we must bear in mind that reforms are on the horizon. No doubt the impacts of Covid-19 will reflect in what reforms and support are now delivered and the timescale for them.

Similarly, the November 2019 DMG report and the Deer Working Group Report of earlier this year have gone off everyone's core agendas but we must bear in mind that the Scottish Government is likely to act in some form. Tom Turnbull, Falcon Frost, Tiffany Douglas-Home and I attended the Scottish Government's reception at Holyrood at the beginning of last month. Friendly words were spoken, and it would be good if the process continued on such amicable terms.

Via a Chamber of Commerce conference call, I spoke with Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy, Fergus Ewing, two weeks ago and as part of our discussions, I put on my ITDMG hat. He was very honest and up-front in stating that he and his civil servant team had not dealt with deer or venison yet, but he thanked me for bringing it to his attention noting that it would now be considered. As well as noting that dealers were all closed, albeit in a quieter venison season, I did mention that local sale/gifting of venison, poaching and e-coli are issues that should be considered. I also noted the matter of sporting rates asking for an exception to be made in line with other types of rates. I have subsequently heard on every other issue raised in the meeting other than on deer matters. Given his positive proactive approach on all other business matters raised and the fact that venison and deer matters were by his own admission late to his attention, at this date I still expect that something will be happening behind the scenes on deer and venison.

We all have a very challenging period ahead in many respects and while the administration of deer management has been downgraded to some extent, nature goes on and akin to many others in the rural sector, we as deer and land managers, cannot take our eye off or stop for long on the ground.

5. Culls and Counts

- a) **Results of hind cull 2019-20** – See spreadsheet. We are still waiting for some cull figures from members. Tilhill staff are furloughed so we cannot get their cull figures yet. FLS had some contractor issues so their cull figures are lower than expected for Dalmally South. On balance, the group is close to the hind target set last October, with some over their expected culls and some under. TT pointed out that very wet weather during the hind season may have resulted in higher mortality.
- b) **Proposed stag cull 2020** – The total stag target is low, but we are missing some figures.
- c) **Group foot count 2020** – Thank you to everyone who took the time to count on 9th March. Unfortunately, several properties only managed partial counts due to the weather closing in around lunchtime. This means we do not have an accurate picture of deer numbers across the group this year.
- d) **Population model** – Due to incomplete counts for the past two years, any attempt at population modelling would produce very unreliable results. Therefore, no recommendations can be made with regards to group cull setting for the coming year. It is advised that members rely on their own experiences of numbers seen on their ground when deciding their cull targets.
- e) **Future counts** – We have had limited success with foot counts in March over the past ten years so it may be necessary to change the date of counting. **It has been proposed that the group does an interim count in October this year to get an idea of deer numbers before the next hind season, with a provisional date of w/c 26th October set. This would be followed by a group meeting on Thurs 5th November.** Please can all members make every effort to take part in this October count and we will discuss at the group meeting what to do for future counts. It is likely an October count would see much higher stag numbers due to the rut.

6. Deer Management Plan

The group's current focus in terms of the DMP is on better collection of population data such as counts and cull figures. We are also continuing to focus on native woodlands. It is up to individual members to take forward any plans to assess or improve native woodlands, and we will continue to pass on any useful information about funding or other support. Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park have written some guidance on the Forestry Grant Schemes available which will be forwarded on to all members. It is useful if any members planning to plant new native woodlands or do restoration can let us know so we can add it to our DMP. FLS have notified us they are planning to plant native woodland on land above the Rest and Be Thankful.

7. **Habitat Impact Assessments** – As members have already been advised, there is no requirement to do HIAs this year with regards to deer management, since Covid-19 advice is to avoid any unnecessary remote working outdoors that could potentially result in emergency services being needed. TT commented that he has noticed the heather has been more heavily browsed this year since the poor weather has resulted in slower grass growth. Glenfalloch have noted their heather is in pretty good shape apart from some heather beetle damage.

Under the terms of our funding agreement with LLTNP, we will need to complete the second part of our group HIA project next Spring. This will involve revisiting 100 of the 300 plots to check consistency of HIA recording.

Action: HM to contact Nikki Dayton to arrange this.

8. Association of Deer Management Groups (ADMG) Report

See separate report from Tom Turnbull.

9. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) Report – Jimmy Irvine

a) Current Corona Virus Restrictions

Most will be aware that general deer management is not deemed as being an essential task and no travel should be taken for deer management at the current time. Where deer control is for crop protection (i.e. where severe agricultural damage is currently occurring) then this could be deemed as being essential for that farm business. People should not be travelling to carry out control, i.e. it should be done locally. This will be on a similar basis to the requirement for fox control during lambing. As far as I am aware most venison dealers are currently closed for collection/ drop off.

b) SNH Report “Assessing Progress in Deer Management - 2019”

The report, published towards the end of November, reflects on some of the positives movements the deer industry (particularly DMGs) have made since 2014. As discussed at the November 2019 meeting there has been progress on producing more informed and active, fit for purpose Deer Management Plans, of which detail delivery of both private and public interests. It is clear work needs to continue on key aspects of deer management for Government - i.e. native woodland, peatland (both effectively Climate Change discussion points), habitat monitoring. At a local scale these are items that ITDMG have been gathering data/ focussing on over the last few years and therefore ITDMG are well placed in moving forward with the deer management 'expectations' of Scottish Government/ SNH.

It is also worth stating that ITDMG have raised frustrations about the use of count information being used to portray ITDMG in a negative fashion, with both wording and illustrations stating an ever-increasing deer population within ITDMG. I apologise for the annoyance that this has caused members. Overall SNH recognise the very good work that ITDMG DMG/ individual members have done and are continuing to do to deliver sustainable deer management.

Ultimately the SNH report is sitting with the Scottish Government, however there was also the Deer Working Group report published in January 2020, so detailed comments from Scot Gov are still due to be received.

c) Deer Working Group Report

The DWG was an external panel of individuals set up to take a wide look at deer management across Scotland. This report takes a wide range look at deer legislation, policy and practice. Overall there are 99 recommendations which can be banded into the following;

- To make the legislation more consistent and removing restrictions on where, when and how deer can be taken/culled with a view to facilitating more culling.
- Providing a clearer vision based on public interest outcomes and reframing of the public interest within the context of the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis with clearer actions to deliver these aims.
- Setting clearer limits/ thresholds for acceptable impacts on public interests.
- To encourage greater use of regulation (as a means of promoting wider compliance) and more focus on individual responsibility.
- Greater equity in addressing the range of public interests impacted by deer.
- Access to better information.

Whilst in broad terms SNH supports the report it is unlikely that SNH will support all 99 recommendations. Ultimately at the centre of debate is the balance between regulation and incentive to drive change towards sustainable deer management. For those that have read the report they will see that SNH have been heavily criticised for use of powers under the Deer (Scotland) Act, however we also stand by the findings of the 2019 SNH Report (see above) on progress within the deer industry over the last few years. As with the SNH Report (and in part due to the Corona Virus crisis) Scot Gov have not provided any comment on this report as of yet.

d) Other items

Deer count & cull planning – unsure who counted and whether a good turn out/ overall figures. I would recommend this year estates carry out a sample calf/ hind count in August to better understand 2020 recruitment and build this into cull plans. I know some estates will do this as standard, but for those that don't this is effectively just taking groups of hinds and counting hinds vs calves. I think it would be worth gathering this across the group as the early indications are that this summer's calf recruitment will be much higher than has been experienced for a number of years and therefore estates will be able to amend cull targets as required.

HIA – as per previous email based on current Government Guidance the SNH position on HIA work to inform deer management for this year is currently not deemed essential work therefore we support ITDMGs proposal of delaying this years HIA monitoring plans.

However, please note that I currently understand that those properties that require to carry out HIA monitoring for Single Farm Payment purposes are still required to complete the usual agreed annual monitoring program. Given advice on what is 'essential' work is always changing then this requirement may change to, so I would advise any estates affected by this to contact their local SGRPID office for confirmation.

10. Any Other Business

DL mentioned that we should continue to engage with local communities. **Action:** HM to ask members which community councils they are involved in.

Peatland restoration – we are not aware of any members currently carrying out restoration. Glenfalloch have had to postpone theirs this year. Please can members let us know if they have any restoration plans.

In the context of lack of engagement and non-payment of fees, we discussed redrafting the boundaries of the group to focus on the main engaged areas to prevent criticism externally of the majority who ensure the group performs well overall and also to write off debts and avoid incurring more by continual annual chasing for information and fees.

11. Date of Next Group Meeting – 10am on Thurs 5th November 2020 at Glenfalloch.