

Ministear airson na h-Arainneachd agus Atharrachadh Aimsir
Minister for Environment and Climate Change

Paul Wheelhouse BPA/MSP

F/T: 0845 774 1741

E: scottish.ministers@scotland.gsi.gov.uk



Rob Gibson MSP
Convener
RACCE Committee
c/o Clerk to the Committee
Room T3.40
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



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Dear Rob

Thank you for your letter of 9 August following the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's evidence session on the control of wild geese arising from the Scottish Crofting Federation petition PE1490.

My detailed comments are in the attached Annex. Clearly, goose management is a complex, and sometimes controversial, issue and there are times when it is difficult to maintain consensus. I would like to assure the Committee that Scottish Government, and SNH, will continue to engage with stakeholders in seeking to promote sustainable goose management.

Kindest regards

PAUL WHEELHOUSE



PETITION PE01490: CONTROL OF WILD GOOSE NUMBERS**Goose species, populations and the international context**

1. I fully agree that management action of migratory goose species should be done in consultation with relevant range states. Clearly, this does not apply to action taken in relation to resident geese which do not migrate.

2. The Committee considers that the current approach and methods of controlling geese requires to be reviewed. I have tried to outline the measures we are taking, principally the development of the Islay Sustainable Goose Strategy and the adaptive management pilots for resident greylag geese. These measures are being developed as a result of the 2010 policy review, and, clearly, will themselves be subject to monitoring and adaption.

Goose management schemes and the Machair Life Project

3. There were budget reductions to the five schemes funded by SNH in 2010, although funding was substantially restored the following year. I welcome the contribution of the Machair Life Project for the period of its operation and note the RSPB decision not to attempt to co-ordinate a second tranche. SNH have incorporated a crop protection element into the adaptive management pilot, with substantial funding of £45,000 committed for 2014/15, alongside additional staff support for co-ordination. SNH believe that the proposed management provides better value than the previous scheme as this uses direct population control rather than non-lethal scaring, so will lead to a gradual and sustainable reduction in damage to crops.

4. The Life mechanism is well used in Scotland to support a range of biodiversity projects, including recent action to conserve freshwater pearl mussels. SNH acts as the lead adviser.

Adaptive Management Plans

5. The adaptive management pilots are intended to address agricultural damage by resident greylag geese, a quarry species. The 2010 review concluded that, given limited resources, the management of protected geese would be a priority. Land managers are encouraged to deal with quarry species on a self-help basis, although assistance has been provided with co-ordination, monitoring and certain expenses, in order to help farmers and crofters to help themselves.

6. As the Committee recognises, the different pilots are designed to take into account local circumstances. For example, the terrain on Orkney lends itself to shooting geese over stubble and so teams of volunteers using shotguns can be deployed to control geese. On the Uists the use of rifles is more appropriate and so a marksman is employed. The strength of the pilots is in partnership working, using small amounts of funding in an imaginative way.

7. The most serious impact on agriculture from protected geese is of course on Islay. Here SNH is developing a strategy to apply the principles of adaptive management to geese on Islay, and this work is funded by SNH.

8. There is no doubt that a mix of management tools, including non-lethal scaring, should continue to be used or developed for use in goose management.

9. The Birds Directive provides derogations for control of protected birds for a number of reasons, including the prevention of serious agricultural damage. With regard to the Islay Sustainable Goose Management Strategy, currently being developed, I have been clear that I would only countenance such an approach on the basis that this approach is compliant with EU and domestic legislation. SNH have taken care to ensure that anything they propose is compliant with the legislation.

10. Sport shooters and wildfowlers can develop their general skills through their membership organisations, such as the British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC). BASC Scotland is represented on NGMRG and the Association provided specific support, funded by SNH, in relation to the adaptive management pilots in relation to the use of non-lead shot and in delivering game processing hygiene training in relation to the sale of wild goose meat.

Data gathering, the environment and public health

11. I fully recognise the importance of carrying out an appropriate assessment and the monitoring of agricultural damage. SNH carry out Natura Appraisals to determine whether proposals are likely to have a significant effect on a qualifying interest for a Natura site (Special Area of Conservation (SAC) or Special Protection Area (SPA)). If there is a likely significant effect SNH undertake a Habitat Regulations Assessment to consider whether or not the conservation objectives for the site can be met if the proposal goes ahead. This means that SNH undertakes these appraisals and assessments where changes are proposed to existing goose Schemes (because all the Schemes have the potential to affect qualifying features for SPAs/SACs including Strathbeg). SNH does not carry out such appraisals in relation to the Adaptive Management Pilots because they are not any SPAs/SACs affected by the Pilot areas. My officials and SNH are working with the local Pilots to ensure that we gather the information required and that in particular we develop our understanding of the relationship between goose numbers and agricultural damage.

12. On funding, I recognise the risks and uncertainties in providing support for goose management through the SRDP. Stakeholders strongly supported continuing to provide funding for goose management through direct funding from SNH and that is the option we selected.

13. I also recognise that funding is under pressure in every quarter. Nevertheless, SNH has provided additional funding for the adaptive management trials, including a crop protection element on the Uists, and the work being done in relation to the Islay sustainable Goose strategy. Scottish Government has also provided additional funding for a second year to allow for an increase in the Islay scheme funding in recognition that the Islay strategy will take time before it delivers tangible savings to farmers.

14. Any adaptive management process requires full information on management measures, particularly on any culling activity. Clearly, good information is available with regard to culling done as part of the pilot and other control carried out under licence, as bag returns are a condition of the licence. Information is also collated regarding the take of geese in season. There is no legal reporting requirement, but one of the reasons that adaptive management pilots were restricted to island areas, is so that there would be good local information available. For example, on Orkney most sport shooting is organised by established goose guides and they have agreed to provide a bag return on a voluntary basis. We can be confident that we have good information on the in-season take. I understand that certain stakeholders have expressed concern that this may be incomplete. However, they have never been specific, or produced any evidence to support their concerns, and the regular population monitoring provides a further means of safeguarding the population.

15. My officials have also been working with stakeholders to develop a scheme to introduce a voluntary bag reporting system for all game birds and wildfowl, and have gained agreement in principle on how to take this forward.
16. There have been suggestions that large numbers of geese can affect water quality in lochs and reservoirs although this has never been substantiated. Scottish Water is collaborating with SNH on Orkney to investigate this further.
17. With regard to public and animal health, there have been concerns about geese transmitting infection to sheep. It is not impossible, for example, for geese to transmit salmonella to sheep, but it is not thought to be common. Wild geese are not regarded as harbouring a significant reservoir of infection, but large concentrations of any animal species in a particular location can act as a local focus for disease transmission. It has been suggested that large concentrations of geese may contaminate pasture through disturbance of the soil which could lead to problems with pathogens such as listeria if silage is made from the pasture, although soil inclusion in silage can also be from other sources.

Market opportunities

18. I am pleased that the trial sale of wild goose meat has been a success and recognise the desire to realise any possible expansion of markets. Nevertheless, I think we must continue to take into account the views of certain stakeholders who expressed legitimate concerns about the possible commercial exploitation of geese. The current licence conditions already allow considerable flexibility, with the retailer permitted to sell to any end user for their own consumption, including those off the island, as well as to catering establishments within the relevant area. This is important because enforcement is the responsibility of the Local Authority. In any case, the numbers involved do not allow much capacity for greater expansion. For example, on Orkney the sales are almost to the capacity of the geese shot under the pilot.
19. Clearly, sport shooting makes a significant contribution to the control of goose populations. On Orkney, we must of course take into account the fact that sport shooting kills both migratory and resident greylags, which are for practical purposes indistinguishable once the migratory geese arrive. We make the assumption that about a quarter of the birds shot through sport shooting are resident birds. Therefore, the contribution that sport shooting makes to the total number of resident greylags shot in each of the first two Pilot years has varied from about a fifth to nearly half the total, and so is certainly significant. The estimated bag returns of resident greylag geese from sport shooting are 570 (Sept 2012 to Jan 2013) and 900 (Sept 2013 to Jan 2014).
20. The Land Reform Review Group have not identified goose management as a significant issue and have not made recommendations in relation to the shooting of geese.

Scottish Government

September 2014