



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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Dear Aileen

Petition PE01490 on the control of wild goose numbers by Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation

The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment (RACCE) Committee gave further consideration to Public Petition PE01490¹ on the control of wild goose numbers at its meeting on 1 April 2015². At this meeting the Committee considered both your letter of 17 February 2015³ and the Petitioner's response⁴ to your letter.

The Committee agrees with the Petitioner's view that your response to our questions continues to be somewhat evasive and incomplete and believes that the lack of response in specific areas is impacting on our ability to find a resolution to the issues

¹ Petition PE01490. Available at:

<http://external.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/controlgoosenumbers>.

² Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, Official Report, 1 April 2015 Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9893&mode=pdf>

³ Letter from Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, 17 February 2015. Available at:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/20150217_Goose_management_-_Ministers_reply_to_letter_of_5_December_2014.pdf

⁴ Letter from Petitioner, 18 March 2015: Available at:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/20150318_Scottish_Crofting_Federation_Response_to_Scot_Gov_letter_17_Feb.pdf

raised in the Petition. We are concerned that despite having already expressed our disappointment to you over the detail of your predecessor's response to our direct questions and recommendations in our letter of 9 August 2014⁵ we find ourselves not much further forward towards helping mitigate the risk currently faced by agriculture in the some of the most fragile parts of Scotland. While we note that some good work is being undertaken to address the issue, the reality is that considerable damage by geese is still occurring in certain parts of Scotland and the detrimental impact of this on our crofters, farmers and our agricultural land is of great concern to the Committee.

I refer you to the discussion on the Petition by the Committee on 1 April, the transcript of which is contained in the Official Report⁶ of that meeting and is reproduced in Annexe A to this letter. The Petitioner's response is attached at Annexe B.

The Committee would appreciate a full and comprehensive response to the issues raised by 21 May 2015.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rob Gibson', with a horizontal line underneath.

Rob Gibson MSP
Convener

⁵ Letter from RACCE Convener to Minister for Environment and Climate Change, 9 August 2014. Available at:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/2014.08.09_-_Convener_to_Minister_re_Geese.pdf

⁶ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, climate Change and Environment Committee, *Official Report*, % November 2014 Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9632&mode=pdf>

On resuming—

Petition

Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)

The Convener: Our final item before we go into private session is consideration of petition PE1490, by Patrick Krause, on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation, on the control of wild geese numbers. I refer members to the paper and I invite comments from members.

Michael Russell: I should make a declaration of interests, as the goose issue affects my constituency. This is an example of how you get to experience everything twice in life; I experienced it as a minister and I now experience it as the member for Argyll and Bute, which has a severe goose problem. I draw the committee's attention to two important documents. The first is the Islay goose strategy, drawn up last October by Scottish Natural Heritage and others, paragraph 1.5 of which reads:

“The strategy is required for two reasons”,

the first of which is

“damage by barnacle geese on Islay is continuing at a level which causes serious agricultural damage. On-going high levels of damage threaten the viability of farming on Islay, which underpins economic and social viability as well as providing wider biodiversity benefits”.

In December 2014, shortly after the strategy was issued, there was a press release from RSPB Scotland, in which Stuart Housden was quoted as saying:

“We believe that the evidence base on which that cull is proposed is fundamentally inadequate.”

There was no cull. He went on to say:

“We fully acknowledge that grazing geese sometimes affect agricultural operations, but past experience on Islay has shown that, with barnacle goose numbers at their current stable level on the island, less destructive means of managing those impacts are available”.

Over 10 years or more, there has been an attempt to bridge the gap between those two positions. One position says that increasing goose numbers—even the current high numbers, which seem moderately stable—are entirely tolerable and create no difficulty, and the other position is that of those who are actually on the ground and running farms and crofts and who can see the damage that is taking place. The reality is that the damage remains considerable. Although I pay tribute to the Scottish Government for its continued attempts to ensure that there is a reconciliation of those positions, they have not been adequately reconciled, and Patrick Krause is quite right to draw attention to the fact that there needs to be more substantial action to protect the livelihoods of those who are involved in agriculture in the Western

Isles, in Orkney to some extent, certainly in the Argyll islands, and now increasingly on the Argyll mainland, where the number of barnacle geese continues to rise. I rarely hold constituency surgeries in Lismore, Campbeltown, Kintyre or Gigha, or even further into Argyll, at which I do not get people telling me that the goose numbers are causing them considerable problems in the running of their farms or crofts. The issue is not resolved. It requires considerably more work, and there needs to be a recognition that the convention that governs the matter gives a derogation to those farmers and crofters who find that their crops and livelihoods are being adversely affected. The right attitude to the petition is to take the issue back to the Scottish Government and to press it to get the widest possible derogation for agriculture, so that the existence of agriculture in fragile parts of Scotland is not put at risk by what is taking place.

Alex Fergusson: Again on a constituency theme, I very much endorse what Mike Russell has said. I am grateful that the communication problems that led to the Solway scheme not providing written evidence to us earlier were resolved and that it has been able to do that. I am also glad that the minister felt able to meet those who are involved in the Solway scheme fairly recently in the Parliament and that she has visited the Solway scheme. That scheme has been hugely successful. It has doubled the number of Svalbard barnacle geese. The Solway is the only place in Scotland that they come to, and that is an important part of their life cycle. However, the problems that the farmers are facing are now being exacerbated by the fact that the CAP reforms are reducing the support that is available to farmers in that part of Scotland. A lot of these guys are at the end of their tether and are now threatening to come out of the scheme. That would be a disaster given the amount of funding and resource that has gone into it—so successfully—over the years. I endorse the position that Mike Russell has taken, but with regard to my constituents in the Solway scheme, which I think is the biggest after the Islay scheme.

Sarah Boyack: I have four brief points. First, this demonstrates the need for continued data gathering and analysis so that we can see which schemes are effective and represent value for money. The second point was partly made by Mike Russell, but it is certainly made in the response from Patrick Krause. It is that we need to balance food production and wildlife management, and analysis of the research is important to guide investment for the future. Thirdly, we can see that investment in different geographical areas is making a big difference, and it is important to learn the lessons from that. Fourthly, the point about goose meat opportunities is an interesting issue to pick up in the context of the year of food and drink. We need to look at opportunities for public procurement and new market research so that, where geese are culled, a positive byproduct comes from that. It would be good to go back to ministers and raise the issues, including the particular ones that colleagues have mentioned.

Angus MacDonald: I agree with Mike Russell and Sarah Boyack that the issue has not yet been properly addressed and that further action is needed. The submission from the Scottish Crofting Federation raises a number of existing points that still require clarification from the Scottish Government. For example, there is still an issue in the Uists, which have not hit their targets. It has to be asked whether SNH is failing to deliver on the matter. On the plus side, it is worth noting that the programme in Lewis is under way and the Government is allowing the sale of goose

meat on Lewis and Harris as well as on the Uists. That is a plus, but we are still not where we want to be. The Government needs to clarify a number of points, as the Scottish Crofting Federation points out.

The Convener: I would like to make a point about the Uists. Last night, in this very room, we had a celebration of the 2015 United Nations international year of soils, and the chief executive of SNH, Susan Davies, pointed out that the two major issues that it is tackling in that regard are the peatlands, which we know much about, and the fragile machairs, particularly in the Uists. Those issues have to come into play when we are talking about the way in which geese affect the fragile nature of those grazings and those lands in the Uists. There is a very good reason why we need to take them into account, and they have not been taken into account in the Government's response at the present time.

Graeme Dey: Thankfully, I do not have a constituency interest in this, but it is a hugely important issue. By any reasonable judgment, the answers that we have received from the Government thus far have not been as comprehensive as we would like. Patrick Krause says that they are incomplete and inadequate, and that is a fair assessment. As a parliamentary committee, we should pursue both the lack of response to the specific questions that we posed and the important on-the-ground issues that colleagues have noted. The Convener: That sums up what we need to do. We need to go back to the Government and get those answers. Do members agree that we should write to the Government on the basis of Patrick Krause's arguments and back them up by saying that we would like complete answers as soon as possible?

Members indicated agreement.

**Written submission the Scottish Crofting Federation on Petition
PE 01490 in response to the Scottish Government letter of 17 February 2015**

We appreciate that the Scottish Government have given a comprehensive reply to the letter from the RACCE of 05 December 2014 and that they have addressed issues raised in the annex, if not in the order raised. However, overall we feel the SG letter is somewhat evasive and incomplete.

We have a few points to comment on that we feel were inadequately addressed or that we feel the SG response to was disappointing. We have added some endnotes which are comments from our local contact.

A general comment is that SG repeatedly refers to Islay where a vast amount of public money is spent on goose management. However, whilst this information is appreciated, the petition subject is the Uists and SG appears to avoid addressing what is happening there.

Following the RACCE order of requests for response:

The RACCE asked for a response to the communications with Netherlands. SG response in their point 3 is disappointing and does not provide the information asked for.

The RACCE's request for a response to the Crofting Commission's point that the goose populations are forcing crofters to be in breach of crofting regulation, appears to be ignored by SG.

SG's response to the RACCE comment that "the current approach and methods of controlling geese require to be reviewed" is inadequately answered in saying that the NGMRG "is still at an early stage in some of the work arising from the 2010 Review". Will time-frames like this "ensure that goose populations, and their impact on agriculture and the environment, are effectively managed"?

SG have supplied a lot of useful information on funding of goose management schemes and research, which is appreciated. Whilst this wasn't specifically asked for the total of £1,041,719 being spent on Islay in 2014/15 against £62,600 being spent on the Uists the same year is startling. The stated Uist budget reduction to £45,400 and then £35,400 in subsequent years is deeply disappointing and SG fails to demonstrate how it would endeavour to make up the shortfall needed to run an adequate control programme in the Uists, as asked for by RACCE.

SG has supplied some useful information in their response concerning adaptive management schemes and training, which is appreciated. It appears that they have still failed to address the crucial points raised by RACCE under this section, that "the Committee is of the view that this is a national problem that requires to be addressed by the Scottish Government as a matter of urgency" and that the "committee recommends that the Scottish Government reconsider its approach to the funding of goose management programmes and allocate additional resources to crop protection and Adaptive Management Plans, ensuring that these programmes follow

best practice in terms of stakeholder involvement, management, design, implementation and monitoring”.

The issue of data-collection in the pilot schemes is, again, inadequately addressed in SG response.

The SG outline of its approach to marketing of goose meat is very thin. It would be a positive approach to the goose problem and is recommended by RACCE. A more comprehensive answer to this would be appreciated.

SCF has been in discussion about attendance of NGMRG meetings and SNH have been very helpful in facilitating this through VC. We will attend in person next week.

Endnotes

1. Numbers of Barnacles in Uists now @4000 (90% concentrated in N Uist) in Feb count and same count of pre- breeding pop of greylags was @5600. Pressure on spring bite of grass in N Uist therefore significant. What are explanations for increase in Barnacles according to RSPB? Their management needs to look at pressure from elsewhere and holistic system of control.
2. AM coming to an end. Uists have not hit their targets of 3400-4400. Now at 5600. Why? Has SNH failed to deliver? Maybe some questions about targets for AM being met needed in all regions. And Figures to demonstrate this. No goose count figures supplied from Feb Count. If not met (as I suspect for Uist) how will funding continue to achieve this?
3. Continued lethal scaring of geese will be essential over breeding season. Cereal crops will always be very vulnerable so crop protection needed as well as population control at other times of the year. Uists has different system to Tiree etc with its reliance on machair corn growing (and this is last bastion of traditional cropping, a sympathetic wildlife management system and key habitat now under threat from geese etc)
4. Goose meat opportunities do not seem to be developed outside Orkney. Why? Some geese meat sales on Uists but could be more and opportunities for use in school dinners/ OAP/care homes etc have not been developed/researched. Research new markets. Sales on island only too restrictive? Use of goose meat in public services could be adopted in Harris and Lewis.
5. Suggestion that sport shooting can help to control geese is optimistic. Figures for Uist are wrong (table does not add up) Suggests 2700 (should be 950) geese to be shot by sport pa. If this is to be the case, how to work better with estates to secure this figure. Not realistic. Better results on Tiree where goose shooting is encouraged by Duke's factor.
6. What is tourist potential of geese? Eg: Barnacles on Uist.

We thank the RACCE for their interest in this vital issue that has such a devastating effect on crofters and ask that the issues raised above be pursued with Scottish Government.