

Minutes of the first meeting of the National Goose Forum

at Vane Farm, 10.00 on 14 November 1997

Present John Randall (Chairman), John Ramsay, David Cant, John Doherty, Donald MacDonald, Steve Sankey, Andy Douse, John Thomson, Mark Andrew, Gill Hartley, Ian Melrose, Henry Murdoch, Frances Reid, John Hood, Colin Sheddon, Andy Robertson, John Miles, Daniel Gotts (Secretary).

Apologies John Gilmour, John Elder

Action Points from first meeting

AP/NGF/1— John Doherty to provide a suggested vocabulary for the next meeting.

AP/NGF/2— Daniel Gotts to draft a paper on a possible National Policy Framework.

AP/NGF/3— Steve Sankey, Andy Douse, Gill Hartley and John Miles to prepare a draft research specification.

AP/NGF/4— John Randall to investigate the possibility of Scottish Office funding.

AP/NGF/5— John Randall and John Ramsay to prepare a draft work programme for the next meeting.

1. Background

The Chairman outlined the background to the National Goose Forum (NGF). The NGF has been set up by Ministers at The Scottish Office as an experiment to see whether greater consensus on the way forward can be reached.

Timescale

There are four parts to the remit of the NGF, as set out in the Terms of Reference (ToR)— key is to advise Ministers on the development of a national policy framework for the management of geese and agriculture (NPF). Ministers expect advice by the summer of 1999 to enable longer-term mechanisms to be in place for the winter of 1999/2000. SNH has been asked to continue with its pilot schemes where appropriate until then.

The NGF is likely therefore to be providing advice to Ministers of the new Scottish Parliament— this is only 20 months away and presents the NGF with a difficult task. Ministers hope the NGF can reach a consensus— they will not hesitate to wind it up if it appears not to be heading towards a solution.

Guidelines

1. The NPF should address the overall aims of policy:
 - Meet the UK's nature conservation obligations
 - Minimise economic losses to farmers
 - Ensure maximum value for public money (VFM)
2. The NPF must be based on a clear distinction between the different conservation status of geese species.
3. The NGF should give advice on the possibility of a new national goose payments scheme.

Procedures

It is expected that the NGF will meet two or three times a year. In between these meetings, sub-groups may meet or members will be involved in the preparation of papers. Papers and discussions should be treated with a degree of confidentiality— the Chairman wished to encourage full and frank discussions within the NGF, and this would be difficult if members commented publicly on the details of papers considered or views expressed by others within the NGF.

After some discussion, it was agreed that organisations should be free to express publicly the views of their members, but individual members should be aware of their loyalty to the forum. The Chairman asked that members should raise any potentially difficult information releases with the group beforehand. This was agreed.

It was suggested that The Scottish Office should prepare a news release soon after each meeting of the NGF– The Raptor Forum provides a half-page note of the discussions which have taken place. This was agreed.

2. Terms of Reference

Paper NGF2/97 provides information on the ToR and the membership of the NGF. There are two groups– the members, and a group of consultees who are available for consultation as necessary by the NGF. It was suggested that farmers who have been in schemes could be included on the list directly, rather than being consulted through NFUS. This could be considered at the appropriate time.

Comments

Some members supported expansion of the ToR for two related reasons:

- Within Scotland, Lord Sewel is keen to integrate rural policy.
- CAP reform currently points to an integration of rural support.

It was suggested that biodiversity and tourism should be added to part (a) of the remit– in other places where geese are an issue the economic analysis is wider elsewhere because although agriculture is important, it is not the only facet.

Part (b) of the NGF's remit was raised– this covers the provision of advice on good practice to local goose management groups (GMSs). It was suggested that experience to date implies that the NGF may need to oversee different arrangements in different parts of country– there is a need for a local look at some issues.

The Chairman emphasised that Ministers had set out the ToR and he is reluctant to go back to them over the remit. However, this did not rule-out the inclusion of relevant issues in the discussions of the NGF. He also confirmed that once national advice becomes available, it would then be possible to consider adjustments at a local level.

3. SNH report on arrangements for 1997/98

The Chairman reported that Ministers had asked SNH to continue interim arrangements where they are judged necessary for the next two winters. He also stated that it is not for the NGF to get into pros and cons of the current interim schemes.

John Thomson provided a report for information on the arrangements for the coming winter.

Islay

This is the most expensive area, and SNH is proposing to extend the scheme on the existing basis for one further year. These arrangements have been offered to farmers, and some have applied so far.

The scheme is proposed to be on a different basis for 1998/99– the payments will be on an area basis and not a goose headage basis. SNH will put in some extra money to help pave the way to a different scheme in future– an extra £12k has been made available. In addition to the Goose Management Scheme (GMS), there are some management agreements (MAs) on other areas– these payments amount to more money than the GMS. The MAs are due to end in the autumn of 1998; SNH does not intend to renew these as by 1998/99 the GMS will be extended to include the areas currently under MAs. The GMS and the relevant MAs cost over £0.5m per year– £3.5m has been paid out on Islay over the last five years.

Solway

The scheme on the Solway is due to run through the coming winter, and there should be no need to change for the next winter. SNH has put in a bid for further EU Objective 5b funds.

South Walls, Orkney

This scheme, relating to barnacle geese (an Annex 1 species) will run forward for the next two winters.

Strathbeg

This scheme was for a different species– grey geese– and was always seen as an exception. The scheme had already been extended for one extra year, but SNH judged it should now end.

Uists

This scheme will continue for the next two winters.

4. Policy Framework

The paper sets out information on three main things:

1. The original discussion paper.
2. Summarises responses.
3. Decisions taken by Ministers this summer.

The Chairman suggested that the NGF should now discuss in general terms what sort of NPF should be aimed for, and he circulated a diagram as a basis for discussion. He then summarised the main issues in paper.

- Any NPF must be within the objectives set, and include the ability to review the conservation status of different species. All the aspects shown on the diagram are relevant to the NPF
- The paper suggested a distinction between:
 1. Species already at favourable conservation status (FCS).
 2. Species needing protected management:
 - (a) Certain core areas where there is protection and encouragement, with payments to compensate farmers for losses on these areas or for positive management.
 - (b) Other areas– scaring or shooting under licence to move geese off these areas onto the core areas.

The issue of the management of species at FCS was raised. These birds can do quite a lot of damage and it was suggested that this problem has arisen because of the success of conservation measures. Profitable farmers will suffer fringe incursion, but in many places geese are no longer just a fringe incursion– incomes are falling, but payments are still the same for increasing numbers of geese. The Chairman emphasised that management for species already at FCS is not necessarily excluded.

Some members expressed concern at the vocabulary being used, for example the interchangeability of ‘population’ and ‘species’. The Chairman suggested that the scientists could provide definitive advice on this, and after discussion it was agreed that John Doherty would provide a suggested vocabulary for the next meeting.

AP/NGF/1– John Doherty to provide a suggested vocabulary for the next meeting.

Other topics raised were:

- Work to establish the population level of different species, and from this determine the conservation status of each species.
- The necessity to include all geese species– for example bean geese, dark-bellied Brent geese.
- The need for the NGF to be aware of national and international commitments– the relevant EU Directives, the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) and Flyway Agreements (FA).
- The effect on geese populations of actions elsewhere in the range of each species, and the importance of setting local management within the context of international FAs.
- The background to FAs and those in which the UK is involved– those for Greenland white-fronted geese, Svalbard population of barnacle geese, and Dark-bellied Brent geese.
- The issue of non-agricultural factors and the economic benefits of geese to rural economies.
- The status of the Uist population and their impact on crofting. Crofters don’t have shooting rights, so the socio-economic benefits to them are minimal and the indigenous population is difficult to control.

It was agreed that the Secretary would draft a more detailed paper for the next meeting on a possible NPF in the light of the discussion.

AP/NGF/2– Daniel Gotts to draft a paper on a possible National Policy Framework.

5. Research

The Chairman presented paper NGF4/97 on proposals for a review of what existing research has been carried out or is underway on geese and agriculture. He suggested there was a need to take stock of existing research to identify gaps, and emphasised that any research encouraged by the NGF should relate to the NPF.

During the discussion the emphasis was on the need to summarise the information already available and to have this done as soon as possible. Other issues raised were:

- Any research should consider the level of harvest of populations which could be sustained.
- The need for a review to include work on the socio-economic impacts of geese.
- The importance of looking at ways geese are managed in other countries.

It was agreed that a review of existing research is needed, probably limited to a three month contract for about £10k. This should focus on the elements of a NPF and should not be an 'omnibus' research programme. A small group should help prepare a specification– Steve Sankey, Andy Douse, Gill Hartley and John Miles. John Randall agreed to investigate the possibility of Scottish Office funding.

AP/NGF/3– Steve Sankey, Andy Douse, Gill Hartley and John Miles to prepare a draft research specification.

AP/NGF/4– John Randall to investigate the possibility of Scottish Office funding.

6. Work Programme

The Chairman suggested that the other aspects of the NGF's remit should be discussed at the next meeting. He proposed that a draft work programme should be tabled then. It was agreed that the best approach would be to work back from the end of the timescale for the NGF.

AP/NGF/5– John Randall and John Ramsay to prepare a draft work programme for the next meeting.

7. Any other business

The availability of population viability analysis (PVA) studies was raised and it was agreed that these would be covered by the research review. These had been done for most species of geese wintering in Scotland, apart from Icelandic greylag geese, and SNH was in the final stages of editing. Once completed, the studies could be made available.

John Doherty noted that in the table summarising responses to the discussion paper, the column headed WWT is blank– he then circulated a copy of WWT's original response.

8. Date and venue for next meeting

It was suggested that visits could be organised to a number of places to look at goose management– for example Mersehead and Caerlaverock.

The next meeting of the National Goose Forum will be in the Boardroom at Battleby on Thursday 19 February 1998, starting at 10am.

Daniel Gotts (Secretary), 17 December 1997.