



## NEWS RELEASE

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### Call for the creation of a crofting support programme

The call for a comprehensive, stand-alone crofting support programme to be a key element of Scotland's future rural development policies was heard at a one-day conference held in Wester Ross today (Monday).

The conference, which focussed on the key issue of how agricultural support in Scotland can be reformed to promote biodiversity and traditional crofting practices, was designed to influence the current decision-making process on the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. The CAP is being reformed at the moment with the intention of channelling funds toward those farmers who are actively using the land.

The well-attended event was held in Plockton Hall and co-hosted by the Scottish Crofting Federation, the National Trust for Scotland and the Skye and Lochalsh Environment Forum.

In his presentation, Iain Turnbull, the National Trust's property manager at Balmacara, described how the Trust has implemented a funding system to assist traditional crofting practices that help to maintain biodiversity. He demonstrated how support models can be simple, flexible and effective. A trial project, set up in 2006 on three crofting townships of the Balmacara Estate, offered funding to crofters to cover the basic production costs of planting various crops, including potatoes, turnips and cereals, and also offered a premium for cutting hay rather than silage with further assistance if hay cutting took place after 1<sup>st</sup> August.

Mr Turnbull said that key to making the process successful was building a relationship of trust with the crofters – a claim that appeared to be borne out by the fact that while 15 crofters had joined the scheme in 2006 this number had climbed by more than one-third to 24 in 2011. The average payment to crofters was between £520 and £620 each year with the total budget rising from £9,300 in 2006 to £13,840 in 2011.

Scottish Crofting Federation chief executive, Patrick Krause, said: "Iain described how one year, because of a sick cow which needed to be kept on the in-bye land, a crofter had been unable to grow hay on a piece of ground that they had allocated for hay that year. In consequence, the anticipated payment for that area was withheld. The crofter continued with, and was paid for, the rest of their agri-ecology programme as usual.

"That kind of flexibility is presently unimaginable from government led schemes which talk the language of clawback and fines. One of the key aspects that emerged from the meeting was the importance of creating a standalone support programme for crofting in the new Scottish Rural Development Programme that is flexible, effective, easy to access and appropriate to crofting. "This is something that a reformed SRDP can do because it has the flexibility necessary to utilise the different measures that are applicable to crofting and put them together into one coherent, beneficial package.

"I'm very encouraged by the fact that the idea of a crofting specific programme seemed to be raised by all of the speakers in one way or another and was then raised again from the floor. There seems to be a good deal of interest in creating a specific crofting agroecology support programme."

After the conference, Iain Turnbull said: "The issue of agricultural support is absolutely key to the future well-being of crofting and of rural communities in the Highlands and Islands and it is one that we, both in crofting areas and as a Scottish and British polity, have the chance to influence now. I hope that today's event will have played a part in moving the Scottish Government towards agricultural support policies that contribute to a healthy future for crofting agriculture, culture and society."

It was addressed by speakers with a wide range of expertise, from active crofters Alaistar Nicolson from Borve and John William Gillies from Raasay and agricultural consultant Alan Boulton to contributions by representatives of Scottish Natural Heritage and the head of the Scottish Government's CAP reform and crop policy team and Rob Gibson, the convenor of the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment committee.

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