



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Crofters accuse Scottish Government of environmental neglect**

45 angry crofters at a Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF) Uist meeting have accused the Scottish Government of ignoring the threat by swarming geese to crofters and the acclaimed machair habitat.

"This is not a sudden or new occurrence", said Sam MacDonald, Chair of the North Uist branch of SCF, "crofters warning of the escalating geese numbers and the effect it has on crofting, and therefore on the machair habitat. SCF has been fighting for movement on this for years and have raised a petition in the Scottish Parliament. But Scottish Government have responded by systematically reducing any help. Well, it has got to the point now that if something isn't done as a matter of urgency crofting will cease and the machair will suffer irreparable damage. What else can you call that but neglect?"

"Crofters are angry about this" Mr MacDonald continued. "The machair is an internationally acclaimed habitat that has European designations such as 'Special Area of Conservation (SAC)' and 'Special Protection Area (SPA)', largely due to the crofting methods we use. Yet Scottish Government has chosen to flout its obligations and to let the crofting that maintains that habitat be driven off by the damage caused by a plague of wild geese. It is ironic that Scottish Government are currently consulting on the future of crofting. The situation in Uist says quite clearly what Scottish Government think of crofters and their environment."

"To rub salt into the wound", David Muir, Secretary of SCF Uists & Barra, added, "there is a sizable budget of £1.3 million per year for control of wild geese in Scotland, but a million a year is spent on control of geese on the farms of Islay. Uist crofters need a small fraction of that but this year nothing has been spent in the Uists. We had a very effective scheme funded by Scottish Natural Heritage but it stopped and so now the goose population is rapidly increasing again. Why does the budget get used up on Islay?"

Mr Muir added, "The UK government are saying that post-Brexit rural support will be environment focussed. Is the Scottish Government of this opinion too or does it intend to continue to funnel support to farmers at the expense of crofting and the environment?"

Current crofting management on the machair, based on cattle and cropping is very demanding in terms of time and money. If the geese population gets out of hand again, leading to unacceptable levels of damage to both crops and the best-managed and improved grassland, then that will lead to the most committed and energetic crofters switching to a lower input, and less risky, style of management. Put at its simplest - cropping would be abandoned wholesale and most would move to sheep. This would have a devastating impact on the diversity of cherished birds such as lapwing, corn bunting and corncrake, on the machair.

Mr MacDonald again, "We appreciate that there needs to be a balance between protecting these important goose species and protecting the internationally acclaimed machair habitat, but it is way out of kilter to the detriment of the environment and crofting. Biodiversity is being lost and crofters have been abandoned by the Government to deal with a disaster not of their making.

"We have at last had some assurances from Scottish Government that the Uist situation will be reconsidered at the National Goose Management Review Group and SNH will form an action plan. We cannot overstress the urgency", Mr MacDonald concluded, "we need immediate action: the reinstatement of a goose reduction scheme and redistribution of the budget if there is no new money. For the long term we need a change to national goose management policy that will not only benefit Uist but also other crofting areas. We need policy that is fit for purpose."

END

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**Notes to editors**

- Pictures can be found at: <http://www.crofting.org>