



NEWS RELEASE

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SCF meetings find potential for crofting after Brexit

The Scottish Crofting Federation has just concluded a short tour of membership meetings in Lewis and Shetland which had as their theme 'Threats to Crofting'. A very encouraging turnout and intense degree of engagement at the meetings keenly illustrated the high level of concern amongst crofters.

SCF vice-chair, Donald MacKinnon (himself from Lewis), commented that meetings such as these, with nearly 100 attending in Stornoway, for example, "demonstrate the fierce commitment to crofting still out there, and the continuing strength of crofting culture in places like Lewis and Shetland. SCF will continue to lobby hard on these issues on behalf of our members".

SCF director Eleanor Arthur added "Although Brexit fatigue had clearly set in, there was great concern about the possibly 'catastrophic' loss of EU markets, particularly in Shetland, which exports a high proportion of its sheep." One SCF member commented that "Whether for or against (Brexit), solutions have to be found VERY quickly...or we just won't put the tups out!" There was also widespread concern about the announced reduction in LFASS payments, with scepticism that the Scottish Government can maintain its commitments to retain these payments at 80% of existing levels. "How can we depend on these people, the same people who told us three years ago that the IT system was fixed?" was a sentiment expressed at a Shetland meeting.

There was, however, some optimism expressed about the potential for moving the emphasis in the sheep sector towards high quality 'heather fed', high welfare, naturally-reared stock which could open up new markets and command higher returns. There was a readiness to explore new markets, particularly on Shetland, although this would require stability in the current industry and its support systems to allow such transitions to be made.

It was felt that the imminent redesign of the Scottish agriculture support scheme should be seen as an opportunity, but that voices from the crofting areas needed to be heard loudly at national policy level, otherwise the new system would again be dominated by the larger farming interests on the eastern and southern mainland. We agreed that we would concentrate much of our lobbying for the new agricultural support system on achieving drastically

simplified and more accessible agri-environment schemes that will reach a much higher percentage of crofters – ideally with some locally-led inputs and involvement. It cannot be emphasised enough that crofting is more than simply agriculture. It is the linchpin which sustains communities and safeguards the environment.

Vocal concerns were raised on both islands about damage to grass and crops from geese, as well as increasing predation of sheep (both lambs and adults) by white-tailed eagles on Lewis and Harris. There was dismay at the prospect of the existing limited goose management schemes in the Western Isles possibly being deprived of all their current funding and a strong feeling that SNH and the Scottish Government urgently needed to find a solution to fund ongoing goose management – which Lewis shows can be successful if adequately financially supported – where, as SCF’s other vice-chair, Brendan O’Hanrahan commented, “the Western Isles would no longer be treated as an undeserving urchin while Islay continued to be supported generously by its doting uncle”.

END

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Notes to editors

- There were three meetings: in Stornoway on 7th Feb; in Sandwick, south Shetland on 13th Feb, and Voe, north Shetland on 14th Feb.
- A picture can be found at: <http://www.crofting.org> or by contacting the SCF office.