SCF submits evidence to the Scottish parliament

The Crofting Reform Bill was introduced to the Scottish parliament on 9th December 2009. It is now undergoing scrutiny by the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee who invited anyone interested in informing the committee to submit written evidence.

Central to the SCF written evidence is the assertion that crofting is not farming and doesn't need to be brought into 21st century mainstream farming. We went on to say:

“Crofting is a resilient rural culture that has kept thriving communities in some of the remotest parts of Scotland and which has survived a relentless stream of misguided attempts to demolish or reform it. This resilience should be nurtured and this bill used to enable crofting communities to continue to take care of their own affairs in a manner which has served them well for many generations and is consistent with modern community development.

This bill, like the last, is teetering on the edge of collapse. We believe this is mainly because it was constructed in a top-down manner with little meaningful participation. Government officials involved in this bill’s drafting did not follow the recommendations for rural development policy set out by the government’s own directives; nor those of the Carnegie Trust’s Commission for Rural Community Development; nor those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, as regards community development in Scotland.

Whilst the SCF acknowledges that the work of this committee is to scrutinise the provisions particular to the present bill, we feel that it is important to place this in the wider context of why there has been so much criticism. The continuing failure by government to allow crofters to participate meaningfully in the creation of legislation has led to a great deal of public money, once again, being spent on legislation that falls significantly short of being fit for purpose.

However, having said this, the SCF supports the progress of the bill in principle as we believe that there can be some good recouped if it is amended appropriately and supported by complementary ministerial direction. We urge the parliament to use this opportunity to stipulate amendments that will allow the bill to truly enact the principles of de-centralisation and community ownership that it claims to promote.

The SCF wants this bill to:

1. decentralise crofting decision making through the partnership of a majority-elected Crofting Commission informed and advised by a locally-elected assessor network;
2. create a fit-for-purpose crofting register, through community-led development, held and maintained by the Crofting Commission.

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Continued on page 4

Sheep and goat identification and traceability

New rules for sheep and goat identification and recording came into force on 31 December 2009, involving electronic identification (EID) and individual tagging.

This has been resisted by the Scottish government on behalf of Scottish producers but it is a European directive and there wasn’t enough support from the UK government or other member states to block it. So we have to live with it.

The Scottish government is trying to make it as painless and as practical as possible. There will be full guidance sent to all sheep and goat producers but the government have also given us a summary which you’ll find on page 5.
The crofter, line would hold crofting federation of bureaucracy. Two the core issue which is thriving itself, diverting resources from crofting becoming an industry in under review – one has to pose census forms in a month, crofting Message from the chair...feeding, access to animals, – ie implications for stock, and men …’

While dismissing the hard work in my sixty plus years that i can remember that i can remember lengthening day and the iTh The The son, who is involved with the assignee to sign up for the access, house site and plans as membership.
The call for maximising food production to this work. a common theme devoted so much time and effort wealth of instructors and course capacity and are really fulfilling a niche for aspiring entrants. We are encouraged by the retention of the bulk hire scheme, albeit tempered with caveats about support and its scale. The danger is that a reduced scheme will cost more per bull; this will discourage users and so reduce numbers further – and so the downward spiral. However, the work of the SCF chair Neil MacLeod to encourage farmers to apply for crofting induction courses, which one could access information to help them in their quest.

The Crofting Connections story is heart-warming and a great example of how to foster a love of the land at a young age. The sit they occupied at the recent future of crofting conference in Stornoway was encouraging and it is a bounden duty that we leave crofting in a vibrant state for their future. I have just read a report by John, the driving-train engineer Balbithann, whose views on agriculture are always thought-provoking, mind-searching and worth a listen. John, having just returned from the Falkland Islands where he only spoke of his envy by their operation with government, with no individual ID worries, just theostream of bureaucracy. Two the core issue which is thriving itself, diverting resources from crofting becoming an industry in under review – one has to pose census forms in a month, crofting Message from the chair...

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Continued from page 1

adequately resourced to do this:
3. be supported by ministerial direction and guidance to planning authorities to create a secure croft land and help to address speculation.
4. be supported by appropriate incentive schemes.eg housing grant and loan scheme.

The bill in more detail

The bill will have five parts plus two schedules. Where we commented, in summary, we said:

Part 1. Reorganisation of the Crofters Commission
This S C F accepts that the Crofters Commission is not the appropriate body to Crofting Commission to reflect the change in its function and is content with government assurance that additional costs for the change in name will be minimal.

Part 2. The Crofting Register
The S C F supports having an effective crofting register. Indeed, it is remarkable that so few bills have been introduced since 1994 when successive governments believed they could measure the potential impact of new policy or change with a reliable database. However, the principle of the registration procedure is wrong – there is no need to have a register as it would be antagonistic and divisive.

Trigger points mean every individual having to instigate a potential boundary dispute all possible great interest. (to both the individual and to the public if Legal Aid is used) with boundaries being established on the principle of ‘deepest pocket wins’. Furthermore, the whole concept could be misunderstood from their croft for very good reason but with respect it is imperative to protect croft land for is Ministers to direct planning authorities to create a secure croft land environment.

Part 3. Duties of crofters and owner-occupier crofters – To consider the relationship while simultaneously removing the housing scheme that made it possible to live on the croft is absurd. Any absentees initiative should dovetail with a crofting register which is likely to have information on the maintenance and working of the land. More importantly, a housing support scheme which was intended to end and re-established. We reiterated the assertion that dealing with neglect is more pertinent to the health of crofting than dealing with absenteeism. Crofters could have to face increasing new tenants without their croft land and help to address speculation.

Part 4. Further amendments of the 1993 Act – Extending the period in which a crofter is obliged to order the disposal of croft land from five years to seven years and accepting that this will not be discriminatory against crofters; all land capable of growing food should be conserved.

Schedule 1. We approve of the framework for the Crofting Commission, though the chair should be elected by the board and not by the individual communities. This may well be by giving a subject to another commission to work the croft in their absence. However, we feel that this should only be used as a land management tool and not used to create an under-class of crofter with few rights.

What next?

The SCF strongly recommends that the Scottish Executive consider in order to extend and strengthen the SCF to deal specifically with crofting community empowerment, a well thought plan. This may well be by giving a community mapping and mediation – which is widely commended by assessors should be trained to the legal profession to help keep the CROFTING. Assessors will be elected by, and accountable to, their crofting community.

Making the best of EID in the slaughterhouse

In summary, Brian Pack suggests crofters need to be looking at:

• the need to think about SCEA for crofters to move to a slaughterhouse
• new entrants – how can they be helped in the interim (up to 2014)
• and we have evidence from the British Smallfarming Trust that 40% of our respondents would like to have a slaughterhouse
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W H I L E V I S I T I N G a mainland Scottish croft recently I was assisted by several members they were having with slaughterhouses especially in being sure their own animals were returned.

This is completely unacceptable if we are promoting a story along with our small farmers and that the production, breed and health of each animal – total responsibility.

A member delivered meat to a slaughterhouse a pre-arranged day. The butcher had booked to cook the meat after the appropriate hanging. The animals were picked up and delivered to the butcher who was unable to process because the animals were 12 to 14 months old. The opinion these animals had not hung enough. The owner’s animals which had been hung for many days had not hung enough. We do not know how many took them for lack of hanging before the head is removed to ensure total traceability.

I feel that we get some benefit from this EID EIS. We advocate that slaughterhouses be compelled to use an indelible, permanent marking of the animal’s number, on all parts of the animals coming out of the slaughterhouse. It is possible. The animals must be marked before the head is removed to ensure total traceability.

Norman Leask

A month in the life of an SCF Director

Continued from page 2

• 4th week – an afternoon board meeting of LEADER. We are now working with our partners to ensure our endeavours taking shape • Standing out of the offices in place, a laundry, village shop, very encouraging youth participation in crofting, Coningsby, small dinghies for rowing, sailing and water sports on one of the islands.

All applications have to be evaluated and approved as being of public interest and evaluated as being in accordance with the principles of public interest.

• Radio interview with Isles FM with overview of where crofting is at at the moment and how the feedback from listeners.

• BBC Radio 4 in overview of the ‘Scot Patch’ programme which covered the issue of the new registration scheme.

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Norman Leask
CROFTING RESOURCES PROGRAMME

Siobhan takes the mystery out of SDRP

The application process, bringing clarity on why and how the Scottish crofting Produce mark, one of the best-known and most trusted of its kind, is being awarded. The format of this mystery has been widely perceived as being complex, uninformative and confusing for crofters. This is why we have decided to run an application training course to help crofters better understand the process of applying for the Scottish crofting Produce mark. The training will be held on 25th May in the Highlands and Islands, with two more courses planned for later in the year. If you are interested in attending one of these courses, please contact Siobhan at siobhan@crofting.org.

A lot of bull

The CROFTER, March 2010

Donald Murdie
donald@crofting.org
Phone: 01470 511 295

Siobhan takes the mystery out of SDRP

The aims of the event were to bring together those involved in the application process and to discuss the implications of the findings. The event will be held on 25th May in the Highlands and Islands, with two more courses planned for later in the year. If you are interested in attending one of these courses, please contact Siobhan at siobhan@crofting.org.

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When defending the status quo; co-Pa-cogeca works best. Insiders report that deciding how much to spend will emerge from a 'co-decision' process. What will this mean for member states, both on the development budget and on how public money only for the environment will be spent? We would welcome a debate on what other public goods exist – or indeed on how and why support should be given for market goods.

From our perspective, detailed proposals and justifications are needed at this stage. We note, as so many times in the past, how those in favour of the status quo – who most support goes to a few businesses who in the next claim to be the most efficient and commercial – use broad generalisations and easy clichés. Don't judge the proposals by the proposers – have a read and then reach your conclusion! We want a decent reward not just for management practices but for development of diverse agriculture and for diversification. We want the payments targeted to redress past injustices but to reflect what the policy says it values. Such a policy should see crofters right.

The proposal is just that – a chance to start the debate, but one that we hope is thought through and comprehensive. It puts forward a number of support packages – area payments and direct payments with investment support and help for the most marginal agriculture-dependent communities. Options and responses can be lodged at the CAP2010 website.

Given our viewpoints, it is not surprising that the environment looms large in the paper. However, we are very clear that we are not promoting public money only for the environment but public money for public goods. We would welcome a debate on what other public goods exist – or indeed on how and why support should be given for market goods.

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CROFTING CONNECTIONS

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CROFTING CONNEXIONS

I AM A PUPIL in my second year of Sgoil Lionacleit’s crofting course, studying for the Intermediate 2 qualification. I was asked to give a speech at the future of crofting conference held in Stornoway about my own croft and crofting experiences.

I stay on our small family croft out in the heart of Lochboisdale, South Uist. The croft came into the family only a couple of years ago. The first year of our crofting course coincided very well with our own croft development, as at that time we were able to start spending money and time on the croft which had suffered from neglect and had not been worked for over forty years. The course has not only taught me the basics of crofting such as animal husbandry, growing crops, dry stone walling, fetching and the history of crofting. It has also put me in contact with many people who are always willing to help me and given me the confidence to go and work on other local crofts.

We have many plans for the croft, some of which will take place this year and some of which are already happening. In the last couple of months I have managed to get the root of the 14 hens. I sell the eggs to friends and family and we are increasing the numbers next month. Last summer I hatched some duck eggs and in March we committed to clear a poor patch of poor land and to fatten up for the freezer. We are developing the vegetable garden and building a fruit cage. In October last year I bought my first half dozen hogs with more to follow. My latest plan is to keep turkeys to fatten up in time for Christmas.

Once I leave school I am going to agricultural college. Whilst I am away, I will do an apprenticeship in butchery and eventually I hope to make a living from crofting, butchering my own produce for sale. For additional income I will do fencing and dry stone walling.

There are now many opportunities for young crofters within our islands. There is the opportunity to sell produce locally and the possibility to export the ‘Uist’ brand. Anyone who does go away to agricultural college and returns home will be able to offer assistance to other crofters.

I am glad to say that crofting means a lot to me as it is, and over the next few years it will be my life.

Julia Hamilton

Julia Hamilton and Kate Moody are the education and outreach officers for Achnahaird, Kilmartin House Museum and Auchindrain in the Argyll and Bute area. Julia is also a crofter and has a flock of Soay sheep.
O rganisational democracy

Get on board: trustee opportunity

Can you help the SCF vision for crofting?

The future of this organisation depends largely on the experience and enthusiasm of our members. We are actively looking for new and old trustees to be part of our board of directors.

If you want to contribute to SCF and the work of the board we are currently seeking nominees for two people with experience of the following:

• strategic financial
• HR skills
• fundraising

If you feel you have the experience and enthusiasm to be part of the SCF board or would like further information, please contact Edinburgh office: 01599 566 365

Closing date for nominations is Friday 30th April 2010

Leaving a legacy to SCF

BY LEAVING a legacy to the Scottish Crofting Federation you can support the future of crofting.

For most people, providing for their families and friends is their priority. However, once family and friends have been taken care of, any remainder of your estate can make a big difference to the work of SCF. You should talk to a solicitor about your will and any provision you might wish to make in favour of SCF.

What type of legacy are you leaving?

There are three types of legacy:

1. A residuary legacy – once you have provided for your family and others you can leave the remainder of your estate to SCF. This can be a small gift or even a very large sum of money.

2. A percentage legacy – a specific sum of money, eg £10,000.

3. A specific legacy of a valuable item, eg a tractor, a house, or even the interest in the tenancy of a croft.

Why do I need a solicitor?

As a will is a legal document, it if it is not prepared properly it may be invalid. That's why the SCF recommends using a fully qualified solicitor to make or change a will.

A will can be changed by the testator (ie someone who has made a will) by the use of a codicil. A codicil is an additional document to your will and it must be signed, witnessed and dated.

Where can I find out more about making a will?

The constitution defines what the SCF is and sets out the rules for its internal governance. This process meant that the SCF became a charity. It gained registered charity status. This process meant that the SCF became a charity and is now also registered with the office of the Scottish Charity Regulator. The constitution also dictates that we change our board members regularly – every year a third of the board stands down and we take on new members. The directors can be nominated by the membership, by the council or by the board. This is why we call for nominations in this issue, ready for the AGM in June.

The essence of this structure could be summed up as the willingness of the wider membership to take full part in the political position and strategy of the organisation by individuals, through due process of election of officers at the annual general meeting and at board and council level.

The board and council must regularly every quarter to determine policy positions, having consulted the advice of the members or subject-specific working groups drawn from the board, council and wider membership. The board may also meet alone sometimes, such as when the board has to determine company business matters to determine the remit of a or of the SCF and the council representatives are voluntary. The time put in by our elected representatives illustrates the commitment to the cause and gives them an edge in their area of expertise, no other organisation has.

The top priorities for crofting

In the membership survey sheet included with this issue, information is sought on your top priorities for crofting. This enables us to ensure that the SCF is focusing on the most important issues facing crofting today. It is therefore vital that this information is as accurate as possible. We need to know what your priorities are so we can focus our activities accordingly.

Please give us your views so that we can formulise policies that accurately reflect what our members want. We look forward to hearing from you.
Agricultural buildings on the croft

Clare Nicolson has all the details

There are a number of reasons why a twenty-first-century crofter might consider erecting an agricultural building on his land, not least because many crofts have insufficient facilities to store or shelter livestock, feed and machinery with existing buildings often being nothing more than old ruins or dilapidated barns. Damage caused by the recent heavy snowfall highlighted the fact that many are in need of renovation or replacement.

Modern-day agri-buildings come in almost every shape and size (and even colour) and offer such a degree of flexibility that they can be multi-purpose structures that bring enormous benefits. And with a lifespan of forty years or more they can provide long-term solutions to improving quality and reducing costs.

The thought of undertaking such a large project can be daunting, both finacially and logistically. Erecting any building can be a slow and ponderous process that requires forward planning: good research at the outset is vital and will pay dividends throughout.

There are three key factors to consider initially:

1) what type and size of building is required. 

2) where the building is to be sited.

3) how the project will be financed.

Building specifications and packages vary from supplier to supplier so shopping around is vital to source the most suitable product. All companies and suppliers will provide everything from sound advice and tailor-made packages to a comprehensive supply, deliver and erect service. Any project will benefit from their experience.

The location of the building is crucial not only in terms of how it will function and serve its purpose but also in the wider sense of local planning issues. Not all agricultural buildings require planning permission. An application for prior notification can be completed to notify the planning authority of proposals to determine whether prior approval is required. The result of this will be a determination that prior approval is or is not required. As a guide, a development on agricultural land does not require planning permission.

The farm building is more than 0.4 hectares; 

• the development is designed for agricultural use only (ie not a dwelling); 

• the construction, extension or alteration of any building or structure is

Based in Fifie, Premier Steel Buildings supply quality cold rolled steel buildings throughout the UK.

The company, which has over five years’ experience in this relatively new light-weight steel building industry, have quickly become the largest supplier of cold-rolled steel buildings in Scotland. This level of business has been achieved by word-of-mouth recommendations based on our high level of customer service and superb quality buildings.

Focusing our energies on steel buildings only has allowed us to become specialists in the field. Premier Steel Buildings are an authorised distributor for Capital Steel Buildings, and is currently the third-largest distributor in the UK for Capital Steel. Designed with flexibility in mind, rigorously tested and expertly crafted these buildings can last, almost entirely maintenance free, for thirty or forty years subject to local conditions.

Premier Steel Buildings specialise in design and supply only of these steel build buildings but can put you in touch with a fitter if required.

Our expertise, dedication and attention to detail help us to stand out from the crowd. We pride ourselves on our quotation service which is amongst the most detailed you will find. This approach reflects our philosophy of dealing with clients in an open and honest manner: knowing that budgeting is an integral part of a building project we promise not to omit any costs from our quote. Architectural drawings for planning consent are included with the building. Structural engineering certification can be supplied if necessary.

With Premier Steel Buildings you can be sure that your requirements come first from the outset. Your building is just that: your building, designed for you, for your needs.

Premier Steel Buildings are delighted to now offer Royal Bank of Scotland BOND payment system for payment security and peace of mind.
The beauty of sheep

Ian Williams fell in love

ALWAYS THOUGHT that sheep looked the same, woolly with black faces, or simply smaller black ones.

Then I was asked by my friend and neighbour to have a look at her favourite sheep. Star. Well, I thought, what is the point? They are all the same. But when I looked – and I mean really looked – I saw for the first time the beauty and completely different markings and characters of the sheep.

I was hooked – and have been sketching them for several years now. I try to capture the essence and character, leaving other details for the observer to fill in. I am working on a sketch of Suffolk sheep now; what fun they are!

My book “A Moment in Time on Skye” has most of my sheep sketches inside, along with lots of other animals.

It is available from me: Iain D Nicol, Loch Bay, Waternish, Isle of Skye. 01470 592 732, or via www.madeskiy.co.uk

News from the branch

In early February, the first gathering of the newly formed Lewis branch of the Scottish Crofting Federation saw a productive meeting held in an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm with a willingness to debate pertinent issues.

Aiming to vigorously pursue a number of matters on behalf of all crofters in Lewis by engaging in debate with all relevant parties, not least the crofters themselves, the SCF Lewis Branch intends to hold meetings in different areas of the island to provide an opportunity for the maximum amount of crofters to express their views and raise any concerns.

The SCF is the only member-based organisation with communities in the Highlands and Islands and is dedicated to safe-guarding crofting and its cultural heritage now and for generations to come.

Denise Macdonald, area representative and chairman of the Lewis branch explains: “The directors of the SCF work tirelessly every day of the week on behalf of crofters.”

“The organisation is held in high esteem at Holyrood and in Brussels. For example, one of our directors, Derek Pylin, has been seconded to the committee engaged in scrutinising the Crofting Reform Bill and Norman Leah regularly flies to Brussels for the other directors of the European Parliament.”

He continues: “The SCF has negotiated concessions from both Holyrood and Brussels, such as the revised LFASS and additional payments for crofters which they should have received in January.”

“I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the SCF to all crofters. That is why we need their continued support.”

It is felt that in our modern day there is a clear danger that the world of crofting could be regulated out of existence, as Denice remarks: “There are some, more cynical than I, who would argue that this is, indeed, the object of the exercice.”

“That is why it is important to guide civil servants and ministers in the right direction that the Crofting Reform Bill provides genuine support and protection for crofters and crofting communities, is order to preserve that unique way of life for future generations to come.”

The Lewis branch SCF plans to organise training seminars for crofters each year, in a variety of skills, which will be advertised in due course.

This year’s AGM will be held in the Council Chamber on Thursday, March 25, 6.30pm and will be followed by a public meeting at 7.30pm.

There will be guest speakers with an opportunity to ask questions and express views. The public meeting is also open to non-crofters.

For further information about the Scottish Crofting Federation, log onto www.crofting.org.

Photos: Iain D Nicol, chairman SCF, Denise MacDonald, branch chairman

SCF officials’ diary

SCF OFFICIALS have a very active participation within our organisation. In December it has been submitted to the committee for rural affairs and environment and has been presented to the committee. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Scottish Government, the local councils, crofters and other organisations.

In addition to these, two youth representatives attended a political training seminar organised by the European Co-ordination of Via Campesina (ECVC).

A report from this seminar is to be in the next edition of The Crofter.

In addition to the meetings, conferences and seminars that officials attend, they are involved with the reporting of these. They have been busy writing press statements, being interviewed for press, TV and radio as well as writing articles for our very own magazine The Crofter. Our officials’ letters are filed up for the following months including the meat marketing conference organised by our crofting resources programme and cross party group meetings.

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In early February, the first gathering of the newly formed Lewis branch of the Scottish Crofting Federation saw a productive meeting held in an atmosphere of optimism and enthusiasm with a willingness to debate pertinent issues.

Aiming to vigorously pursue a number of matters on behalf of all crofters in Lewis by engaging in debate with all relevant parties, not least the crofters themselves, the SCF Lewis Branch intends to hold meetings in different areas of the island to provide an opportunity for the maximum amount of crofters to express their views and raise any concerns.

The SCF is the only member-based organisation with communities in the Highlands and Islands and is dedicated to safe-guarding crofting and its cultural heritage now and for generations to come.

Denise Macdonald, area representative and chairman of the Lewis branch explains: “The directors of the SCF work tirelessly every day of the week on behalf of crofters.”

“The organisation is held in high esteem at Holyrood and in Brussels. For example, one of our directors, Derek Pylin, has been seconded to the committee engaged in scrutinising the Crofting Reform Bill and Norman Leah regularly flies to Brussels for the other directors of the European Parliament.”

He continues: “The SCF has negotiated concessions from both Holyrood and Brussels, such as the revised LFASS and additional payments for crofters which they should have received in January.”

“I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the SCF to all crofters. That is why we need their continued support.”

It is felt that in our modern day there is a clear danger that the world of crofting could be regulated out of existence, as Denice remarks: “There are some, more cynical than I, who would argue that this is, indeed, the object of the exercice.”

“That is why it is important to guide civil servants and ministers in the right direction that the Crofting Reform Bill provides genuine support and protection for crofters and crofting communities, is order to preserve that unique way of life for future generations to come.”

The Lewis branch SCF plans to organise training seminars for crofters each year, in a variety of skills, which will be advertised in due course.

This year’s AGM will be held in the Council Chamber on Thursday, March 25, 6.30pm and will be followed by a public meeting at 7.30pm.

There will be guest speakers with an opportunity to ask questions and express views. The public meeting is also open to non-crofters.

For further information about the Scottish Crofting Federation, log onto www.crofting.org.

Photos: Iain D Nicol, chairman SCF, Denise MacDonald, branch chairman

SCF officials’ diary

SCF OFFICIALS have a very active participation within our organisation. In December it has been submitted to the committee for rural affairs and environment and has been presented to the committee. The meeting was attended by representatives of the Scottish Government, the local councils, crofters and other organisations.

In addition to these, two youth representatives attended a political training seminar organised by the European Co-ordination of Via Campesina (ECVC).

A report from this seminar is to be in the next edition of The Crofter.

In addition to the meetings, conferences and seminars that officials attend, they are involved with the reporting of these. They have been busy writing press statements, being interviewed for press, TV and radio as well as writing articles for our very own magazine The Crofter. Our officials’ letters are filed up for the following months including the meat marketing conference organised by our crofting resources programme and cross party group meetings.
A small-scale electricity revolution

On February 3rd the UK government announced the finalised Feed-in-Tariffs (FiTs) scheme – a new renewable energy subsidy which is set to be introduced in April 2010.

The scheme provides financial support to potential customers in the UK with the exception of Northern Ireland and covers technologies such as small-scale wind turbines, solar energy and photo voltaic (PV). A key part of the government’s effort is to increase the amount of electricity generated for renewable services which will trigger a small-scale electricity revolution bringing benefits to the wider public. The Feed-in Tariff will provide an accessible financial support mechanism for private individuals such as crofters and landowners as well as small- to medium-sized businesses. This is a long-term commitment from the government with tariffs being guaranteed for up to 20 years for new developments.

The benefits for installing renewable energies such as small-scale wind turbines or PV panels are enormous. For example:

• there is a reduction of 33,900 CO2 emissions per turbine per year;
• a well-sited turbine can reduce electricity bills significantly, sometimes even cover them completely;
• protection against electricity price increases;
• an investment that pays for itself within a short time frame.

Renewable energy is a growth industry and several specialist companies have been established over the last decade. One of these companies is Icon Energy. Established in 2008, they have operational offices both in Dundee and Milnathort (Perth and Kinross) and are readily able to cover mainland Scotland and the islands and provide a first-class service in microgeneration from conception to completion.

They offer a range of renewable energy technologies suited to the commercial and domestic market. Their current range of turbines cover 3.2 kW (ideal for powering a standard two-bedroom house), 6kW (generates enough power for an average three-bedroom house) and a 15 kW (perfect for light industrial, commercial or agricultural use). With the 15 kW turbine a client can easily power a typical three-bedroom home and produce enough energy to make notable returns on selling back into the national grid.

Icon Energy is also at the forefront of promoting ‘Windcrofting’ which is a concept whereby clusters of 3 x 15kW turbines are installed and connected directly to the national grid. All the electricity produced is sold to the national grid in order to obtain an income which will generate enough to pay for the purchase and installation of the turbines within a few years whilst still generating a healthy income during this period and for years after.

In addition Icon offers solar systems and heat pump technology which provides renewable energy efficient and cost-effective solutions. Solar electricity generates cheap, green electricity from sunlight. Capturing the sun’s energy using photovoltaic (PV) cells and solar thermal water heating can save 35 – 70% on hot water costs. One of the other advantages of solar technologies is they do not require planning permission.

Icon’s service incorporates full and relevant professional advice including site assessment, in-house planning, grant advice, finance, installations and after-sales service. A privately-owned dynamic business with a multi-disciplinary team of engineers, they are experts in their field offering an unparalleled service to crofters, small businesses as well as the domestic market. They also have extensive experience with local authorities throughout Scotland.

There are various different methods of funding the purchase of the turbines and Icon have excellent relationships with governing bodies and agents who can guide you through any application you may wish to make for grants or loans.

Icon Energy is microgeneration certification scheme approved and is a member of the renewable energy association. For further information, please contact Icon Energy (Scotland) Ltd, Kingfisher House, Auld Mart Business Park, Milnathort, KY13 9DA, Tel: 01577 863050, e-mail info@iconenergy.co.uk, or visit their website on www.iconenergy.co.uk.

With the introduction of the UK Government’s Feed-in-Tariffs (FiTs) for small scale low carbon electricity generation in April 2010, there has never been a better time to invest in renewable energy. Payback could be within 4 years subject to wind speed.

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What lessons for crofting from the Farm Soils Plan?

Joanne Brown reports

CROFTER, 73 in December 2006 described a research project investigating the implications of the Farm Soils Plan in crofting. This project was funded jointly by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and carried out by the latter. Following the article, a number of crofters expressed interest in taking part in the study.

Due to the specific nature of this assessment, it was important to gather accurate data. Although the project was designed to address the implications of the Farm Soils Plan in crofting, it was necessary to obtain a representative sample of crofters.

The project was aimed at understanding the implications of the Farm Soils Plan in crofting, specifically focusing on the management of agricultural soils. The study aimed to identify any potential issues that crofters may face in relation to the Farm Soils Plan, as well as to provide guidance on best practices for managing agricultural soils.

In conclusion, the study highlighted the importance of understanding the implications of the Farm Soils Plan in crofting and provided guidance on best practices for managing agricultural soils. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be useful for crofters in Scotland and that further research will be conducted to explore the implications of the Farm Soils Plan in other agricultural systems.

Contact: Joanne Brown, Joanne.brown@rspb.org.uk

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SAC Consulting
SAC Consulting provides leading edge, independent and impartial advice throughout the crofting counties. Our consultants combine local knowledge with extensive experience and are supported by our team of renowned specialists.
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• small-scale renewable energy studies
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**New Commission absentee policy**

Once the Crofting Commission formal notice to owner to re-let the croft was accepted, a vacant croft would be advertised in the local press. If there were no expressions of interest within 21 days an offer to purchase the croft would be made. After this, the crofts would be offered to the Scottish Crofting Federation. Any offer to purchase the croft would be advertised in the local press. If no expression of interest was received within 21 days, the croft would be offered to the owner to re-let. **

**Croft tenancy policy**

There are no current policies that address absenteeism in the crofting community. The Crofting Commission has been actively trying to address the issue of absenteeism in recent years. The commission has been conducting surveys and research to understand the extent of absenteeism in the crofting community and to identify potential solutions.

**Benefits of the Crofting System**

The Crofting System benefits those who own or have access to crofting land. It provides economic, social, and environmental benefits to the communities in which crofting land is located. Some of the key benefits include:

- **Economic Benefits:**
  - Crofting provides a livelihood for many people in remote and rural areas.
  - It supports the local economy by providing employment and income.
  - Crofters can produce a variety of agricultural and seafood products for local and export markets.

- **Social Benefits:**
  - Crofting fosters a strong sense of community and local identity.
  - It provides opportunities for education and skill development.
  - Crofting supports traditional practices and culture.

- **Environmental Benefits:**
  - Crofting helps to maintain and conserve natural habitats and ecosystems.
  - It promotes sustainable land use practices.
  - Crofting supports biodiversity conservation.

**Current Issues and Challenges**

Despite these benefits, the crofting system faces several challenges, including:

- **Absenteeism:**
  - Many crofts are owned by people who do not live on the croft.
  - This can lead to the neglect or abandonment of the croft.
  - The Crofting Commission has been working to address absenteeism.

- **Economic Pressures:**
  - Rising costs of living and agricultural inputs.
  - Changes in the market for crofting products.
  - These factors can make it challenging for crofters to sustain themselves.

- **Regulatory Concerns:**
  - Changes in the law and regulations that can affect crofters.
  - Ensuring that crofters have access to timely and effective legal support.

The Crofting Commission is committed to addressing these challenges and ensuring that the crofting system remains viable and beneficial for future generations.
Winter weather... wasn't it wonderful?

YES, IT DID cause some problems and I feel for anybody who was genuinely adversely affected by it, but for those few glorious weeks when we all experienced proper winter weather for the first time in years, I was in my element!

While the headlines focused on the transport network and the problems with shrinking salt supplies, we embarrassed ourselves on a national level. Yet on a local level, up and down the land, we showed our true colours. Neighbour helped neighbour, while farmers and gardeners ventured out together for the sole purpose of engaging in fun, and thousands of Christmas jumpers, woolly scarves and patterned socks that wouldn't normally be so well received were welcomingly adored and proudly paraded in the great outdoors.

Perhaps my love of such conditions comes from being midwinter born, perhaps from working from home and not worrying about a daily commute, or perhaps from being a non-driver not having to consider how safe or sensible it is to set out. Whatever the reason, I loved every minute of it but quickly tried of the complainers – the man on the street who couldn't get his car out; the doom and gloom merchants who forecast an extension to the recession; the parents who complained of schools closed beyond the holidays. For goodness sake! A few weeks out of thirty odd years? I probably captured enough Christmas card images to see me through those thirty years! We cut kindling, chopped wood and I even got out the loppers in an experiment to see whether pruning in freezing conditions had any adverse affect on the blossoms meddling to come. Time, I suppose, will tell.

Indoors, we lit the fire shortly after breakfast, aware of the rapidly emptying oil tank at the side of the house and knowing that the lorry wouldn't be with us for over a week. Pots of soup, casseroles and bread-making duties kept me busy in the kitchen and in a haze of contentedness I actually began to dread the inevitable rise in temperature!

But now it's all gone, the days are lengthening, the bulbs appearing, can anyone tell me if the harsh winter will have decimated midge numbers come summer? We may not see for another thirty years? I probably captured enough Christmas card images to see me through those thirty odd years! We cut kindling, chopped wood and I even got out the loppers in an experiment to see whether pruning in freezing conditions had any adverse affect on the blossoms meddling to come. Time, I suppose, will tell.

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Closer to home, The Crofter’s wife column turns to diversify, one of the emerging successes is surely that of crofting holidays. Whether it's the original blackhouse now renovated, a new log cabin with world-old appeal, a B&B with blackpudding breakfasts, or a cosy caravan with stunning views, crofting holiday homes offer a unique experience for those seeking refuge from their daily drudgery. After-all, they come complete with friendly and knowledgeable (yet non-intrusive) folk on hand who can unlock the door to a world full of peace and solitude, history and culture, the environment and agriculture and who have deep-seated local knowledge. Far more appealing than a plastic folder stuffed with leaflets and left on the coffee table, don't you think?

For travel, financial and environmental reasons more and more people are holidaying within the UK. These days, the so-called staycation; This is excellent news for crofters who have accommodation and tourism business links and now is the time to review how you promote them to ensure that you tap into what may be a bumper year.

The SCF website has a section dedicated to crofting holidays and is keen to expand it and welcome new advertisers. Now is a great time to sign up: as the days lengthen thoughts turn to the year’s holiday and people start to look at what’s on offer. An annual fee of £35 (subsequent years, £25) buys you a slot on the croft holidays page on the SCF website with two photos, about 50 words of text and all your contact details. More importantly, it can help you reach potential new visitors and customers. Certain crofting businesses may be eligible to advertise too, including visitor attractions, catering, retail outlets and caravan sites.

And while we're here, why not consider a crofting holiday for yourself and your family? It might sound like a busman’s holiday but the crofter’s wife and her family highly recommend it as well as a cracking holiday, it’s a great way to support and promote both crofting and the SCF!

To advertise your croft tourism business, or for further information, please contact Claire Nicolson at ads@crofting.org or call 01471 833 239. Terms and conditions apply.
Croft housing

At the Future of Crofting Conference in Stornoway in January, SCF held a workshop on croft housing in which issues about the potential for croft housing support were discussed. The main problem is that housing is too expensive for young people to get a foot-hold. Some of the solutions suggested included:

• There needs to be a stand-alone croft house support scheme at least equal to the Rural Home Ownership Scheme – which crofters are not able to use and which currently gives a higher grant rate than the Croft Housing Grant Scheme.
• The SCF has fought for a croft house grant and loan scheme but the idea of a loan is consistently rebuffed by the Scottish government on the grounds that government is not a lender. That alone does not seem a very good reason – the loan scheme provided a very valuable service and the rate of default was very low. By its very nature a loan scheme does not cost the public anything – the money is borrowed and returned.
• There is interest in exploring the idea of shared equity if the loan is not going to happen. This is a well-proven model where housing support is given as grant assistance to build a house that the assister retains some ownership in. In other words, the government retains a share of the house in order that the amount of funds the crofter needs to find is less. The crofter can of course gradually buy the share back at market value as and when he or she has the means to do so.
• Another method of supplying loans is through credit unions, again a well-proven model worth exploring. In effect this is crofters creating their own saving and lending facility. Whether it would be able to provide sufficient loans would need to be looked into.
• Crofters can often contribute their own labour and building expertise to the house building project. This should be recognised as sweat equity or in-kind contribution and supported appropriately.

The possibility of means testing the grant was also explored. It would help the grant to be targeted to those who really need help – the young and people in local employment which is generally paid below the national average and is insecure or seasonal. It is widely contended that the current grant does not reach those that need it as it is too low and therefore needs too high an amount from the crofter, thus excluding those that really need it. Details of how means testing would work, such as thresholds, would need exploring further – but the principle seems to be acceptable.

• An uplift in grant support for those actively using their crofts was suggested and supported. New entrants should only be eligible for house grants if they are using their crofts, but there should also be an incentive, for example an uplift in the house grant for new entrants who have implemented their croft five-year management plans.
• The difficulties of priority areas came up and the present post-code allocation was rejected as not fair or workable – creating the situation that one crofter may get one rate whilst a neighbour gets another and that the real cost of build is not taken into account. Suggestions were that it should be targeted by HIE priority areas (already used for their targeting of resources), or there should be a flat rate for all crofting areas. This needs further consideration.
• Innovative and off-the-shelf designs for croft housing need to be available, aimed at keeping building costs down. For example, designs for starting small but with the option to easily expand at a later date.
• And finally, it was agreed that housing development strategies need to be part of a crofting community development plan – looking at the whole picture of what is needed and what opportunities there are in a crofting community.