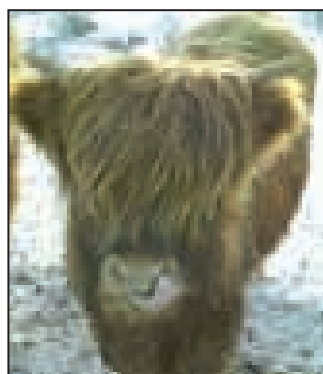


Inquiry into future support for agriculture in Scotland

THE INQUIRY into future support for agriculture in Scotland, chaired by Brian Pack OBE, has released an interim report and is holding a series of public meetings to present findings so far.

The report is out for consultation and responses are required by 5th March. This date will therefore be past when you read this. We are currently putting together the SCF response to the consultation and will report fully in the next issue.

Meanwhile, one of the inquiry members, David MacLeod, gave a very useful and comprehensive presentation at the future of crofting conference in Stornoway in January. His main points continue on page 5.



Ruraidh Stewart

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.

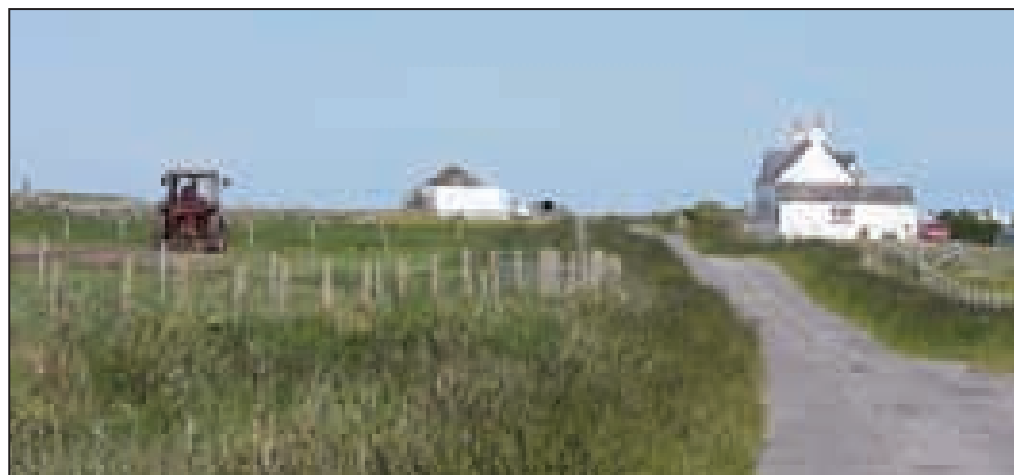
However, having said this, the SCF supports the progress of the bill in principle as we believe that there can be some good recouped if it is amended appropriately and supported by complementary ministerial direction. We urge the parliament to use this opportunity to stipulate amendments that will allow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

Continued on page 4



Martin Benson

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- Crofting resources programme
- Crofting connections
- Membership pages
- Commission absentee policy

And much more ...

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.

Message from the chair...



WITH THE lengthening of the day and the ravages of winter hopefully past, crofters are beginning to plan for the crofting year: calving, lambing, planting, upkeep of property, fences, drains and the myriad of diverse work which crofters do.

The expectation is somewhat blighted by the stream – or raging torrent – of bureaucracy. Two census forms in a month, Crofting Reform Bill, implementation of EID, LFASS, SFP, CAP all under review – one has to pose the question, is legislation of crofting becoming an industry in itself, diverting resources from the core issue which is thriving crofting communities?

We are encouraged by the retention of the bull hire scheme, albeit tempered with caveats as to its long-term future 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 review group chaired so ably by Sarah Allan and her excellent team, not least our own vice-chair Marina Dennis, made a succinct and telling case, consulting widely, exploring numerous options. They deserve our sincere thanks for their presentation and compelling case for this so-important scheme. It is also encouraging

that the government has listened and has reversed the closure.

The crofting induction courses are once again running at full capacity and are really fulfilling a niche for aspiring entrants. We are fortunate with the wealth of instructors and course organisers who every year devote so much time and effort to this work. A common theme running through discussion with course participants is 'How or where do I acquire a croft?' They bemoan the lack of a Crofters Commission database holding information on perspective crofters and vacant crofts, where 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 slot they occupied at the recent future of crofting conference in Stornoway was encouraging and it is our bounden duty that we leave crofting in a vibrant state for their future.

I have just read a report by John Cameron, the train-driving farmer from Balbuthie, Fife whose views on agriculture are always pertinent, mind-searching and worth a listen. John, having just returned from the Falkland Isles (a British dependency) spoke of his envy at their co-operation with government,

no individual ID worries, just a holding tag, grants for grass seeds, re-seeding and fencing being encouraged. Each fleece is worth about £16 and they have a large market for exporting mutton to the USA. Could I quote the words 'halcyon days'?

It is absolutely imperative that we turn out and listen to Brian Pack's inquiry. If it is causing division among farmers, how much of an effect will it have on crofting? My dictionary tells me that less favoured areas status is "severely handicapped by weather, distance and environment" and is meant to compensate for the natural handicaps we incur. We fully understand that all monies are under review as the EU expands and budgets are stretched with many calls on them, but the environment found in the less favoured areas needs to be protected.

Reports across the crofting counties point to stock being in remarkable condition despite the severe freeze which lasted for such a long time and made tending of stock so hazardous and expensive.

Scanning results are very encouraging, feed prices more affordable, forecast of sale prices appear to be reasonable, so we have to look forward with renewed optimism.

A month in the life of an SCF director

We prevailed on hard-pressed SCF chair Neil MacLeod to write a blog, so that members and sceptics might see just how much is done by volunteers on their behalf. It's all too easy to sit back and benefit from this while dismissing the hard work of those who represent crofters.

WITH THE deepest frost that I can remember in my sixty plus years and no sign of a thaw, I thought January would be a relatively quiet month. To quote the Bard: 'The best laid schemes of mice and men ...'

• 5th January – work commences. Interview with *Stornoway Gazette* about absenteeism/neglect

• 6th January – interview with BBC Alba and BBC radio on similar subjects

• 8th – interview with BBC Alba on effects of severe weather – ie implications for stock, feeding, access to animals, costs incurred and possible

consequences arising out of this. I also gave a warning that whilst tending stock that one should carry a mobile phone in case of any accidents. Next day, yes, who was it who happened to have a fall? Me! Cracked ribs, very badly bruised shoulder and dented ego. What do they say? Pride goes before a fall!

• 2nd week – interview with BBC radio on costs of Crofting Reform Bill to date. So far it has cost 1.236 million pounds. Which budget does this come out of?

• A meeting with crofters on mis-use of common grazing land.

• A meeting with a crofter on proposed assignment to member of his family who is presently in employment on the mainland and cannot see an opportunity to return and take up the offer due to lack of work (a common predicament).

• Meeting with a crofter who has to dispose of his croft as it is outside of the 16KM ruling. The son, who is involved with renewables, would have liked to

take over this croft but again due to the slow growth of renewables and planning constraints he would have occupied the croft, given another scenario.

• Meeting with area chair to plan meetings and stimulate membership.

• Meeting with proposed assignee and grazings clerk re access, house site and plans as to how to use the land. Advised the assignee to sign up for the crofting induction courses, which was done.

• Meeting of LEADER local action group. This is a big call on my time when evaluating applications but it is absolutely vital that SCF has an input

• Interview with BBC radio about Single Farm Payment and the slipper brigade – ie those who receive payment but no longer farm or croft.

• Assist course leader of the crofting induction course to identify speakers who would impact on the discussions.

• 3rd week – BBC radio

interview on EID tagging and its implications for crofters.

• Meeting with a crofter who feels concerned and threatened with an out-of-scale development for a rural area – a thirteen-bedroom multi-unit complex.

• Meeting with a crofter who has inherited a croft and is unsure as to what to do with it as there is no family interest.

• Complete three LEADER appraisals, a board meeting of Lewis Crofters, BBC radio interview about the Crofting Reform Bill. I took the opportunity to point out that Shucksmiths team were disbanded on delivery of the report, it was left to SCF to flush out the detail and collate and present all the evidence that people were only now wising up to. This was a difficult time for staff and directors. I was personally vilified but this did not deter us from presenting the majority view to government.

Continued on page 4

The pen is mightier than the sword

Alistair MacIver reviews the development of support schemes over the years

THIS oft-quoted line would hold good for crofting as well as many other situations. The evidence can be seen in crofting legislation (**the legislative pen**) from 1886 to the present day and in the changes to support for crofting (**the regulatory pen**) from the 1980s.

The call for maximising food production during the 1940s – and indeed for many years after – combined with a number of support schemes designed to underpin production helped crofters to survive. Coupled with the availability of crofter-friendly jobs, this allowed crofters to achieve a reasonable return. Up to and including the 1970s and 1980s, support in the form of liming and re-seeding grants (up to a maximum of 80%), cropping grants, livestock improvement schemes, Highlands and Islands compensatory allowances (HLCAs), and of course the more familiar crofting counties agricultural grants schemes (CCAGS) and the crofter building grant and loan scheme (CBGLS) were available, all of which were easily accessible for all crofters.

Liming and re-seeding grants and cropping grants have long since disappeared. These had helped to restore and maintain a much more attractive patchwork to crofting areas rather than the tired areas of sheep-grazed or indeed ungrazed land which tend to be the norm today.

HLCAs were paid at three different rates: standard, disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged – and despite being a fairly blunt instrument it at least recognised that there were differences in the degree of disadvantage.

The successor to the HLCA scheme was the less-favoured area support scheme (LFASS) based on an area payment as decreed by European Union regulations. At this point, 84% of Scotland was designated a less-favoured area for the purpose of the scheme. However after the first year of operation it became apparent that the biggest beneficiaries were large estates and crofters with substantial areas of common grazings. Consequently the National Farmers Union of Scotland began to argue for change because farmers with relatively smaller total areas were being disadvantaged and despite the best efforts of our own organisation, a new element was added to the scheme, namely stocking

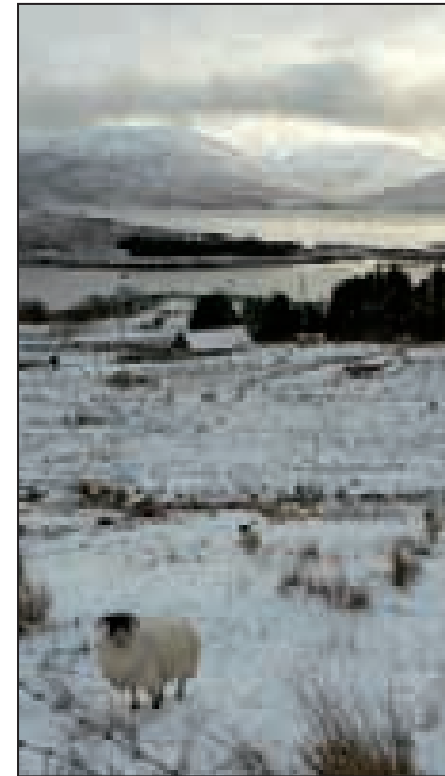
density, which put very simply, paid the highest rate to those with the highest stocking density and the lowest rate to those with the lowest stocking density. **Another stroke of the pen**; need I say more!

From the early 90s the system of agricultural support changed dramatically and by the end of the decade we had IAACS; AAA; BSPS; SCPS; SAPS, all of which were amalgamated into IAACS.

Because of the complexity of the application forms now required, many crofters – particularly older crofters – simply gave up and forfeited their payments.

During this period we had the introduction of quotas for sheep and cattle which could be traded privately and on the open market and unless a young person getting a croft could obtain sufficient quota he or she had to buy privately or on the open market; **another stroke of the pen!**

During the early part of the first decade in this century another change was introduced, namely the single farm payment (SFP). This, coupled with a later withdrawal of the croft entrant scheme, provided another obstacle



Claire Nicolson

for a young prospective crofter in that there was no automatic entitlement to SFP unless it could be bought on the open market.

The stupidity of the decision not to tie the SFP entitlement to the land is only now becoming obvious, even to those who campaigned successfully for it.

Finally, three schemes which were restricted to crofters (or those of like status):

- The livestock improvement scheme, the ram hire section of which was withdrawn; and the bull hire section was only saved by determined opposition by SCF and is currently subject of a government review.

- CCAGS, applicable to most improvement schemes on a croft, requiring a simple application form and an estimate of the cost, would be approved prior to commencement and on completion of improvement would be paid to crofter or could be paid 50% to contractor and 50% to crofter. In addition the option of applying for grants at standard costs prescribed by government was available to allow a crofter to carry out the work himself. Grant rates varied from 50% to a maximum of 80%.

CCAGS is now subject to completion of a six page application form, which will require payment of contractor prior to reimbursement at either 40% or a maximum of 50%. There is no longer an option of standard costs and it is forecast that CCAGS, now part of SRDP, will disappear with the current round of that scheme – **that pen again!**

- CBGLS proved in a survey in 1987 to be the most cost-effective means of providing housing in Scotland (Shucksmith). It was also shown to provide, on average, 87% of the cost of a standard three-bedroom house. The rates of assistance were last reviewed in 1989 at £29,00 – £17,500 loan and £11,500 grant and have never been updated. In 2002 the scheme was reviewed, the loan element removed and three rates of grant only were provided, £11,500, £17,500 and £22,000 depending on the location. The estimated value of the scheme as a percentage of the current cost of building an equivalent house is 14%.

Interestingly, the repayments of the loan were repaid into a general government tax account, thus falsely showing the loan scheme as making an annual loss, when, in fact, it was self financing – **a major stroke of the pen!**

Scepticism on bull hire reprieve

THE SCOTTISH Crofting Federation welcomed the announcement by environment minister Roseanna Cunningham that the government's bull hire scheme for crofters is to continue, albeit in a reduced and temporary form and that the stud farm at Balrobert is to be improved.

SCF parliamentary spokesman Norman Leask said: "The reprieve of this essential and valued scheme is welcome, as is the news of improvements at Balrobert, which will benefit

the staff there, the animals and the users of the scheme. There is a real danger, however, that a reduction in the scheme will lead to the cost per bull becoming prohibitive and so lead to further decline."

Mr Leask went on to praise the work of the bull scheme review group chaired by Sarah Allen. "The review group went out and listened to crofters. Their report is thorough and comprehensive. They have once and for all debunked the suggestion

that the support was in breach of EU rules and they have set out irrefutably the scale of the social, economic and environmental losses that would have ensued had the scheme been scrapped. Yet despite this the stay of execution is only temporary. The minister has made her intentions clear. I doubt that this is the last we will hear of moves to undermine and ultimately destroy this support for cattle rearing in Scotland's most fragile and remote areas."

SCF submits evidence to the Scottish parliament

Continued from page 1

adequately resourced to do this;

3. be supported by ministerial direction and guidance to planning authorities to protect cultivatable croft land and help to address speculation;

4. be supported by appropriate investment, eg a crofting housing grant and loan scheme."

The bill in more detail

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

Part 1. Reorganisation of the Crofters Commission – The SCF accepts that the Crofters Commission is re-named the Crofting Commission to reflect the change in its function and is content with the Scottish government assurance that additional costs for the change in name will be minimal.

Part 2. The Crofting Register – The SCF supports having an effective crofting register. Indeed we find it difficult to understand how successive governments believed they could measure the potential impact of legislative or policy change without a reliable database. However, the whole principle of the registration procedure is wrong – there is no participation and it looks designed to be antagonistic and divisive.

Trigger points and ranking will mean every individual having to instigate a potential boundary dispute at possibly great cost (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 exercise could take generations to complete.

The SCF strongly recommends that the register be completed using participatory methods such as community mapping and mediation – which is widely commended by the legal profession to help keep disputes out of the judiciary system. Assessors should be trained to assist in this. This aligns with the HIE community-led development model and with 'asset growth', an established approach to rural development. It is anticipated that this methodology could save on public expenditure in the long term and would establish a fit-for-purpose register under community ownership.

Part 3. Duties of crofters and owner-occupier crofters – To condemn absenteeism whilst simultaneously removing the housing scheme that made it possible to live on the croft is absurd. Any absentee initiative should dove-tail with a crofting new entrants scheme, which should incorporate a croft housing grant and loan scheme. Means-testing housing support could be considered in order to extend and target limited resources.

There is a keen interest in taking up croft tenancies but for some reason the Crofters Commission has ceased to hold a record of interested parties. This needs to be re-established.

We reiterate the assertion

that dealing with neglect is more pertinent to the health of crofting than dealing with absenteeism. Crofters may have to be absent from their croft for very good reason but it is fair to expect them to put in place a land management plan. This may well be by giving a sub-let to another crofter who will work the croft in their absence. However, we feel that a sub-let should only be used as a land management tool and not used to create an under-class of crofter with few rights.

Part 4. Further amendments of the 1993 Act – Extending the period in which a crofter is obliged to give up 50% value of disposal of croft land from five to ten years is acceptable as an effective deterrent to short-term speculation on croft land. The sale by nominee (Whitbread vs MacDonald) loophole could be closed as individual gain through such means is despicable to the majority of crofters.

However, there seems to be no justification for the development share to go to the landlord who is likely to have made no contribution to the maintenance and working of the land. Rewarding the landlord in such circumstances is, like an interposed lease, against the spirit of land reform. The SCF would rather see the landlord's present 50% clawback become a township development contribution. This is worthy of further consideration.

The SCF welcomes the provision for the Crofting Commission to not give direction to de-croft

notwithstanding the existence of planning consent, should it deem that appropriate. This may help in curbing some blatant speculation on croft land. However, we believe that the effective way to protect croft land is for ministers to direct planning authorities to have a presumption against building on the better-quality croft in-bye. Furthermore, this should not discriminate against crofters; all land capable of growing food should be conserved.

Schedule 1. We approve of the formation of a majority-elected Crofting Commission, though the chair should be elected by the commissioners. However, this will not suffice. The Scottish government has consistently ignored the fact that the decentralisation model already exists in the assessors network which represents democracy working at the very roots of the community. This existed (and was effective) for decades until being run-down by the last Commission regime and then revived by the present Commission under pressure from the crofting communities and the SCF.

The design of a modernised model for the assessor network and assessor panel was started and needs to be completed. Core to this is that the power balance must change with the assessor panel working in an informing and advisory role to the Crofting Commission. Assessors will be elected by, and be accountable to, their crofting community.

A month in the life of an SCF director

Continued from page 2

• 4th week – an afternoon board meeting of LEADER. We are now seeing the fruits of our endeavours taking shape – from development officers in place, a laundry, village shop, some very encouraging youth participations schemes, Crofting Connections, small dinghies for rowing, sailing and water sports on one of the islands. All applications have to be carefully researched and evaluated as funding is increasingly difficult.

• Radio interview with Isles FM with overview of where crofting is at present (we got a lot of positive feedback from listeners).

• BBC radio interview on disparity of LFASS payment. CNES crofting conference which was a very well-attended event,

excellent workshops, a good opportunity to network, SCF more than played its part.

• JCC meeting with CNES re council's response to Crofting Reform Bill.

• BBC radio interview about implications of the Pack Report into farming and crofting and its ramifications.

• Before the end of the month a QMS TAC meeting in Edinburgh. then to Dumfries for the end of the month for a two day meeting of the Scottish Rural Development Council on which I sit. It is normally chaired by Richard Lochhead, cabinet secretary, but on this occasion it will be chaired by Roseanna Cunningham, minister for the environment. Agenda items for discussion, the major players in the rural scenario, will be land

use strategy, Rural Framework, community asset ownership/enterprise development, supporting island communities, infrastructure requirements, community empowerment, a well managed environment, asset transfer and land ownership and active communities.

A huge disappointment to me was a member informing me that he was not renewing his membership as he did not see directors or council working on his behalf. That was the day he received a 19% uplift on his LFASS cheque with a similar amount expected next year. I know that the incessant lobbying by SCF was instrumental in achieving this much-needed resource.

Despite my cracked ribs and all of the above I managed to weave

two tweeds! Over the next two months I have more than a full timetable to undertake, as most of my fellow directors have, but it is engaging and satisfying as we strive to maintain and better crofting for the present and the future and should put paid to the question "What does SCF do?"

In a word – a great deal!

It should also be borne in mind that all this important work undertaken by SCF directors is done voluntarily for no financial gain and all we would look for is the support of crofting communities as we seek to further the cause. It would be heartening to see an increase in SCF membership to give us the confidence to continue our endeavours.

After all membership costs less than a daily newspaper!

Inquiry into future support for agriculture in Scotland

Continued from page 1

What we have at present:

• Pillar 1 Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scottish Beef Calf Scheme (SBSC)

• Pillar 2 Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP): Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS), Land Managers Options (LMO), Rural Priorities

What next:

Short Term:

• Option 1 status quo historic Single Farm Payment + Scottish Beef Calf Scheme

• Option 2 historic Single Farm Payment plus Article 68 measures

• Option 3 move towards area-based payments

Long term:

• area-based payment – one move

• based on Macaulay land classification

• Top-Up Fund (TUF)

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

• the need to think about timescale for move to area-based payments;

• new entrants – how can they be helped in the interim (up to 2014);

• should Article 68 measures be introduced for beef or sheep pre 2014;

• stocking densities proposed before 2014 (0.08LU/ha) and post 2014 (0.12LU/ha) – is this the right balance between ensuring some activity and a realistic stocking on hill land in the crofting counties;

• balance of top up fund and direct payments 1/3 to 2/3 or different;

• what measures should be in the top up fund?

Sheep and goat identification and traceability

Continued from page 1

Summary guidance for keepers in Scotland

There are five key elements.

1. Register as a keeper on every holding that you use.
2. Identify each of your animals.
3. Keep your records up to date.
4. Complete movement documents for every move.
5. Notify movements of animals to the Scottish Animal Movement Unit (SAMU).

Sheep identification

• All sheep born or identified after 31 December 2009 must be identified with an electronic identifier.

• All sheep kept beyond 12 months must be double identified, with one electronic identifier and one non electronic identifier.

• All slaughter animals must be identified with a single electronic identifier (known as a batch tag) showing only the flockmark.

Goat identification

• Electronic identification is not compulsory for goats.

• All goats kept beyond 12 months must be double identified (born or identified after 31 December 2009).

• All slaughter animals must be

identified with a single identifier (batch tag) showing only the herdmark.

Holding register

• From 31 December 2009 every fully EID identified sheep and double identified goat must be individually recorded in the holding register when the animal is first identified, dies or moves to another holding.

• Slaughter animals are always recorded as a batch or a batch within a batch.

• The individual identification number of animals born or identified before 31 December 2009 (known as historic animals) do not have to be recorded, (except for moves to shows).

Movement document

• From 31 December 2010 every fully EID identified sheep and double identified goat born or identified after 31 December 2009 must be recorded in the movement document.

• From 31 December 2011 every animal must be recorded in the movement document.

• However, if you move animals through a critical control point (such as a market or abattoir) they will record this for you.

• Where animals are moved

from one holding to another but the ownership of the animals does not change, an entry should be recorded in the holding register and a movement document completed, showing the number of animals moved at batch level.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, for full details keepers should go to the SG website <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/Agriculture/animal-welfare/Diseases/IDtraceability/SheepandGoats> where they can access guidance, frequently asked questions and the ten golden rules for tagging sheep; as well as copies of the new holding register, the movement document, the new sheep and goats order and the relevant EU legislation. A hard copy of the guidance will be issued to all Scottish sheep and goat keepers.

Crofters and farmers are also encouraged to join the large-scale Scottish electronic research pilot study coordinated by SAOS that aims to find workable and cost effective solutions for the Scottish industry. Further information about the pilot and how partner farms will benefit from participation can be found at www.scoteid.com.

Making the best of EID in the slaughterhouse

WHILE VISITING mainland Scotland recently I was advised by several members they were having problems with slaughterhouses, especially in being sure their own animals were returned.

This is completely unacceptable if we are promoting a story along with the meat guaranteeing the place of production, breed and age of each animal – total traceability.

A member delivered three normal pigs each, of course, having a right and a left side. On delivering the split carcasses to the butcher they were told – guess what – there were two left-hand sides and four right-hand sides.

Another member delivered two young cattle to a slaughterhouse which had no facilities to hang for the appropriate time so a chilling facility was obtained. When these carcasses were picked up both animals had been crudely dissected into parts making it impossible to not only identify if

the whole animal was intact or had parts been misappropriated but also making it impossible to hang the meat, thus destroying the quality.

Another member delivered animals to a slaughterhouse on a pre-arranged day. A butcher was booked to cut the meat after the appropriate hanging. The animals were picked up and delivered to the butcher who was unable to process them as in his expert opinion these animals had not been dead for more than four hours. No one seemed to know whether these were the owner's animals which had been forgotten about in pens for several days or whether they were animals belonging to someone else.

We are being forced to use EID at great disruption to the crofter in the name of traceability. When I worked in a slaughterhouse the animal was killed and the head was left attached until it was ready to be weighed to ensure that there was no confusion. Now the



Claire Nicolson

practice is to discard the head – with the EID tag – early on, leaving the carcass unidentifiable. This is a nonsense.

I feel that to get some benefit from this EID fiasco we advocate that slaughterhouses be compelled to use an indelible, edible mark comprising of the tag number, on all parts of the animals coming out of the slaughterhouse. These marks must be stamped on before the head is removed to ensure total traceability.

Norman Leask

CROFTING RESOURCES PROGRAMME

Crofting resources programme update

SCOTTISH CROFTING Federation's Crofting Resources Programme has now been running for six months. We are funded by SRDP (food processing, marketing and co-operation grant), Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Esme Fairbairn Foundation to deliver the following outputs: -

- awareness raising of qualities of croft-based production;
- formation of and support for new producer groups;
- support for existing producer groups;
- development of standards relevant to croft-based production;
- advice and mentoring for new producers;
- assistance in food-chain issues affecting croft produce;
- promoting best use of township assets;
- produce horticultural manual for crofters;
- generic advice on SRDP.

So far we have assisted thirteen crofting groups with training and eleven with development. Three groups have been given advice on SRDP applications; nine new producers and five townships have been assisted. The Taking Stock research project on crofters' stock clubs is underway and a conference on marketing meat from the croft, aimed at producer groups and meat-producing members of the Scottish Crofting Produce Mark, will take place early in March.

A lot of bull

I MUST CONGRATULATE the minister for the environment for listening to crofters and for committing to renew the buildings on the Crofters Commission farm outside Inverness.

I must ask the government to have patience with us while we turn around the bull numbers required for hiring and take into consideration the way the scheme has been attacked by officials in the previous government.

Had the old government in 2003-4 had the commitment that we see today, 230 or so bulls would have been hired that year. Fifty applications were binned for being a day late and only 180 were hired that year. This number was still acceptable and very good for the recipients in maintaining the quality of the stock in the crofting

A programme of horticultural training workshops for crofters is planned for the spring, the first one taking place in Harris in February. Also, at the time of writing, a course on pig health and husbandry is due to take place in Stornoway.

A new initiative, which Maria Scholten writes about elsewhere in this issue, is a producer group for the native seed varieties of oats, rye and bere which are so essential to traditional crofting practice in Tiree, Uist, Orkney and Shetland.

In order to take forward the Scottish Crofting Produce Mark, the working group has been re-established and will meet early in March to review the criteria for the mark and to set standards for produce not yet covered.

We are currently working with two townships on development plans, but we are looking for more townships interested in taking part in a pilot programme of asset-based community development, in which we will assist with drawing up plans.

Our project fieldworkers will also give general advice on SRDP options, but we do not have the resources to draft Rural Priorities applications. We are also happy to assist new crofters and innovative producers. Individuals, townships or crofting groups wishing to take advantage of the Crofting Resources Programme should contact SCF head office or email donald@crofting.org.

counties. The attacks continued and we are down to around 120 bulls at the moment.

It would be beneficial to everyone if as many as possible took up the offer of hire and this would drive down overheads on individual bulls, thus ensuring a more price-effective hire. The bulls are still good value for money when considering the price of replacement bulls. The ability to get another bull after two years to use on heifers is a great advantage and in many cases the ability not to have to over winter is essential.

I strongly encourage groups to gather together, look at their whole-health status and get the benefit of these high-health, good quality, tested bulls.

Norman Leask

Township assets – can we help you?

ONE OF THE things HIE is keen to encourage is for townships and similar crofting communities to take stock regularly of their assets to see if their potential is being realised.

A famous scientist once said, "Resources are not, they become", in other words, while things may not change much physically, their value is dependent on such highly variable factors as technology.

So just as iron ore was little more than useless rust until someone discovered how to make iron from it, so a windy peat bog could lose its value as sheep declined and coal fires came in, only to gain it again as wind power and

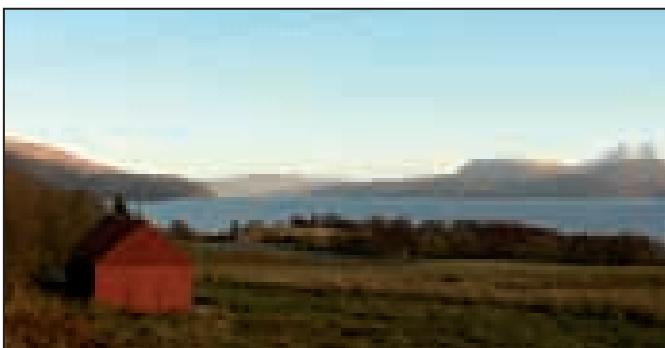
environmental schemes make their appearance.

HIE's vision is of townships taking the initiative to carry out this evaluation themselves, but they recognise that assistance is necessary, especially for the first few examples and perhaps for many more.

So one of the things they are supporting in the CRP is help to communities to carry out an assessment of their township assets.

We are looking for communities keen to give it a go. Contact me (no obligation!) to discuss how it might work.

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



Claire Nicolson

CRP looks at stock clubs

THE CRP, while it wants to encourage and nurture innovation, is also looking at a more traditional way of joint management and marketing – the stock club. These are usually run as co-operatives or other unincorporated businesses and are completely separate from their member crofters from the point of view of IACS. Most clubs have just sheep, but a few also have cattle.

The Taking Stock project will give a clearer picture of the importance of clubs and look critically at the club as a model for development.

It will look at the club's strengths and weaknesses as a way of organising common grazing management. At first sight they offer a way of involving people throughout the various stages of their life, from active youth and middle age to infirm old age. They are also a way of overcoming the lowest common denominator factor in the management of stock on common grazings. But on the other

hand, they make the cost of labour very apparent and depend on a high degree of trust and co-operation.

Why have some clubs wound up while others seem to be quite vigorous? Has the club had its day or is it due for a renaissance? Would it indeed be feasible to set up new clubs?

The project will involve a combination of data gathering from the desk and speaking to a sample of clubs, so be prepared for a phone call!

A similar exercise, but this time looking at common grazings in general is being undertaken by EFNCP in association with SCF. The aims include getting a picture of how common grazings shares are used both on the ground and on IACS so as to be able to evaluate the potential issues arising from any CAP reform. It is intended that crofters themselves will be involved both in the information gathering exercise and in discussing the implications of the findings.

CROFTING RESOURCES PROGRAMME

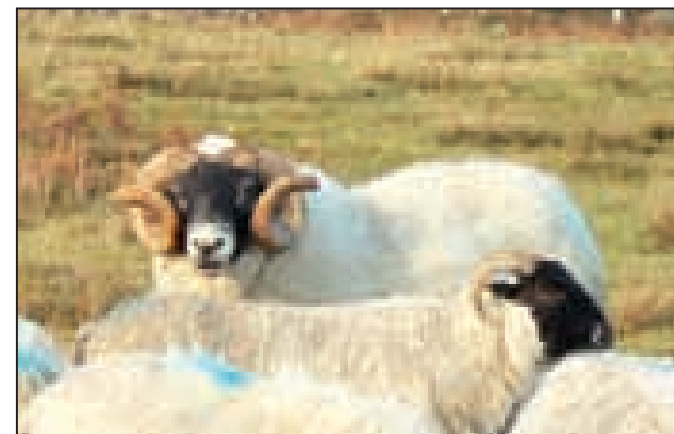
Siobhan takes the mystery out of SRDP

TWENTY horticultural producers from Skye and Lochalsh braved the ice in early January to come to Breakish Hall for a meeting on opportunities in SRDP for horticultural businesses.

Siobhan Macdonald, Scottish Agricultural College's senior consultant at Portree, gave an overview of grant assistance available under the various support schemes – Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS), Land Managers' Options (LMO) and Rural Priorities (RP). The complexity of Rural Priorities, and its difficulty of access, has proved a considerable barrier to crofters and other small producers, but having it explained by Siobhan in such a clear and concise manner made it seem a bit less intimidating.

The application process, being entirely on-line, requires a degree of computer literacy and access to broadband internet and most people who are considering large projects will probably need professional assistance with their applications. LMO is much easier to access and will assist with membership of quality assurance or organic certification schemes, skills training and improvements such as shelter-belt planting. CCAGS, which most crofters will be familiar with, assists with croft infrastructure such as fences, sheds and polytunnels.

The meeting at Breakish was organised by SAC and SCF in conjunction with the Skye and Lochalsh Horticultural Community Interest Company. Any crofting group wishing to have a similar meeting on SRDP should contact SCF head office or donald@crofting.org.



Claire Nicolson

Marketing meat from the croft

AS WE WENT to press SCF was staging a conference on the theme of marketing meat from the croft as part of the Crofting Resources Programme.

The aim of the event was to bring together crofter producer groups and meat-producing members of the Scottish Crofting Produce Mark with leading industry experts, marketing and retail specialist and representatives of the hotel and restaurant industry.

Speakers will cover a wide variety of subjects including direct marketing, abattoir provision, the light lamb trade, mutton marketing, food safety, exporting and selling via the internet. A report on the conference will be in the next issue of The Crofter.

Professor Bob Orskov of the Macaulay Institute, one of the leading speakers, gave us a preview of his presentation: "I would like to address several issues for crofters and small farmers. I have had the opportunity to visit many small farmers in

different countries. The product they produce will obviously depend on soil, climate, culture and socio-economic circumstances, so there is never one solution, but some generalization can be made. They should be stimulated to work in co-operation to assist in development of infrastructure to take product to market, reduce risk and avoid exploitation by middle men.

"On technical issues, I will address aspects of livestock in their natural interaction with soil, plants and people. I will also look at livestock in agro-forestry with grazing combined with trees, which if correctly managed is good for animals, soil and carbon sequestration. This applies equally to Scotland. I will also discuss aspects of complementary multi-culture and its interaction with livestock using by-products from animal feeds to benefit the soil, and total resource management to eliminate waste.

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Land managers options assistance for animal welfare

THE ANIMAL WELFARE Management Programme, Option 23 in Land Managers' Options (LMO), has proved popular with crofters. Its purpose is to assist keepers of cattle, sheep and goats to adopt and improve high standards of welfare in their stock, reduce communicable diseases and thereby improve economic performance. To be eligible for the programme, applicants must have at least five livestock units.

Applications must be submitted on the LMO application form, which must be received by the local SGRPID office, along with the Single Application (IACS) Form by 15th May each year. The commitment for this option is five years. In the first year applicants must formulate a welfare management

programme with their vet, using the following criteria: -

Good feeding	1. absence of prolonged hunger 2. absence of prolonged thirst
Good housing/ environment	3. comfort around resting 4. thermal comfort 5. ease of movement
Good health	6. absence of injuries 7. absence of disease 8. absence of pain induced by management procedures
Appropriate behavior	9. expression of social behaviours 10. expression of other behaviours 11. good human-animal relationship 12. absence of general fear

Based on this an annual management plan must be agreed with the vet, and this is reviewed each year, attracting an annual payment. In addition the applicant and his/her vet must select a minimum of three specific actions from the following list: -

- o implementing bio-security
- o field-based separation facility
- o reducing mutilations in sheep
- o maintaining bodily condition
- o preventing lameness
- o mastitis control

- o control and prevention of diarrhoea and pneumonia
- o liver fluke control
- o payment for loss of grazing
- o Johne's disease control
- o control of BVD
- o sheep scab control

Each of these actions attracts an annual payment and the number of actions that can be undertaken (greater than the minimum of three) depends on the total livestock units. The payment rates are quite good, and animal welfare is a concern for all of us, so this is a scheme well worth considering. The LMO booklet and application forms can be obtained from local SGRPID offices and full information is available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/farmingrural/SRDP/Land-Managers-Options>

New year, new challenges

HERE ARE SOME of the key agricultural policy questions of 2010, at least as seen through these rather jaundiced eyes.

What difference will the new Commissioner make? Will Commissioner-designate Ciolo's tenure reflect mostly his French education (the French government see his appointment as a victory for their diplomacy) or his Romanian nationality?

Given that the new member states already have a completely decoupled area payment system which is unrelated to the historic activity of individual businesses and a significant small farm issue, he will surely bring a very different perspective to that of retiring Dane Mariann Fischer Boel.

The Lisbon treaty brings in a big change in agriculture policy. Whereas previously decisions were made solely by the council (ie ministers from member states), with the European parliament offering no more than opinions, they are now to emerge from a 'co-decision' process. What will this mean for the mood music of policy? Who will be the key people to influence (or counter)?

Spending money is one thing; deciding how much to spend is another. Insiders report that DG Agri war-gaming exercises assume that the best case scenario still involves a cut of 20% in their budget post 2013. If this comes true, it will pose a particular challenge to the large farming unions, whose EU body COPA-COGECA works best when defending the status quo; but don't underestimate their ability to think of new reasons

to give most of the money to the same few farmers.

The influence of the new challenges, particularly climate change, on policy, is perhaps the biggest unknown. Will action to promote food security lead to support for the most sustainable systems least dependent on imported inputs or just for increasing our dependence on home-grown intensive produce? Will reducing greenhouse gas production in agriculture mean more support for the extensive sector or a shift to indoor white meat production or indeed to reduced meat consumption overall? Will we start counting the cost of producing and shifting protein feeds round the world? What about biomass?

This brings us to the CAP itself: what is it for; why do we need a EU policy when it's becoming less and less 'common' with each reform; what is the rationale for paying farmers – is it for public goods or something wider; and so on... The Commission will publish a paper in the back end, which means that DG Agri have already more or less fixed their position.

Last but not least, LFA reform inches slowly onward, seemingly disconnected from wider CAP reform. Member states are trying out the criteria for delimitation and at some point we can expect a legislative proposal from DG Agri. For Scotland, the main question is of course not delimitation but how to justify, calculate and target payments and any proposal will need to address these issues.

Plenty of work for SCF, then...

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NGOs call for discussion of future CAP

WITH A GREEN paper on the post-2013 CAP expected from the Commission in late 2010, it is very important for crofters to get involved in the debate, pressing the right buttons with the right people.

As pointed out in the useful website cap2020.ieep.eu/ there are a range of viewpoints amongst member states, both on the scale of the agriculture and rural development budget and on how it should be spent. Many of these offer little to crofting and some are positively threatening. SCF needs to involve itself as soon and as effectively as possible.

One contribution to the debate with which the writer has been involved is the new proposal by five EU organic and environmental networks. cap2020.ieep.eu/vision/NGO-CAP-proposal.pdf

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 of various types, investment support and help for the most marginal agriculture-dependent communities. Opinions and responses can be lodged at

the CAP2020 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.

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 – where most support goes to a few businesses who in the next breath 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 whole systems which deliver public goods. We want the payments targeted not to replicate past injustices but to reflect what the policy says it values. Such a policy should see crofters right!

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CROFTING RESOURCES PROGRAMME

Conservation varieties – new opportunities for marketing seed of local varieties?

THE YEAR 2010 is International Year of Biodiversity. The link between crofting and diversity is well known but there is a much-overlooked dimension of biodiversity that is highly supported by crofting: agrobiodiversity.

This is the diversity in and around agriculture itself, of agricultural crops and breeds. There are quite a few rare crops and breeds on crofts: Shetland kale, ait, bere, Eriskay ponies, Highland cattle, small oat, many potatoes with local or historical names, local rhubarb, gooseberries, turnips, local fuchsias and daffodils. But this diversity is poorly known.

This agricultural diversity can be seen as an asset, as a potential resource. Diversity for development as much as diversity for conservation. **Scottish varieties increasingly valued**

Traditional barley (bere) has seen commercial interest in recent years. Beremeal is listed in Slow Food's Ark of Taste among other British high-quality and rare local foods and ingredients as a way of promoting its use. Shetland kale has been used in Slow Food's events as an ingredient of traditional Shetland mutton stew.

New regulatory framework

Against a background of decreasing agricultural diversity and genetic erosion the European Commission – after ten years of consultation and deliberation – is offering derogations from existing seed regulations in order to allow conservation varieties onto the official national lists of member states. This is the first time conservation considerations have been included in seed legislation.

The legally-minded can consult the texts of the new directives – 2008/62/EC and 2009/145/EC.

Until now, the corn landraces (bere, small oat, rye) and Shetland kale fell outside seed regulations and therefore the seed could not be marketed commercially. So what difference will the two new directives make?

The new rules are of interest for two reasons. First we need to be sure that they are not a threat to current crofting practices. But secondly, they may open up significant new markets for local varieties still grown by crofters. Are they likely to open up these markets for crofters or will they just allow entrepreneurs or large companies to market these varieties and shut crofters out?

Without going into much detail of definitions and rules, the directive has three fundamental elements: linking local varieties and area of origin; derogations for regular procedures; quantity restrictions for marketing.

First of all let's consider what marketing means and doesn't mean in this context. If an end user has no commercial intent, a transaction is not considered marketing. Providing a neighbour with seed for next year's corn production is therefore not marketing. Current practices of seed provisions for home use such as on the Uists will not require registration as conservation varieties. Only seed producers who aim at selling seed for commercial end-uses are marketing seed and only for these are the new directives relevant.

So what about opportunities for marketing? How easy will it be to register? A crucial issue is defining the area of origin, crucial because this also determines the region in

which seed may be produced and marketed.

Effectively, the region of origin will function as a branding of the local variety – ie function as a protection for that variety within that region.

Scottish implementation of the directive for agricultural crops has been laid out in Scottish statutory instrument 2009/223. This proposes to draw the region of origin as simply as possible. No problems in terms of restrictions on the quantity of seed produced are foreseen.

Interestingly, of the known Scottish agricultural landraces, Scots timothy, bere, small oat, murkle oat, Shetland aet, rye, only bere is proposed as conservation variety. There are reasons for this. Scots is a commercial local timothy variety, still on the national list. Small oat/Shetland ait is not an official EC common catalogue species and for this reason falls outside the scope of the directive; also, the mixtures grown on the Uists are not allowed because mixtures are not included. But seed potatoes are.

As regards costs: registering is £175; in addition £50 to £100 for a variety description, £45.80 for OSTs seed tests. This price is much lower than registering a commercial variety but considerable for an individual crofter.

It may be too early to evaluate what benefits the new regulations will bring for crofters, if any. What seems clear is that marketing options are required before registration makes sense and will become financially worthwhile.

The Crofting Resources Program can play a role by:

- bringing interested commercial parties in contact with seed growers;
- exploring new products through

small-scale pilot projects, for example milling test;

- assistance with constraints in the production chain, for example by organising seed cleaning;

- support for or formation of conservation variety seed growers groups where there is interest;

- assisting in financing and organising registration applications if and where applicable.

(This topic will be continued in the next issue of *The Crofter*)

Report or discuss your local varieties!

Report local varieties to your Crofting Resources Program fieldworker or to: **maria_scholten@hotmail.com** 07746671984

Links

For a detailed analysis of the EC Directive by seed legislation expert Niels Louwaars: http://www.farmseed.net/home/resources/publication/Report_FSO_task_13_def_13.2.09.pdf

Slow Food Ark of Taste beremeal <http://www.slowfoodfoundation.com/eng/arca/dettagliolasso?cod=1068&prs=0>

Maria Scholten



Local varieties for genebank conservation

Maria Scholten

The man who planted trees

Representatives from all over the crofting counties were given the opportunity to see an example of innovation and determination on Harris on a croft visit, part of the SCF gathering 2004.

Murdo Morrison welcomed a group of crofters to his croft in Ardvourlie where he has transformed the barren hills into a woodland for locals and tourists to enjoy for many years to come.

In the year 2000, Murdo started to put in a surfaced path across the 650 Ha of common grazings, of which he was the clerk, to celebrate the millennium. His vision was to see a natural habitat restored and being made accessible to the public. With the help of supplies from the Forestry Commission, he took 110 Ha of bare hillside which he formerly used for sheep and started planting a mixture of native broad-leaf trees. In three years he put 210,000 in the ground and protected them with 5,500 m of deer fence.

It was not easy, of course. Set back by a lack of labour, walkways being washed out by the rain and the frequent inclement weather, the project has none-the-less suffered remarkably low losses. Murdo accepted that he would not see the mature stand, but he did this not only for the present, but for future generations.

Sadly Murdo past away on 8th January 2010, but will join those legendary crofters who have left a legacy of inspiration for us all. Our good wishes go to Murdo's family and friends.

CROFTING CONNECTIONS

Kilchoan primary's crofting connection

WINTER IS almost over and we are beginning to look forward to spring and all that it entails.

As head teacher at Kilchoan primary school that means a lot of creative thinking and preparation in order to bring the teaching and learning into line with the requirements of A Curriculum for Excellence. This is where Crofting Connections comes in.

It hardly seems like three years since the pupils were involved with the Planting to Plate initiative. Seven of those children are still in the school. The work done and the experiences gained during that initiative has had a lasting legacy. Each spring since then we clear out the tubs and herb garden and fill them with a mix of our own compost and new soil. We faithfully plant potatoes, carrots, parsnips and herbs and each year to date we have had successful crops.

Our wee bit of croft land on Ormsaigbeag continues to look very picturesque. We would love to work it but the stony ground and the lack of a tractor and ploughing gear makes it almost impossible to do anything with it.

However, where one door closes another opens. Plans are afoot to create a community garden. Land has been gifted and grants applied for. The idea is to create raised beds under a polytunnel. The children will work the beds along with adults and receive a share of the produce produced. It's not quite crofting, but if it gives some of the children an interest in things arable then it is a start.

Meanwhile Katie's pig, Tammy, has produced nine lovely piglets, the bull is out and calves are expected, the sheep are due to be scanned and fine sets of twins are hoped for.

Crofting Connections is beginning to move forward now. I see we have had seed potatoes delivered and the new gardening equipment from Morrisons has arrived. We look forward to visits from Margaret Bennett and Catherine Brown and visits to the Lochaber Rural Education Trust.

Connections with other schools are already being made and exciting times are ahead. A new generation of crofters is in the making. Just watch this space.

Lynne McLuckie



Our croft



Lots of tatties



S3 crofting students threshing rye under the watchful eye of crofting instructor Neil MacPherson

Crofting connections at Sgoil Lionacleit

WE ARE NOW in the second run through of The Crofting Year at Sgoil Lionacleit on the Isle of Benbecula.

The course has attracted considerable interest from within educational circles, from the media and from within the crofting community. Why all the interest, after all it's just another secondary school course in amongst a whole plethora of other courses covering different subject areas at different levels?

But it isn't just another course; it was written after lengthy consultation with local crofters and was specifically written for Uist (although it is easily adaptable for other areas), with one eye on the past and one eye firmly on the future and yet fulfilling all the stringent requirements of the Scottish Qualifications Authority. It is different from the normal school diet, focussing unashamedly on the day-to-day work on the croft with theory backing up the practical rather than the other way around. It taps into a current interest in all things sustainable and it is easy to capture the undoubted enthusiasm of the students.

For crofters it shows that there are young people who are both interested in crofting and prepared to devote their time and energy to acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to set themselves up in crofting.

It was therefore with some satisfaction that I set off with three of my students early one morning last month to catch the early morning ferry from Berneray and

make our way to Stornoway, to be part of the youth focus at the future of crofting conference.

Since the start of our course, we have become part of the nationwide Crofting Connections project and it marvellous to be in contact with other schools in the Western Isles and across the crofting areas of Scotland who are also focussing on crofting. There is a tremendous feeling that we are engaged on something very important and that we are at the start of one of those journeys where you are not at all sure where you are going to end up but you know that there will be some great experiences along the way. It was as part of Crofting Connections that I was asked to speak at the conference and introduce one of my students, Calum Martindale, who so eloquently represented all those young people who want to make crofting their life.

I was truly heartened by the number of people who spoke to me after the conference to offer their encouragement for what we are doing. Once again, over to Calum...

Steve Carter, crofting teacher, Sgoil Lionacleit, Isle of Benbecula

Keep up to date
with events on our
website at
www.crofting.org

CROFTING CONNECTIONS

Crofting will be my life

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, fencing 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.

We keep 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 are getting a couple of weaners to clear 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. And 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.

Calum Martindale



Calum Martindale introduces his hens and ducks to his fellow crofting students

Discovering the past to understand the future

FOR THE FIRST time since 1847, a small area of land at Auchindrain will be worked using the runrig system.

This traditional method of land allocation will be used to set out the areas to be used by local primary school children for producing a variety of crops over the next few years. The children of Inveraray, Furnace and Minard primary schools are the first three schools in Argyll to join the Crofting Connections project and learning about runrig is only one of a host of experimental learning programmes planned for them this year at Auchindrain.

An important element of the project is for children to look to the past in order to understand the history and progression of farming and agriculture. This will enable them to understand changes that took place in the landscape, and more importantly, changes that occurred in the daily lives of the people who lived in townships. Townships were traditional Highland farming villages, a way of life that existed long before the appearance of crofting. Auchindrain is the last survivor of these townships, and today it is preserved as

a unique and special historical site open to visitors as a museum.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, agricultural improvement brought an end to the old farming community system. However, Auchindrain continued as a township for another 150 years until the last tenant retired in 1962, surviving untouched by agricultural modernisation or changes in the way people lived.

The village as seen today has a range of Grade A listed buildings which include furnished traditional longhouses, cottar's



© Auchindrain

houses, barns, stables and byres. There are also kailyards, roads, field walls and the ruined remains of buildings abandoned years ago.

Over the years, Auchindrain has proved to be an important and valuable historical resource. The opportunities for supporting schools in their use of this resource are immense and we are absolutely delighted to be able to offer new learning opportunities for those schools participating in this exciting project.

We hope that the invaluable experiences and historical knowledge of the traditional farming and community life learnt over the course of the project will inspire the children's enthusiasm. This in turn will educate them in the need for the guardianship of crofting. This can only lead to a positive future for crofting and what's more, they will have fun in the process!

Julia Hamilton

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



© Auchindrain

MEMBERS' PAGES

Organisational democracy

THIS CROFTING Reform Bill is progressive in that it is looking at the democracy and structure of the governing body, the Crofters Commission, in order to make it more representative and accountable.

This potential move away from the Commission being a government-appointed, autocratic quango must be a good thing. The proposals are moving in the right direction, but we want to see more involvement from crofting roots in the form of a more democratic and leading role for the assessors network, the voice of crofting communities.

Equally, we must also look at our own structure: are we representative of our membership, our constituency?

When the SCF changed from being the SCU it became a company limited by guarantee and gained registered charity status. This process meant that a constitution had to be registered with Companies House and is now also registered with the office of the Scottish charities register. The constitution defines what our objectives are, how we organise ourselves and how we represent the majority views or our membership.

The organisation is required by law to have a board of directors (trustees) legally responsible for the proper conduct of the organisation. The role of the board is to decide on company business matters such as the financial strategy, accounting policy, operational objectives, employment issues and so on.

The SCF has also chosen to have a council of area representatives, people elected in their areas and asked by their area to represent them on the

council. Areas in turn have their own constitution which gives them autonomy, though they come together as the SCF – hence the term federation.

Council deliberates upon what position the SCF should take on policy that is being formed by the powers that be that affects crofting. They usually find a common position acceptable to all but if they don't they can vote and the majority rules. We have a council as we believe that the crofting areas are distinct in their views and that these views need to come together in a common representation.

Our 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 will for there to be full participation in the political position and strategy formation of the organisation by individual members, through due process of election of representatives at area level and at board and council level.

The board and council meet regularly every quarter to determine policy positions, sometimes with the advice of subject-specific working groups drawn from the board, council and wider membership. The board may also meet alone sometimes if there are company business matters to determine.

All of the work put in by the board and council representatives is voluntary. The time put in by SCF's office-bearers illustrates the commitment to the cause and gives the SCF the credibility no other comparable 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 is your chance to tell policy makers what YOU see as the most important issues facing crofting today. Is it erosion of subsidies, crofting legislation, lack of provision for new entrants, loss of local services such as abattoirs and marts, lack of understanding by Scottish and UK governments, climate change, over-complex regulations and paperwork, lack of schemes appropriate to crofting? And so on ...

Please give us your views so that we can formulate policies that accurately reflect what our members want. We look forward to hearing from you.

Get on board – trustee opportunity

Can you help achieve 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 trustees who can help us achieve the SCF vision for crofting.

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

- strategic financial management
- HR skills
- fundraising
- business skills

If you feel you have the experience and enthusiasm to be part of the SCF board or would like further information contact SCF HQ for further information Hq@crofting.org or tel **01599 566 365**

Closing date for nominations is Friday 30th April 2010

Leave a legacy to SCF

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

For most people, of course, providing for their families and friends is their priority.

However, once family and friends have been taken care of even a small gift from the remainder of your estate can make a big difference to the work of SCF. You should speak to a solicitor about your will and any provision you might wish to make in favour of SCF.

What types of legacy are there?

There are three types of legacy:

1. A residuary legacy – once you have provided for your family and others you can leave the remainder or a percentage of it to the SCF, eg 10%.
2. A pecuniary legacy – a specific sum of money, eg £1000.
3. A specific legacy of a valuable item, eg a tractor, a house, or even the interest in the tenancy of a croft.

What wording should I use in my will?

The SCF suggests the following wording and would advise that in order to avoid any misunderstandings in your will, your solicitor follows this form of words:

'I bequeath to the Scottish Crofting Federation, Scottish Charity Number SC031919 [or its successors] to be applied by it for its charitable purposes [add bequest]'

Why do I need a solicitor?

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

Can I save on tax by leaving a legacy?

Not everyone pays inheritance tax. It is only due if your estate – including any assets held in trust and gifts made within seven years of death – is valued over the current inheritance tax threshold (£325,000 in 2009-10). The tax is payable at 40 per cent on the amount over this threshold. On an estate worth £400,000, tax of £30,000 would have to be paid (ie £75,000 x 40%). With the increase in house prices in recent years and increased ownership of stocks and shares, more and more people have estates worth more than the inheritance tax threshold.

However, if you leave a legacy to a charity then this gift is removed before the worth of the estate is calculated for tax. For instance, if you left a 10% legacy on an estate worth £400,000 to a charity (ie £40,000) then this would first be removed, leaving tax to be paid on the remainder of the estate above the tax threshold (ie £400,000 - £40,000 = £360,000: 40% tax is paid on £360,000 = £144,000).

All inheritance tax can be avoided by leaving everything above the tax threshold to charity. The SCF is a charity registered in Scotland.

MEMBERS' PAGES

Problems – we can help

THE SCOTTISH Crofting Federation is always pleased to help members with their crofting problems and queries wherever we can. What we cannot do, as we are not qualified, is offer legal advice, but we can nearly always point a member in the right direction for assistance. Quite often, simply by speaking to the right person or writing a letter, we can help to achieve a satisfactory outcome for members who ask for help. Here are a few examples, which of course have to be anonymous, of cases we have been involved in recently.

○ A member was being refused CCAGS assistance for regeneration of pasture and eradication of rushes. Not only that, but the local office had sat on his application for a number of months before refusing it without explanation. Eventually, and after persistent efforts, our member was told that he had been refused because he was only proposing to cut the rushes, not spray, and to surface treat the pasture rather than plough, harrow and reseed. This would have been contrary to the advice of the local Scottish Agricultural College consultant, which was that ploughing would actually make the rush problem worse and would cause erosion of the land due to its steepness and the shallow nature of the peaty soil. SCF asked the Crofters Commission to review the case, following which our member's CCAGS application was given the go-ahead.

○ A member approached us for assistance with a dispute regarding the Scottish outdoor access code. He had closed up a gate on his croft which was used as access over his land to a beach. He pointed out, however, that alternative routes were available. He had fenced this part of the croft, which is good machair land, to use as a park for silage and to grow vegetables and potatoes. Members of the public had made complaints, and the local authority access officer had threatened prosecution. We took up the case with the access officer, pointing out the alternative routes and suggesting that these should be signposted by the council. The council officials were clearly under pressure from the complaining parties and

continued to insist on access through the croft. We had a site meeting and a compromise was reached. The access path would be diverted around the edge of the croft's park and the council would pay for and install a new self-closing gate. This seems to have satisfied all concerned.

○ We assisted in another complex housing case. Our member applied to CHGS for assistance to build a house on his bareland croft. This was refused on the grounds that housing grant assistance had been given to a previous tenant within fifteen years and that, prior to that, another grant had been paid to another tenant. Our member appealed, pointing out that the croft had not been worked for at least forty years, having been landlocked until our member purchased land and built an access track. He is an active crofter with cattle, sheep and pigs and has an operational need to reside on the croft. The previous tenants had never worked the croft and had only acquired it in order to obtain housing sites and assistance. The previous houses referred to had been built on apportionments and there had never been a house on the croft. We wrote in support of the appeal and also raised the principles of the case with the local MSP, arguing that an outgoing croft tenant who has breached the letter and spirit of the grant scheme by using the croft to get housing assistance, then selling the croft, should be the one that is penalised rather than the incoming crofter. Eventually our member was offered CHGS assistance.

Members seeking help with crofting problems should contact SCF head office on **01599 566365** or hq@crofting.org.

And at the global level, our membership of ECVC means that we are part of La Via Campesina, the world-wide movement for small farmers with a membership of over 300 million.

There is strength in numbers. If we are to change the way we produce food so that it is controlled by us and benefits all and if crofting is to get the recognition it deserves in Scottish food policy, we need to be part of the bigger movements advocating a sensible use of our resources.

The way crofting generations have produced food, sustained the population and protected the natural environment is the way forward and there are millions of others in world who believe and practice the same. Only by standing together will we be big enough to move the corporate ideology of using food to make profit no matter the cost to rural populations and the environment. And only by making this massive policy shift will we be able to feed everyone with good food for ever.

National and international affiliations

THE FACT that the SCF is the only membership organisation dedicated to promoting crofting makes it unique, but the fact that it is also the largest association of small scale food producers in the UK makes it of great interest to national and international food advocacy organisations.

At the Scottish level we are involved in the setting up of a Scottish food advocacy group, an association of organisations that will influence Scottish food policy, moving it towards a more sustainable and people-friendly model.

At UK level we are a member of Sustain – the alliance for better food and farming, again an alliance of like-minded organisations who influence UK food and agriculture policy and host the UK Food Group, a collective voice speaking on behalf of UK organisations who believe in sustainable food production.

At a European level we are members of the European Co-ordination for Via Campesina (ECVC), the largest and loudest voice for small-scale food production in Europe with the power to influence European food policy. We are currently involved in preparing an alternative common food and agriculture policy based on food sovereignty, a policy framework advocating democracy in localised food systems. Recently two of our young people went on a week-long political training course to learn more about food advocacy – they will write of their experience and plans in the next issue.

Membership survey

At SCF we are always looking at ways to improve our service to members. With this in mind, we would like to ask your views on how we can best meet your needs and tell you about the things that interest you.

If you could spare a few minutes to complete the enclosed questionnaire it will really help us. The results of the survey will be of used to inform our membership working group and will be published in the next edition of the Crofter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Agricultural buildings on the croft

Claire 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 financially and logistically. Erecting any building can be a slow and footy process that requires forward planning: good research at the outset is vital and will pay dividends later on.

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. Kit 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 end 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 if:

- the farm holding 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

i. less than 465 square metres in area, or

ii. less than 12 metres in height.

- the development is more than 25 metres from a metalled trunk or classified road;

- the development will house pigs, poultry, rabbits or animals bred for their skin, or for the storage of slurry or sewage sludge AND is more than 400 metres from a "protected building". A protected building is a building normally occupied by people but does not include buildings forming part of a working farm.

This list is not exhaustive and it is therefore important to liaise with the local planning office who will offer relevant advice.

Arranging finance and preparing a thorough budget is equally important. It is recommended that all building projects include a 10% contingency to allow for unforeseen expenses. Visualising the completed building can help to eradicate hidden or over-looked expenses – ground works, access, service connection costs and fixtures and fittings are all integral parts of the project and its costs.

Financial assistance may be available to crofters through CCAGS (Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme). Grants of up to 50% are available but applicants must meet all the usual CCAGS

criteria. More specifically, there are clear guidelines on the grant eligibility for agricultural buildings.

Permitted buildings include:

- all the usual buildings for keeping livestock and storing crops produced on the unit;
- buildings for general service purposes;
- buildings for other kinds of livestock kept for the production of meat, milk, wool, fur or hides;
- buildings associated with honey production;
- stabling for keeping work horses;
- facilities for sheltering out-wintered livestock.

Furthermore, buildings should be durable, permanent structures that comply with British building standards where appropriate.

The balance of the project's costs can be financed through specialist agricultural finance houses or normal banking loans and are subject to all the usual regulations. A financial advisor will be able to provide advice.

For further information visit:

planning:

www.eplanning.scotland.gov.uk

grants:

www.crofterscommission.org.uk/documents.asp

finance: Google

"agricultural finance"

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To cater for a growing market within the agricultural construction market AGB opened a sales and distribution depot in Fyvie, Aberdeenshire. There a considerable supply of standard sheet lengths is stocked along with purlins, rooflights, flashings and fixings. Our experienced staff based here will be delighted to advise you with your requirements and we can also arrange local deliveries with our own transport fleet.

According to managing director Brian Garvey, AGB Steel Products are unique within Scotland in that we are the only company that manufacturers and distributes the complete range of roofing and cladding products within the country for the agricultural construction industry. We are very proud and also very mindful of our responsibilities to our customers and to the industry. We are delighted to look after all enquiries no matter how small or how large and complicated they are.

Please see below for our contact details.

Glasgow **0141 5567551**

Fyvie **01651 891668**

www.agbsteelproducts.co.uk

info@agbsteelproducts.co.uk

More agri-buildings info can be found on the following page...

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www.croftersmart.com

CROFTERS MART is a new free classifieds web site developed exclusively for crofters in the Highlands and Islands. Our aim is to make it easier for crofters to connect and trade with each other by offering free classified ads. Free advertising for your business, coupled with our promise that your ad is displayed until it sells. Crofters Mart makes that easy to do from the comfort of your home. Trading your surplus goods is both good for the environment and your pocket.

All ads submitted to Crofters Mart are displayed for up to 60 days or longer in some categories (all renewable at any time) which instantly appear on our web site without having to wait for approval. Users can upload up to four photos to accompany their ad. Categories range from livestock, through machinery to property and land. Users have the ability to highlight or feature their ad to make it more visible to prospective buyers and there is even a wanted category.

Crofters Mart was only launched four weeks ago, but we believe it will slowly grow to become

an essential part of the crofting community. Our greatest challenge in these early days is to get that buzz of activity, so post details of that machinery attachment you no longer use or details of that machine you wish to hire out.

www.croftersmart.com

We have also recently launched three other web sites that may be of interest to local crofting communities:

www.highlandpoultryadoption.co.uk

– Highland Poultry Adoption. Helping poultry lovers to find new homes for their surplus or unwanted poultry, including cockerels, through our adoption forum.

www.westhighlandclassifieds.com

– West Highland Classifieds. General classifieds for communities on the west coast. Here you have the choice of over 90 categories from tools through cars to livestock and pets.

www.skyeclassifieds.com

Communities on Skye now have their own dedicated site.

The beauty of sheep

Ian Williams falls in love

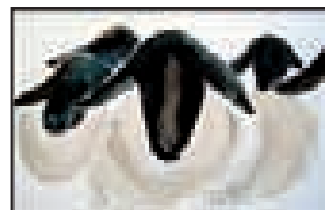
I ALWAYS THOUGHT that sheep looked the same, woolly with black faces, or simply smaller black ones.

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 my gallery at Brae Fasach, Loch Bay, Waternish, Isle of Skye. **01470 592 732**, or via www.madeinskye.co.uk



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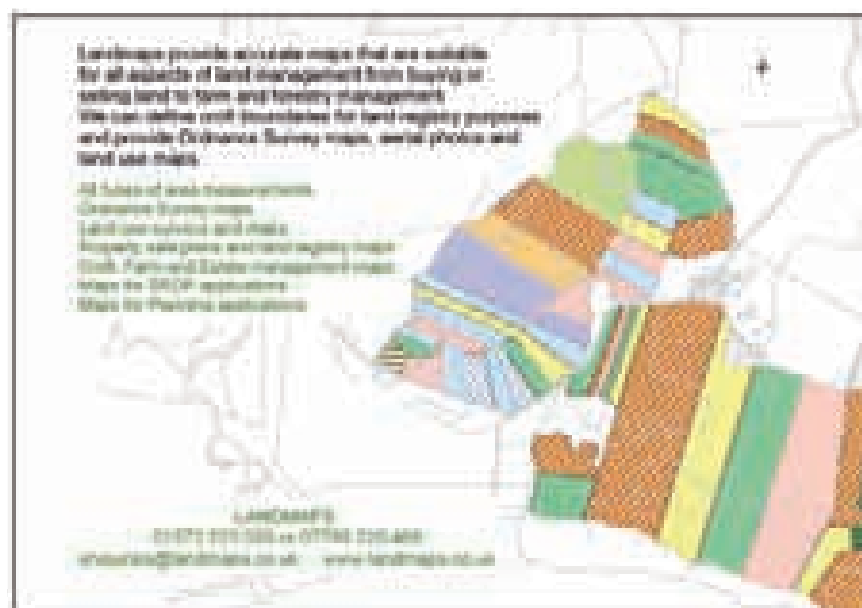
Chris Simm, the director, will be as involved in your project as you want her to be, from free straightforward initial advice and guidance to self-builders who are managing their own projects, all the way up to full project management services, all with the same level of commitment, attention to detail and friendly customer service.

She can design the building you need using an existing concrete base, or add extensions to existing sheds with the appropriate drawings and engineering certificates. GFB Buildings Ltd can also arrange for your base and erection works in partnership with a tried and trusted pool of contractors and help with planning and building warrant applications, grant applications and insurance claims.

And it's not just farm buildings. If you're considering diversification projects, our buildings are suitable for all uses, including: domestic and commercial garages; car ports; farm shops; workshops; stables; kennels; storage and industrial buildings.

What makes us different? Well, our customers tell us that we are somewhat unique in that we respond and produce accurate quotes quickly, we listen and provide a friendly honest service, we're competitive, our buildings are delivered within weeks of placing an order and they are versatile and quick to erect.

So when you're looking for a quality steel building, whether it's a small sheep shed, utility or implement shed, stable block or a huge barn, GFB Buildings Ltd can provide everything you need.



MEMBERS' PAGES

News from the Lewis 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-led organisation for crofting communities in the Highlands and Islands and is dedicated to safe-guarding crofting and its cultural heritage now and for generations to come.

Donnie 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 Flyn, has been seconded to the committee engaged in scrutinising the Crofting Reform Bill; and Norman Leask regularly flies to Brussels to lobby members 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 Donnie remarks: “There are some, more cynical than I, who would argue that this is, indeed, the object of the exercise!

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

The Lewis branch of 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.



standing l-r are: Donald Martin, Iain D MacLeod, Kenny J MacLeod, Carola Bell, Alex D Nicolson
sitting l-r: Neil MacLeod, chairman SCF, Donnie MacDonald, branch chairman

SCF officials' diary

SCF OFFICIALS have a very active participation within our organisation.

They attend many meetings to represent our members throughout Scotland, UK and Europe. Over the last three months they have been busy as ever to ensure that crofters have a voice in these meetings, conferences and seminars.

In December our representatives attended meetings regarding Leader funding, the parliamentary cross party group for crofting, the same for rural development and a stakeholder group on EID. There was also crofter representation at the sheep and goat advisory committee in Brussels, the marketing conference in the Wester Isles, the protected food names conference in Perth and a community development seminar in Ireland.

At the beginning of 2010 our officials were again busy throughout the UK. As well as the crofting futures conference held in Stornoway, a representative was present at the grass-fed conference in Oxford. Meetings on EID implementation, the food cross party group, grazing discussions and the SRDP monitoring committee all had SCF representative present to ensure that crofters had a voice.

February has seen meetings with QMS, Scottish government officials and MSPs. The Pack inquiry meetings have also started throughout Scotland, at which we have had representatives

attending. Evidence on the Crofting Reform Bill introduced in December has been submitted to the committee for rural affairs and environment and has been presented to the committee. The meeting for the foundation of common land and another with the food and drink industry division all had SCF representation. 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 will 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' diaries are filling up fast for the following months including the meat marketing conference organised by our crofting resources programme and cross party group meetings.

All our officials give generously of their time on members' behalf for no reward other than the satisfaction of working for the good of crofters and crofting. Next time you're asked to pay your subscription and you wonder what you're getting from your membership, just think of all this unpaid work that is done by fellow crofters on your behalf. You'd be a lot worse off without it.

Caithness Branch AGM
Norseman Hotel, Wick
26 March 8pm

Skye and Lochalsh Area AGM
Monday 22nd March 7.30pm
Broadford Hotel

Presentation: Pack Inquiry's Interim Report re. the future of agricultural support in Scotland – what does this mean for crofters?

A small-scale electricity revolution

ON FEBRUARY 2nd 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, and
- 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.

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What lessons for crofting from the Farm Soils Plan?

Janette Sutherland of the Farm Business Service in Portree explains

“The soil is what gives us the real income that supports us all” – Ed Begley Jr

THE FARM SOILS Plan (FSP) covers all aspects of protecting agricultural soils and can protect incomes too. You should read this plan –

- if you are interested in saving money on fertiliser;
- if you wish to protect your single farm payment from penalties;
- if you wish to improve your grassland quality.

Below I will share some of the key points, although it is by no means an exhaustive list – the Farm Soils Plan is well worth a read.

Compaction

The biggest causes of

compaction in crofting soils are likely to be machinery travelling on wet soils, poaching and shallow pan formation from livestock.

Solutions to compaction

- The FSP shows how one can identify the depth of compaction.
- A myriad of solutions may be suitable such as altering plough depth, sub-soiling, mowing or grassland aerators. The key message is all these activities have to be carried out in dry conditions.
- Although not easy, vehicular access should be restricted when soil is saturated.
- Avoid machinery operation if ground fails the foot-print test – ie when pressure is applied, water is seen in the footprint.

Poor drainage

Poor drainage is often the result of old drainage systems blocking

or being unable to cope with the weight of new machinery.

Solutions to poor drainage

There are two responses to areas of poor drainage. In fertile ground drainage systems should be maintained/renewed. However in some areas it may be wiser to manage the area as a wetland for environmental payments. Please contact your local SAC office if you require advice.

Fertiliser cost

Excessive fertiliser applications waste crofters' money and can cause diffuse pollution problems.

Solutions to fertiliser costs

Test soil pH and nutrients on a 3/5 year cycle. If you know exactly what to apply, you will save money as excess fertiliser won't be wasted. For example when muriate of potash costs £425/t and Triple Super Phosphate costs £249/t (in 500kg bags)

Applying enough potash and phosphate to grow hay on low potassium (100kg/ha) and phosphate soils (100kg/Ha) when the soil in fact has a moderate reading and only requires 60kg/ Ha of each wastes £29.96 per hectare!

The above example shows it is well worth correcting any deficiencies as it will reduce annual fertiliser requirements.

- Calculate how much N, P & K is required. If you spread FYM remember to take this into account. SAC can do this for you.
- Keep fertiliser and manure

applications away from watercourses and hedges to reduce pollution. Grass margins may be beneficial.

- Make sure your equipment is accurately calibrated.

Soil erosion

Soil erosion should be avoided where possible as it is the loss of a valuable asset of your croft. Water quality can be damaged by soil erosion.

Solutions to soil erosion

- Make sure feed rings are suitably positioned well away from watercourses and not on ground sloping towards a watercourse.
- Consider managing water-margins as part of an agri-environment scheme to protect sensitive water margins from livestock.
- Carefully choose midden locations well away from watercourses.
- Regularly check fields for excessive poaching and take action if required.

Correct soil management will not only protect your SFP, but it will also reduce your costs in the long term and improve animal welfare. Above is a whistle stop tour of a very complex subject!

If you require specific advice on your croft/farm please do not hesitate to contact your local SAC office. We are happy to post a copy of the Farm Soils Plan.



Radioactivity in seaweed: the conclusion

Joanne Brown reports

CROFTER 73 in December 2006 described a research project investigating concerns about the presence of radioactivity in seaweed being used as fertiliser or as an animal feed.

The project was funded jointly by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and the Health Protection Agency (HPA) and carried out by the latter. Following the article, a number of families and individuals expressed an interest in taking part in the study.

Due to the specific nature of this assessment, it was important to gather information relevant to this situation and to analyse the radionuclide content in the foodstuffs produced. The radionuclide technetium-99 (99Tc) is of primary interest because of relatively high historic discharges from the Sellafield

nuclear site, it has a long radioactive half-life, it is mobile in the marine environment and is readily taken up by seaweed as indicated by routine surveillance monitoring. In addition, in some circumstances it is readily taken up by plants from soil.

Each of the families or individuals was visited and asked to provide information on the amounts of seaweed they applied, the frequency of application and any prior treatment such as composting. They were also asked about the crops that they grew on land treated with seaweed, including those to be used as animal fodder and also whether they kept any animals that grazed directly on seaweed. Samples of the seaweed used and soil from the treated land were collected and analysed.

As had been expected, the differences in the ways in which seaweed was used meant that, to make an appropriate estimate

of the radiation doses received, the study would need to focus on measuring the radionuclide content in the foodstuffs produced on treated land. A second visit was therefore made to all of the participants at the end of the main growing season in 2007 and a range of vegetables and some samples of meat and offal were collected. Initial results from the analyses confirmed that the radionuclide of primary interest was technetium-99.

A radiological assessment requires information on the amounts of foodstuffs consumed as well as the amounts of radioactivity that they contain. All participants were therefore asked to estimate the quantities of foods they ate and how much was produced on seaweed-treated land. The information on the amounts of food consumed was combined with the measured activity concentrations of technetium-99 in the various

foodstuffs to estimate radiation exposures from consuming the foodstuffs produced on land treated with seaweed.

A cautious approach was adopted so that levels of exposure were very unlikely to be underestimated. In all cases the levels of exposure were small, the highest values being 1000 times lower than the relevant limit for members of the public and at least an order of magnitude lower than the radiation exposure from consuming naturally-occurring radionuclides in a typical UK diet. The highest estimated levels of exposure are also comparable with that from cosmic radiation during a flight to mainland Europe. The majority of the estimated exposures in this study were a factor of 100 – 1000 lower than the highest value discussed here.

The final report has been published by HPA and can be downloaded from the HPA web site www.hpa.org.uk/HPA/Publications/Radiation/HPARPDSeriesReports

Minimizing losses at lambing time

IT IS VITAL THAT ewes receive the correct care, nutrition and management throughout pregnancy and preparation for a successful lambing should begin as early as pre-tupping.

The selection of sound ewes and tups at the correct condition score and the correction of any trace element deficiency (in particular adequate cobalt (B12) status) is vital in order to maximise fertility. Scanning is also a vital aspect of lamb survival as decisions can be made as to feeding requirements depending on the number of fetuses the ewe may be carrying.

Crofters should condition score all pregnant ewes six and three weeks before lambing. This allows for them to adjust feed accordingly ensuring a good supply of quality colostrum and to avoid prolapses. Completing vaccination four to six weeks before lambing will also ensure a good supply of antibodies in the colostrum.

If you are using lambing pens, try and prepare the accommodation in good time. Lime the floors of lambing pens to reduce build up of infection. If straw is in short supply put a layer of wood shavings over the lime.

Stock up with all equipment and drugs required at lambing

time. Check warming boxes are working.

During lambing time

Improved lamb survival at lambing time relies on a robust flock health plan based on accurate records.

Try and ensure that all lambs suckle within four but preferably two hours of birth. If you have any doubt that a lamb hasn't fed, stomach tube the lamb with either sheep's colostrum stored from ewes that have lost lambs, or use artificial colostrum. Cow's colostrum can also be used but try and mix the cow's colostrum from at least two or three cows to reduce the risk of anaemia.

Dress the navels of all lambs with strong iodine. Dip rather than spray the navels to ensure total coverage. Antibiotic aerosols are not very effective as they do not have an astringent property, so it is vital to dry and wither the navel cord.

Isolate and keep a record of any ewe that aborts for future reference. Foetal membranes should be carefully collected and placed either with the foetus in double plastic bags for submission to the laboratory or for disposal. Submitting any aborted fetuses and membranes to a veterinary investigation laboratory will help

you determine the possible cause of abortion.

Ensure that lambing pens are cleaned out between lambing ewes. If time is limited, at least try to spray with disinfectant or apply a liberal dressing of lime on the old bedding and cover deeply with fresh straw.

When lambs leave the lambing pens or are bonded on outside don't forget that the 14 days after lambing is the time when the nutritional demands of the ewe are at their highest as they try to maintain a good milk supply for their lambs. It is therefore essential to continue to feed ewes adequately during this period.

If lambs scour take a sample (not a swab) and submit to your vet or local veterinary investigation laboratory to determine the cause and identify the appropriate treatment. Remember that a quick diagnosis leads to rapid correct treatment and so reduces losses.

Chris Lewis is an independent sheep advisor and a director of the Moredun Foundation. Moredun runs a membership scheme which aims to keep farmers and their vets up to date with the latest developments in animal health research. If you like would more information on lamb survival or are interested in becoming a member of Moredun, please contact Maggie Bennett at The Moredun Foundation, Pentlands Science Park, Bush Loan, Penicuik, EH26 0PZ phone 0131 445 5111 or visit their website at www.moredun.org.uk



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Know your birds

CROFTERS ARE being given the chance to find out exactly which bird species are on their land – through a scheme run by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds that provides free surveys on agricultural land.

The Volunteer and Farmer Alliance (V&FA) project is being rolled out across Highland Region, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, having been shown to be beneficial to farmers and crofters in other parts of Scotland in previous years. Increased coverage throughout the Highlands and Islands has been made possible through EU LIFE+ funding.

During surveys, crofters are matched with a trained and experienced local volunteer who will carry out three or four visits between April and July to record all of the bird species they see and hear. The results are then plotted on a unique laminated 'bird map', which provides an at-a-glance guide to where birds of conservation concern are located on the croft. Additionally, crofters receive a full report and species list and are offered follow-up advice on ways to manage land to benefit those species. The survey results are confidential and there is no obligation to act on them.

The V&FA project aims to enthuse and inform farmers and crofters about the birds they have on their land and encourage them to seek advice

about practical action they can take to help. Last year, the average V&FA survey recorded 35 species – in most instances participants were made aware of several species they had not realised were using their land.

Historically, the populations of farmland birds have declined significantly due to changes to their habitats. More recently, targeted work has helped stabilise the populations of some species, such as the corncrake. However, many species continue to decline in Scotland, including the lapwing, curlew and corn bunting.

With many crofters already carrying out habitat management for birds, the survey results can be used to maintain and enhance existing measures and demonstrate which species are benefiting from their efforts. A V&FA survey can also help with SRDP applications by providing confirmation of bird species on the croft and steering future habitat management plans towards options that best suit those species. This could include choosing the location and species composition of wild bird cover, management of wetland areas and timing the harvest for late nesting species.

The survey records also contribute to painting a clearer picture of what is happening to some of our struggling farmland species across the UK and forms part of the RSPB's larger farmland bird recovery programme, which aims to halt and reverse the decline of many farmland birds.

For further information please contact:

- Argyll & Bute:
Dan Brown, RSPB Scotland, 10 Park Quadrant, Glasgow, G3 6BS
0141 331 9097 daniel.brown@rspb.org.uk
- Highland and the Western Isles:
Su Cooper, RSPB Scotland, Etive House, Beechwood Park, Inverness, IV2 3BW
01463 228 827 suzanne.cooper@rspb.org.uk
- Orkney and Shetland:
Rebecca O'Dowd, RSPB Scotland, Onziebust, Egilsay, Orkney, KW17 2QD
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Tha sinn air gluasad 'S e an seòladh ùr againn on 1 Màirt 2010:
Taigh á Ghlinne Mhòir, Rathad an Leacainn, Inbhir Nis IV3 8NW
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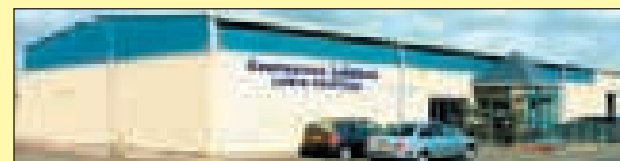
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CROFTING HERO

John McLaughlin of Carrowmenagh, Donegal

Iain Mackinnon from Camus Cross in Skye wrote this profile

NEAR THE PLACE where John McLaughlin lives they tell a story about an old man who was visited one day by the local priest.

When he came in, the priest told the old man that as he came



down the road to the old man's house, the day was so clear he felt he could have reached his hand out across the water to touch the island of Islay, some forty miles distant.

"Yes," replied the old man, not missing a beat, "and yesterday it was so clear that when my wife went out to the well, she looked out over at Islay and saw a woman with a tartan skirt on feeding the chickens!"

Around two miles from the house of the far-sighted woman is the townland of Carrowmenagh in the Inishowen peninsula, which is the northernmost part of County Donegal in Ireland and is within sight of the Scottish islands of Islay, Jura and Colonsay.

It is here that John McLaughlin lives. He was born in 1932 in a house built by his grandfather in the late 19th century. It is on the street through Carrowmenagh – the 'street' is the name Donegal folk give to the road that runs between the clustered clachan of houses that make up the hub of a townland (a townland is in many ways equivalent to a Highland township). John and his wife Anne live in his grandfather's house today and many of their relations also live in the place.

I have met several fine crofters (as I think of them) in Inishowen, but John was the first man who mentioned to me that in their names for divisions of land within the township, the older folk in Carrowmenagh would call the better quality in-by land crofting land.

From his youth John remembers working hard at the hay and turnips, planting spuds, yet no shortage of fun too.

Except for the winter months, schooling tended to take a back seat. He said: "When the spring opened up, you started ploughing

and the lads were then sent to look after the cattle and after the pigs. Then, when it came to cutting the turf, they would get to school if it was a wet day."

At school John was in a class of 15. When they left school, 13 of them – including Anne who was to become his wife – emigrated.

John stayed, becoming a rent collector and home assistance officer for Donegal county council which allowed him to travel all over north east Donegal, initially by bicycle.

John said: "Anne and I went to school together but we weren't sweethearts then. It was when she came back from studying to be a nurse that I saw her in a different light!"

When I come to ceilidh them, Anne usually leaves John and I to get on with it, but when she stays in our company I find that she is as sharp as he is and adds interesting observations of her own to her husband's stories. It is obvious this 'croft' has been worked in partnership!

John has two farms (or crofts): one of 16 acres, the other of 14 acres. He would have kept around five cows and a couple of horses for ploughing. The farms are now worked by a younger relative.

He was involved in setting up the Inishowen farmers' co-operative in the late 1950s. At that time, farmers who came to

sell their cattle were at the mercy of traders known as the gombeen men. They were notorious for offering low prices for cattle.

The dealers didn't think much of the new co-op. John said: "At the time, they were coming out with all kinds of stories like 'Oh give it a year and then you will be back with us' but it's been going now for more than fifty years – and still going well."

During the course of many years' work for the council he says he talked to literally thousands of folk. From this he acquired a great deal of local knowledge which, in recent times, he has been putting to use.

After retiring, he took a course in local history. There followed a part time course in history at a local college and then, (after, he says, a lot of convincing) he decided to take on a BA course in history and politics at Ulster University. This is a man who, more than half a century earlier, had left school at fourteen with no qualifications.

Since graduating John has produced two books and a radio play about his home place.

It has been a privilege for me to spend time with John and Anne, and other 'crofters' like them, who carry so much of the traditions of Inishowen with such kindness and generosity.

Machraichean fo Bhàrr

THA NA MACHRAICHEAN air taobh an iar nan Eileanan an iar prìseil agus luachmhor oir is ann air am feadh a gheibhear lusan agus eunlaith a tha tearc agus a tha air a dhol a bith ann an àiteachan eile.

Tha cunnart ann, leis na dòighean obrach a tha aig croitearan an latha an diugh, gun teid cron a dheanamh air an talamh ghaineamhach seo

A nis tha buidhnean air tighinn còmhla gus ionmhas, luach da mhillean nota, a chruinneachadh a chuireas dìon air na h-àiteachan sònraichte seo. Thàinig còrr agus mìlean bhon Aonadh Eòrpach agus tuilleadh bho Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Comann Dion nan Eun agus Dualchas Nàdarra na h-Alba.

Thuit am BPA Alasdair Allan, "Tha mise fìor thoilichte gu bheil air air ionmhas fhàotainn a shàbhalas cuid den àrainneachd againn a tha cho prìseil."

Leis an airgid bheir taic do chroitearan gus an talamh àiteach

agus bàrr a thogail anns an t-seann nòs. Bhiodh sin a'ciallachadh gu cumadh na croitearan crodh agus caoraich air a'mhachaire agus gun gearradh iad pàirt den arbhar gus a cheangal na sguaban. An sin chuireadh iad na sguaban ann an suidheachain agus as deidh sin na chruachan beaga air an achadh agus mu dheireadh na chruachan mora anns an iodhlainn. Dh'fhagadh iad caoibean de thalamh gun àiteach aig cinn nan iomairean far am fàsadh feur agus lusan a chòrdas ri eòin mar an traon.

Tha an liuthad laimhseachadh seo air an arbhar, a' deanamh cinnteach gun tuit siol agus connlach air an talamh far am faigh eòin a tha an impis a'dhol a bith, mar gealag bhuachair agus an cadhag dhearg, biadh gu leòr Tha na beilearan mora cumhachdach a tha croitearan a'cleachdadh an diugh a'slugadh siol agus connlach agus gan cur ann am pocannan plastaic agus chan fhaigh na h-eòin

bheaga dad a sgròbas iad.

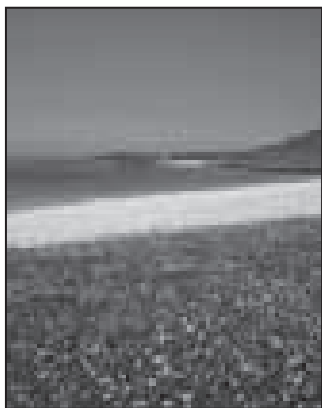
Tha Ena NicDhòmhnaill as a'Chaoas ann an Uibhist a-Tuath, a'caoidh mar a dh'fhalbh na seann dòighean air àiteachas. Tha i ag radh, "Theid mi sìos chun a'mhachaire anns an fhoghar agus chan fhaic mi sguab neo suidheachan. agus rud eile, anns an earrach chan fhaic mi duine a'feamanadh. Tha iad a'cleachdadh tobhar Gallda. Chaneil eòin bheaga bhòidheach ann mar a b'abhaist."

Tha e air a mheas gu bheil sia deug mìle de eoin ghrunnachaidh mar a' churracag agus am bodhag agus na ceudan de sheòrsachan de bhiastagan, air na machraichean. Tha moran de eòin eile, mar an gille- feadaig, am maor chladaich, an gealan beinne agus an traon beò orra cuideachd.

Anns an t-samhradh bidh brat ioma-dhathach, athamiorbhuileach ri fhaicinn, de fhlùraichean, air na machraichean. Tha sinn gu math eòlach air feadhainn dhiubh,

mar bàrr a'bhreisgein, bròg na cuthaig, agus an trì-bhileach ach tha na fìcheadan ann. Bidh luibh-eolaichean a'tighinn as gach cearn gus sgrùdadh a dheanamh orra. Tha e cudthromach nach teid tobhar Gallda a chur air an talamh seo.

Tormod Domhnallach



Machair

New Commission absentee policy

AREPORT commissioned by the Committee of Inquiry into Crofting (Shucksmith Report) identified croft absenteeism as the most important area for crofting regulation.

The Committee of Inquiry itself reported that nine out of every 10 responses indicated that absenteeism had to be dealt with. And in its own response to the inquiry the Scottish Crofting Foundation stated that: "Absenteeism must be vigorously pursued."

So the announcement by Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for the Environment, in early January that the Crofters Commission will systematically address absenteeism will be welcomed by most. The minister said: "I have asked Commissioners to conclude cases of absenteeism that have existed for 10 years or more. This will ensure we focus resources on resolving those long-outstanding cases first. The crofting community as a whole will benefit from this direct action."

In response the Commission has now written to all absentee tenants (673) and absent owner occupiers (217) of 10 years and over advising them of the minister's statement and the follow-up work that the Commission will undertake. It intends to work down through

the years to a much earlier cut-off point.

Over the next year the Commission will progressively examine each case, in accordance with the requirements of the Crofting Act. The act defines an absentee as a crofter who is not ordinarily resident within 16 kilometres of the croft. The Commission has to be satisfied that it will be in the general interest of that crofting community for the tenancy to be terminated and the croft let to another person.

Before reaching such a stage the Commission must consider all the circumstances of the case, including the extent to which the croft is worked and the nature of the arrangements where it is worked by a family member. Before issuing a termination order the Commission must advise the crofter and the landlord that it is proposing to do this. They are given the opportunity to make representation against the proposed order. If unsuccessful, notice of the termination order will be given at least three months before either the Whitsun or Martinmas term dates.

This is the ultimate stage, but it need not reach this point. The Commission will take account of individual situations when examining all the circumstances of a case. Also absentees have the opportunity to resolve their situations themselves. An

obvious example is by returning to live on or near the croft. A limited timescale to do so may be agreed with the Commission. If no timescale can be agreed the absentee may apply to assign it to another person. A new entrant to crofting would be preferable.

The croft tenancy can also be renounced. The landlord will provide compensation for any permanent improvements and re-let the croft.

There may be situations where the family home remains part of the croft but to return to reside there permanently is unrealistic. In such instances it is possible to purchase and decroft the house and garden ground and assign the remainder of the croft.

Purchasing the croft itself does not resolve an absentee situation nor remove the croft from crofting legislation. Crofters who purchase crofts become the landlord of a vacant croft. Technically, unless they live on and work the croft, the Commission can ask them for proposals for re-letting the croft.

There is no legal requirement for the Commission to give any consideration to the particular circumstances of an absent owner. However, as with tenants, an opportunity may be given to take up residence within a limited timescale, and consideration may be given where a family member is resident on and working the croft.

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DELEGATES from the Scottish Crofting Federation were in the north of England in early February to attend a major meeting discussing the formation of a UK and Ireland-wide Foundation for Common Land.

At the meeting held at Melmerby in Cumbria were graziers from throughout the UK and Ireland who work common land and members of representative groups that support them. A series of short presentations at the outset of the meeting showed that in some areas, such as the Highlands and Islands, there is a strong local representative system already in place, while in other parts of the country representative groups are less developed or do not exist at all.

The proposed Foundation for Common Land will weave together existing and emerging groups into a national commoners network or 'observatory'.

Among the benefits that its promoters anticipate is that the foundation will form a comprehensive forum for consultation, enabling effective discussion and efficient input to debate. It is also intended to act to influence research, spread good practice and share understanding of how different land tenure systems work.

Norman Leask, who attended the meeting with other members of the SCF, said: "This clearly has the potential to be an exciting development for crofters if the foundation is able to create a united voice with which graziers on common land can speak to the UK and European governments on issues of common interest."

"This would be important for crofters because, although the SCF has formed good working relationships with Scottish politicians and with key officials in the Scottish government, this has proved more difficult with

the UK government. Having access to the UK government is important for us – not least in that the UK is the European member state and the UK government is therefore the key to enabling crofters and other common land holders to have a voice in Europe."

Andrew Humphries, who hails from Cumbria and is the chair of the Foundation for Common Land, was one of the driving forces behind the network. He outlined his reasoning for proposing it, saying "Commons are no anachronism but are increasingly recognised as key resources for a range of public goods and of significant importance economically in the production of quality livestock. Through better communication and understanding, a collaborative approach should benefit all parties involved."

He has proposed a Commons Charter which highlights the economic, social and

Once the Commission gives formal notice to an absent owner to re-let the croft, he has two months in which to submit acceptable proposals. If these are not forthcoming the Commission will then re-let the croft itself.

Communication between the Commission and absentees is a vital part of the process for resolving situations. Ignoring letters from the Commission does not evade action and can entail a swifter move towards the termination of the tenancy or the relet of the croft.

The Commission makes reasonable attempts to obtain addresses, but if unable to do so a notice will be placed on the croft proposing to terminate the tenancy unless contacted within 21 days. The opportunity for consideration of mitigating circumstances may be lost through the failure to respond to earlier communication or to have advised the Commission of changes of address.

It is generally accepted that the greatest single contribution that crofting can make to sustainable economic development in rural areas is to ensure that crofts are occupied. In taking this initiative forward the Commission is aware of the many challenges it may face. However, in addressing these it has to be guided by the principle of what is best for the long term future of crofting.

environmental benefits of common land-holding systems, their historical importance and the need to share knowledge about common systems with the general public.

Norman Leask added that the meeting had exemplified the importance of the crofting system in maintaining small scale agriculture in the Highlands and Islands – and the strong communities that exist in the area because of it.

He said: "Time and again, English delegates told us about the struggles they have to retain the integrity of their holdings and their communities in the face of a system of land tenure that is still in key respects feudal. With legislation currently going through the Scottish parliament, it is vital that politicians understand that strengthening the crofting system is a vital part of ensuring the integrity of Highlands and Islands communities."

Crofter's wife column

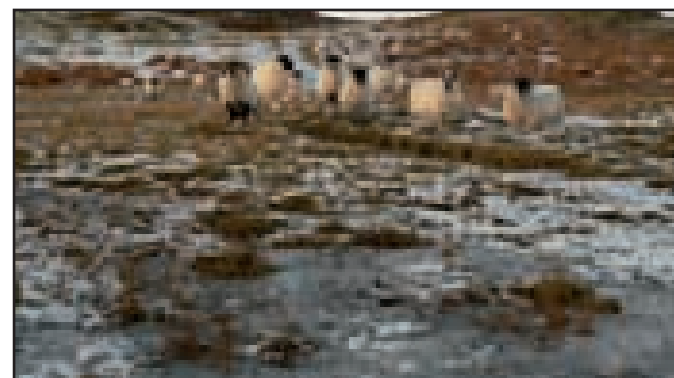
Winter weather... wasn't it wonderful!

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 it hogged the headlines, trounced the transport network and soaked up shrinking salt supplies, we embarrassed ourselves on a national level. Yet on a local level, up and down the land, we shone: neighbour helped neighbour, whole families 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 adorned and proudly paraded in the great outdoors!

Perhaps my love of such conditions comes from being mid-winter 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 tired 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? Let the children play!

Closer to home, The Crofter tended to the increased needs of the cattle and sheep while I kept the bird feeders stocked and did the rounds of various watering holes marvelling at how quickly they froze over.



Claire Nicolson

www.crofting.org

Our biggest problem was the ice-covered driveway and successfully negotiating it became a daily challenge for pick-up, car and even tractor. As for us pedestrians, well, I gave up trying after one particularly precarious descent trauchled down by a pram with a mind of its own and a Jack Russell who hates the cold and whose head and heart told him to turn and head back to the warm kitchen but whose feet couldn't obey as they slithered and skidded under him!

My daily dose of fresh air was instead achieved by heading up the croft, always armed with a walking pole and camera and wearing more layers than an arctic explorer, accompanied by another less wimpish dog. We were blessed with cold, clear days that presented snowy vistas we may not see for another thirty 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 blinking rhododendrons. 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 can only hope! Hurray for snow!

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Martin Benson

Croft tourism

Following the crofter's wife's piece in the last issue about her family holiday on an Irish farm, we've been asked to come up with an article to help promote your croft tourism ventures...

AS CROFTERS continue 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 old-world appeal, a B&B with braw blackpudding breakfasts, or a cosy caravan with stunning views, crofting holiday homes offer a unique experience for those seeking refuge from their daily drudge. After-all, they come complete with friendly and knowledgeable (yet non-intrusive) folks 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, £20) 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.

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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 up-lift 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.

Why everyone should join the Scottish Crofting Federation

- To be part of the only organisation run by crofters for crofters.

- Which, through collective action by crofters, promotes and defends crofting at the highest levels, so that crofting-specific support and policies are maintained and enhanced.

- To gain access to advice and support from people with hands-on experience of crofting and everything that affects it.

- To make contact with like-minded people who have experiences to share.

- To receive a copy of *The Crofter*, the only magazine geared specifically to crofters, but which also influences and informs policy makers.

- To take advantage of the SCF members' discount scheme which can often save more than the cost of the subscription.

- To learn about and make contact with people in other countries who farm in a way very similar to crofters.

- To gain access to the Croft Produce Mark which can help market your produce more effectively.

- To benefit from the Crofting Resources Programme, which raises awareness of croft-based production and assists producers with all aspects of the development of their produce.

- To help crofting protect the environment and unique habitats of the Highlands and Islands.

- To show your commitment and support for the unique way of life that is crofting.



Martin Benson

Save the Date

SCF AGM will be held on Saturday 5th June – full details in the next edition of the Crofter.


Scottish Crofting Federation
 rooted in our communities

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 Scottish Crofting Federation

Our mission is to safeguard and promote the rights, livelihoods and culture of crofters and their communities