Will the new SRDP be more crofting friendly?

SCF responded to the recent SRDP consultation by saying that crofting, whilst widely recognised as very important in Scottish rural development, was supported by the current SRDP quite appallingly.

There has been a lot of work carried out by crofting interests to try to identify why and to suggest ways of reversing this in the new SRDP. The result of these deliberations is the suggestion of a Crofting Support Scheme (CSS), which has widespread support.

But having seen crofting fare so poorly in the current SRDP, it would not be unfair to predict that the CSS would not satisfy all requirements (in measures and money) to keep crofters crofting; and crofters would therefore be likely to need to apply to wider SRDP measures also. In this scenario there have been concerns about duplication, but that is perhaps a bit of a red herring; if the appropriate measure exists within the CSS there would be no need for the crofter to seek support elsewhere, surely?

The suggestion that the CSS should extend to other small-holdings in the crofting counties that deliver the same desired outcomes is understood. However, there are valid reasons why this should not be the case. Crofting is a regulated system of tenure – regulated by specific legislation related only to crofting. It imposes burdens upon crofts.

Still lots for a crofters union to be doing

When putting together the first issue of The Crofter, a title borrowed from a Highland Land League publication of the 1880s, I wouldn’t have bet much money on there being a hundredth issue.

In the course of the late night or early morning sessions that were a feature of my regular visits to the Lewis home of the late Angus Macleod, the Scottish Crofters Union’s founding father, one of our recurring topics was how long the then new organisation, in which Angus had invested so much entirely unpaid effort, might last.

The Land League, Angus would say, had been founded in 1883 and had done a great job in winning crofters the security of tenure and other basic rights embodied in the Crofters Act of 1886. But by the early 1890s the Land League was falling apart. As for the Federation of Crofters Unions, set up in the early 1960s to successfully oppose Crofters Commission plans for wholesale croft amalgamations, it too achieved its key objective – but then, just like the Land League before it, began to fade away.

What both these organisations lacked, or so Angus concluded years before the SCU got off the ground, was a subscription base sufficient to support paid staff. Volunteers were all very well, but you couldn’t rely on them. Worse, you couldn’t give them orders. But once you had employees working for you forty hours a week – though at the end of forty hours, in Angus’s opinion, you’d barely started – well, then you might just have a fighting chance of having set up something that would stay the course.

And so it’s proved. There have been a couple of name changes (which I regret) along the way. But crofters still have an organisation with the capacity to argue crofting’s case in a...
WELCOME TO THE 100th Issue of The Crofter. I confess I don’t remember the first issue of The Crofter. But of course it did happen a long time ago.

I used to boast – as did many others – of being present at the formal inauguration of the Scottish Crofters Union (SCU) at Inverness in November 1985. After that meeting, I introduced myself as a lawyer to Jim Hunter, who had just been unveiled as the first director (chief executive) of the fledgling organisation.

And soon after that I was to meet Fiona Manville at the SCU office in Skye and to work with her to provide a legal advisory service for members, thereby bringing myself into contact with many crofters and their multifarious problems. But somehow I seem to have missed the first issue of The Crofter.

It is not surprising that the centenary year of the 1886 Act was nominally used for the launch of SCU, taking full advantage of the publicity surrounding that anniversary. Less foreseeable for Fiona and myself was that somehow I would chair the board and, whilst still editing The Crofter, Fiona would be my vice chair. As such we were both present when, to mark our silver jubilee, life membership of the Federation was awarded to Professor Hunter in 2012 at our international conference held at Strathpeffer. As Jim commented that evening, 25 years was indeed a major milestone – as most previous crofters’ organisations had failed to survive for more than a few years. But if we were to be such a success? In 1985 the SCU was to insist that the determination of crofting policy was primarily a matter for crofters. Further, we would make a much wider impact by seriously getting to grips with a wide range of crofting policy issues. That included scrutinising any proposed legal reforms and pursuing the interests of crofters and crofting, wherever that may require us to go. The goal was to become ‘part of the furniture’.

It is a measure of that success that the firm foundation laid in these early years by Jim and Fiona (and those who followed their lead) has meant that arguing for a coherent and comprehensive crofting policy is now seen primarily as a matter of new and future crofters and those who support them. By 1985, the improvements in the regulatory and decision-making system by virtue of the 1976 reforms were at last being generally appreciated. By taking to crofters, I became conscious that there was a reluctance to acknowledge or be seen to vindicate these changes. Many crofters were to take advantage of their new status whilst others remained justifiably wary of any implication that censorship or registration could be reinstated. Meanwhile there was often unimagined animosity from landowners and factors.

The belated publication of textbooks on crofting law, in 1990 by D J MacCuish and in 2000 by Craig-Ange, along with the formation in 1994 of the Crofting Law Group, meant that a complicated legal ideology was at last being made more accessible. Although it has been regarded as over-complicated, crofting law has gone on to show itself capable of fresh initiatives whilst continuing to resist attempts at simplification.

The Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993 – itself a consultation which has recently been improved by the Crofting Reform etc Act 2007 and the Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2014. The passing of these two reform acts, interspersed by a committee of inquiry on crofting law, has provided the reform acts have provided us with some ingredients for the ‘owner-occupied croft decrofting’, is a sure sign that crofting law, as currently constituted, has parted company with real life and is of value only to the sort of people who might otherwise be left to argue happily about the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin.

Which is why I’ve agreed to speak at Crofting Law Group get-together in Edinburgh at the end of September – my theme being that, if crofters are to be served properly and productively by crofting law, then the only way forward is to scrap existing legislation in its entirety and start again with a clean sheet. I’ll maybe see some of you there.

Jim Hunter compiled the 1994 feasibility study that paved the way for the SCU, served as part-time secretary to the Crofters Union steering group during 1984-85 and, in January 1986, took up his post as the SCU’s first director.

Continued from page 1

The Crofter is a significant and important element of the SCU’s representative role within crofting. It was former editor John Toal.

IT HAS BEEN a constant throughout the existence of the organisation, which itself has changed names on a number of occasions. I had the privilege of editing an estimated one tenth of the 100 editions.

I was involved with the SCU from the outset and helped to establish an effective branch and area network in Lochaber along with crofting stalwarts Ronnie Campbell, the late Sandy Kennedy and the late lain MacPhail. On joining the small SCU headquarters team in 1992, I took over editing The Crofter from its former SCU director, Jim Hunter. On occasion features could have historical significance. It was to do a feature on the Asylland crofters’ campaign for ownership of the North Lochinver Estate that I happened to be in Assynt in 1993 on the very day the news broke that their bid was successful. I was sitting in Bill Ritchie’s house as he took the phone call delivering the news. That added a whole new dimension to interviews with the members of that outstanding steering group – Bill Ritchie, John Morrison and Allan Macrae.

The principe endorsement of crofting’s environmental credential is important – as the SCU, with others, had done groundbreaking work on raising awareness of this aspect and seeking proper recognition within the support framework. Other fundamentals of crofting support structure and the impact of support for crofter housing was a perennial feature. A Review of Support for Crofter Housing for the SCU and Scottish Crofters Foundation “rooted in our communities” by Sir Crispin Agnew, along with Coverage of significant events was also important, such as the annual SCU conference. Allan Macrae was himself one of the speakers at the 1993 conference in Stornoway, as well as Prince Charles. Mark Shucksmith was again involved as joint author with Di Alexander. The SCU contribution was therefore a significant one in kind, through my services. Ironically, one of this report’s recommendations was that the scheme should be operated by the Crofters Commission, on the basis that crofting services should be properly integrated within an organisation with specific crofting responsibilities.

There was also the wider current argument that greater concentration of decision-making and the importance of support for crofter housing was a perennial feature. A Review of Support for Crofter Housing for the SCU and Scottish Crofters Foundation “rooted in our communities” by Sir Crispin Agnew, along with Coverage of significant events was also important, such as the annual SCU conference. Allan Macrae was himself one of the speakers at the 1993 conference in Stornoway, as well as Prince Charles. Mark Shucksmith was again involved as joint author with Di Alexander. The SCU contribution was therefore a significant one in kind, through my services. Ironically, one of this report’s recommendations was that the scheme should be operated by the Crofters Commission, on the basis that crofting services should be properly integrated within an organisation with specific crofting responsibilities.

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

Our vision is a sustainable future for smallholders and crafters in Scotland.

We are dedicated to:

- Ensuring fair and legal tenancies for crofters
- Promoting the rights, livelihoods and communities of crofters
- Protecting the traditional way of life in the Highlands and Islands

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Scottish Crofting Federation

www.crofting.org

The shape of the CAP (so far)

UNE SAW a final agreement reached between the European Council, Parliament and Commission on the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the EU (due to come into force in 2015).

After a long and complex period of negotiations, it is felt easy to distinguish the final shape of the policy. Furthermore, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which sets the limits within which all financial mechanisms within the CAP, has yet to be signed off by the European Parliament.

Some aspects of the CAP that will affect crofters include:

- Definition of permanent pasture. This has been defined as land used to grow grasses other than heather, which has not been included in the crop rotation for five years or longer, but with crofters under 40 years of age member states can include land which can be grazed and which forms part of established local practices where heatherous forage is traditionally not predominant.

Active farmer test Member states can set up minimum activity requirements to prevent "slipper farmers" from receiving payments.

- Flexibility between pillars. Parliament and Council agree on a 15% maximum transfer from Pillar I (Direct Payments) to Pillar II (Rural Development). The possibility of transferring money from Pillar I to Pillar II is under discussion.

Basic payment system Member states may grant entitlements to those who can prove that they were actively farming in 2013 – so new entrants can access entitlements on the same basis as established farmers in 2015.

Internal convergence Member states will have to ensure that the lowest payments per hectare are at least 60% of the national or regional average by 2020.

National reserve Member states can top up artificially low value entitlements, as well as grant new entitlements, to new entrants up to the national or regional average. The National Reserve can be finessed through a top slice.

The CAP will still have to be signed off by the European Parliament. After a long and complex period of negotiations, it is felt easy to distinguish the final shape of the policy.

10 hectares of arable land will be exempt.

- SCF has welcomed the plan and looks forward to working with the Commission towards active crofting communities.

On 31st July royal assent was granted to the Crofting (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2013 which allows the Commission to accept applications tocroft land from owner-occupier crofters.

As Derek explains, "The new commissioners have discovered they have much to do to fulfil their statutory role. Their invitation to me to be part of a review group was irresistible."

The Commission has contacted all those people with applications which were being held in abeyance until this issue was resolved. If they wish to go ahead, no new application is necessary and the organisation can now consider new applications from owner-occupier crofters.

The Crofter, September 2013

www.crofting.org

SAC Agricultural & Conservation Consultants combine local knowledge with extensive experience supported by our team of renowned specialists. We can assist crofters with business advice on a range of topics to improve profitability including:

- Agriculture and rural business advice
- Enterprise planning
- Comprehensive assistance with IACS, LMO, RF, CHGS and CCAAS (agricultural buildings, hard standings, drainage, grassland improvement, handling equipment, fences and access tracks are examples of eligible expenditure under CCAAS)
- Compilation of Assignations, Decrofting and Sublet applications
- GPS and croft maps for Crofting Commission or Scottish Rural Planning
- Operational Needs Assessment to support planning applications
- Livestock record keeping and pre-inspection checks
- Grassland and crop advice including soil analysis, fertiliser and reseeds
- Livestock feed analysis, rationing and animal health
- Horticultural advice
- Agri-environment advice
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formed in 2008 by the merger of the Scottish Agricultural College and the Scottish Rural College

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Tribute: Allan MacRae

Allan William MacRae was born on 13 September 1939, the youngest of the family of four sons of the late John (known locally as Johnnie Glenn) and his wife Cora. Johnnie and Cora were justifiedly proud that their family were evidently endowed with talents above the ordinary in terms of intellectual ability but, in the case of Allan in particular, this was accompanied by the practical and manual skills necessarily possessed by many West Highidders. Although of average height in manhood, Allan was clearly a man of no mean strength and physique, having been declared the best newcomer at the Ben Nevis race in 1960; a feat of physical endurance that he ultimately succeeded in winning. He also figured prominently amongst early finishers on other occasions.

Having completed his education at Lochinver Primary School and Golspie Tech, he began his working life in the employment of a number of contractors engaged in the early 60s in the construction of large hydroelectric projects throughout the Highlands. He was also involved in a number of road construction contracts. Returning to his native soil he took on small construction, fencing and drainage contracts that were undertaken in tandem with his passion for crofting. His skill and knowledge of animal husbandry, and of cattle in particular, was recognised when he was chosen as the chairman of the North West Cattle Producers’ Association; a role that he held for many years. His adaptability and breadth of practical skill was further demonstrated by his acquisition of the fishing trawler the Fulmar, which he operated for a while with two other crew members. Perhaps his most outstanding rural skill was that of dry stone building. There are outstanding rural skill was that of dry stone building. There are

Allan MacRae was chair of the local branch of the Crofters’ Union with Bill Ritchie as its secretary. Incidentally, Allan was the chairman of this branch from the day it was set up until his death, and he also chaired the North West Sutherland Area Committee and represented it on the union council. An emergency meeting of members was hastily convened to consider how best to oppose the London-based liquidator’s agenda. At that meeting a steering group was elected to the purpose with Allan as its chair and a representative was appointed for each of the affected townships.

At the beginning there was no premeditated master plan to attempt to buy the asset of the estate; simply an attempt to resist by recourse to crofting law what was being proposed by the liquidator. Very quickly the audacious proposal was put forward at a subsequent meeting that we try to raise the funds by public appeal to compete for the purchase of the asset of the estate on the open market and the rest is history. It is widely acknowledged that in the six months from June 1992 to the day that Assynt changed for ever the pattern of land ownership in the Scottish Highlands and this was due in no small measure to the passionate and articulate contribution to the debate made by Allan MacRae.

As one of those whose forebears had been cleared from good grazing land to the harsh, rock-strewn terrain of the Atlantic coast of Assynt a couple of centuries earlier, he and his contemporaries who led the media campaign generated support throughout the UK and abroad. Every contributor to our appeal for financial support, large or small, received in return a windscreen sticker with the words ‘I support Assynt Crofters’. We still have on file the letters received at that time from all over the world, race, from a descendent of the Highland Diaspora in New Zealand,testament of his delight in seeing in a supermarket car park a vehicle sporting near to his own and both displaying their support for the crofters of Assynt by means of their windscreen stickers.

The contrasting iconic images of a despondent Allan with his dog when we received the news that our second bid had been rejected by the liquidator and, subsequently, a jubilant Allan after the final success of our campaign, will live on for generations in the history of land reform in Scotland.

It was a source of pride to Allan, as well as to those of us who were closely involved with him in our efforts, that the pattern of land tenure remoulded at that time in Assynt has largely been side-lined by our political masters on the basis of perceived political correctness. Yet the esteem in which Allan was held is evident from the fact that the church in Lochinver was filled to overflowing at his funeral on 3rd July. The presence there of many individuals from the legal, academic and political sector having a major role in the land reform agenda, was testament to the lasting legacy left by Allan MacRae.

The entire community is deeply shocked and greatly saddened by his passing. The board of Assynt Crofters’ Trust along with the SCF, is for communities to work together to map and register their crofts. Scottish Government has set aside funds till end November 2013 to reduce the cost of registration where communities opt to work together. For our part we at RoS are committed to offering such support as is reasonable to assist communities through the registration process. For more information on the crofting register, please contact us at crofting@ros.gov.uk or 0845 607 0164.

Go online at www.crofting.org

Crofting register plans

Crofter 99 explained the background to the crofting register and the process for registering a croft. In this article Rhona EVirk of RoS explains the mapping requirements.

The crofting register is based on a map of Scotland on which the boundaries of crofts, common grazings and land held running are added as and where these areas are registered.

As part of the registration application for a croft, the applicant (typically the crofter) must provide a plan showing the boundaries of the croft.

A suitable plan of the croft may already exist. If not, we can provide an extract of the Ordnance Survey (OS) map, (for £16 plus VAT) on which crofters can draw the boundaries of their croft. We would emphasise that there is no legal requirement to engage a surveyor or other professional to prepare the plan. Indeed our guidance is designed to enable crofters to prepare the plan if they wish to do so. To aid that, we have set out guidance on the preparation of plans. Of the crofts registered to date some of the plans have been prepared by crofters and in other cases they have chosen to have plans prepared by professionals.

The plan should clearly mark all the boundaries that make up the croft. The OS map will show certain physical features (walls and fences etc) and the crofter needs to take this into account when preparing the plan. In particular, if the feature the OS has shown is not where the legal boundary of the croft is, then the plan that is being prepared should clearly mark the legal boundary and not simply the fence boundary. (Some crofters have explained that on occasion fences will be erected within their croft legal boundary.)

It would also help to note the measurements of boundaries and also provide a description of what the boundary is (such as the centre of a wall). We can then make mention of those measurements and features on the crofting register application. Our preference, and the stated preference of the SCF, is for communities to work together to map and register their crofts. Scottish Government has set aside funds till end November 2013 to reduce the cost of registration where communities opt to work together. For our part we at RoS are committed to offering such support as is reasonable to assist communities through the registration process.

Detailed guidance can be accessed at www.ros.gov.uk/croftingregister/guidance.
Gaelic tradition and alternative food systems

As such it is, perhaps, best understood through an example. A few years ago I was working with an older crofter and his younger neighbour in an area of the west Highlands which had suffered serious population loss for most of the 20th century, but which in recent years has seen that dramatically reversed. The older crofter was a Gàidheal; the younger man was an incomer who was being grafted into the community.

We had noticed that the council were felling and chipping trees which were overhanging the main road a mile or so from the crofters’ township and the older man had gone so far as to obtain permission from the owner of the land on which the trees were growing to take some of the chippings. We planned to use them as mulch. After the initial observation of the chipped wood and the obtaining of permission, the process of sharing the workload and distributing the ‘harvest’ proceeded in a spontaneous and organic way.

We used the younger crofter’s truck and trailer to gather the chippings and when we got back to the township we began to unload the older crofter’s portion first. He was standing in the trailer shovelling off the chippings, while myself and the younger crofter were doing the same at ground level. The older crofter suddenly straightened in the trailer and exclaimed: “Nàbachd! It means neighbourhood. It’s what we used to do here.”

“The observer at a sheep-shearing, a potato-planting, or a harvesting will be conscious of how near the surface is this desire and joy in co-operation…The impingement of another operation… and the breaking down of such simple co-operation is one of the causes of the breakdown of life in the townships.” (Fraser Darling 1950: 282)

A fundamentally co-operative attitude is deeply rooted in the culture and, traditionally, was maintained by a system of customary expectations within Gàidheal society.

The contemporary relevance lies in their values and examples of alternative ways of doing work and business, which do not exclude individual rights. MacKenzie points out that in the collective ethos behind working the faingan, there was place for individual rights to produce. The comparison with new emerging forms of business – presented as alternative food systems – is a reminder that the need to operate within strict ecological limits often resulted in a culture of cooperation and community.

One of these is the REAL project – Real Education, Active Lives – a farming social enterprise at Inverness High School.

The project was born from frustration within the city’s business community that schooling did not prepare young people for the world of work and from concerns within the school that their curriculum lacked creativity and flexibility.

The project’s promoters chose to develop a range of social enterprises, the first being REAL Organics, which operates an organic farm at the school. The school went into partnership with a commercial organic grower and began to sell at local markets. Eventually the initial project split into two parts, REAL Organics, which concentrated on production, and REAL Foods, which concentrated on retail.

By 2009 the organic farm was operating three polytunnels on a plot of around one acre. In their first years they produced mainly root vegetables and brassicas. However, in response to small returns from these crops the farm also moved onto higher-value produce.

The farm’s first produce in 2006 was sold through the school and at the Inverness Farmers Market. In the years that followed the range of retail outlets increased, including one at the Eastgate Shopping Centre.

By setting up a local production and distribution system the project sought to reduce the energy footprint of food consumed in Inverness. The project also made use of local organic inputs. For fertiliser the pupils grew their own comfrey and took seaweed from the Beauty Firth just a few miles from the school.

In 2010 the REAL Project was scaled back to ensure its financial integrity. However, the farm continues to grow and has also achieved broader social aims, with the school introducing courses in rural skills and community involvement as well as initiating an eco-schools project and work on pupil leadership.

Further information on the project can be found in the report Inverness High School – the REAL story, available on the Inverness High School website at: www.inverness.highland.sch.uk/The Real Story Inverness High.pdf.

One aspect of the Hungry for Rights project is to list projects initiating alternative food systems in Scotland. One of these is the REAL project – Real Education, Active Lives – a farming social enterprise at Inverness High School.
**The value of traditional genetics**

Jamie Robertson and Cecil Poile consider the basic premises of breeding quality kye.

**INTEREST IN BEEF**

From the very first crofting conference started by James Hogg, a boost from a variety of sources, from retailers wanting production of arable-based beef units to hoteliers who wish to supply top-quality products to their customers.

Stewart has created a demand for certain types of traditional cattle across the UK which the market will fill. With many agricultural competitors, the promise of premium prices, thereby increasing the number of animals that can be maintained on a crofter's land, is always an attractive option. The number of cattle that can be maintained on a crofter's land is limited only by the size of the holding and the number of cattle of a certain type. This can be a great opportunity for Scottish kye, but the obvious pitfalls should be avoided.

The characteristics of hill kye that mattered in the past will matter in the future. Good legs, straight back, compact well-formed udder, good mothering ability and the ability to forage well and milk off the back. These traits are not specific to one particular breed but they are essential. Lack of any one of these will prevent the calf from being marketed, finished, butchered, or even sold at an early age. Where do we find more cattle that are reared in a low-input, extensive, cow type that we know can produce consistently under variable conditions.

The first three improvements that are most obvious is that genetics may be introduced that are attractive in the short-term but may promise larger calves, but the losses may be too high. The second is that the genetics may be too expensive to treat like gold dust if we want long-term performance. Colourism in the first three months; protection of the dam; dry, draught-free housing; fresh air and good hygiene are all basic requirements. Every calf born of the desired type of cow is needed, to be available for breeding.

What leads to the second point? If a heifer or cow fails to breed, we risk losing another cow. The market does not want 101 variables of a food product – we know it consists of 40% protein with the rest, finisher unit, processor or plate.

Where do we find more suitable heifers and cows? The first place to look is at home, from the remaining herd. Two sources of loss can and should be avoided. This has a high risk of failure of heifer calves to make second lactation. The second is the calving rate within the barn and is associated with late breeding. Every calf could be treated to be more like birth, calving and the right condition at the right time because the cattle are not overcrowded. Required body condition at breeding is not too fat, on a rising level of feeding and in good overall health.

We want to make the best of what we already have. There is complete certainty that new genetics will be introduced, but we should nurture the best of what we already have – Scottish kye.

**Neosporosis – a major cause of abortion in cattle**

Neosporosis, caused by a parasite called Neospora caninum, is a major current health challenge. Infected cattle are three to seven times more likely to abort than from uninfected cattle. The disease is challenging due to its complex lifecycle and the lack of effective treatments or vaccines.

Neosporosis was first identified in dogs. If dogs eat infected meat the parasite can infect and multiply within gut cells and infect eggs (oocysts) will be excreted in their faeces. These oocysts will remain infective for many months and infect other dogs. Neosporosis is not a bad thing, but cow type should remain clear. The market does not want 101 variables of a food product – we know it consists of 40% protein with the rest, finisher unit, processor or plate.

The load could then be divided up by the needs of individual crofters and the crofters reseeding under CCAGS could get a cheaper price if they pooled their resources and built one larger shed they could still save money (see table below).

**Is your common grazing maximising CCAGS?**

If the feeding value of the park is improved, the following production benefits can be achieved. If the feeding value of the park is improved, the following production benefits can be achieved.

**What is a crofter?**

Donald MacSween, NMS in the north of the island of Lewis, who has officially been a crofter for eight years, since receiving my croft as a 21st birthday present, he remembers the best and the worst of it.

Cows and calves from one of Cecil’s farms. These cows are grazing at 1,000ft above sea level and the calving didn’t begin until 16th March. The photos were taken on 2nd July.
No matter how small the problem is, I always do my very best to help.

I hold regular surgeries and advertise these in local newspapers.

Constituency Office: Thorfin House, Bridgend Business Park, Dingwall, IV15 9SL
Email: dave.thompson.msp@scottish.parliament.uk
Phone: 01349 864701     Fax: 01349 866327

I am always happy to hear from you.

Angus MacNeil MP
Constituency Office
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Stornoway
Isle of Lewis HS1 2DU
Tel no 70 2272
E-Mail AngusMacNeilMP@parliament.uk
Enquiries welcome – office open Monday-Friday

Constituency includes Dingwall, the Black Isle, Aird and Loch Ness
Member of the Scottish Parliament for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch constituency (SNP)

Standing up for you

Rent a hen

Lochboisdale Amenity Trust on South Uist has launched an innovative project to restore the island’s egg industry, which once produced thousands of eggs a day. The trust has secured £32,576 from the Big Lottery Fund for its Rent-a-Hen scheme. Islanders will be encouraged to keep hens to provide eggs for sale to a new egg packing station at Daliburgh. Graded eggs will then be sold on around the islands and possibly further afield, reversing the trend of recent years when most eggs were brought in from the mainland.

Rhoda Grant MSP
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I am always happy to hear from you.
**CROFTING ON THE INTERNET**

New crofting enterprise website

**Make use of the internet**

A
corDing to marketing experts, the key trend in promoting products or holiday is authenticity. This means that the product or experience captures an image or lifestyle that the consumer wants to be a part of. And for some this includes crofting, which means we can sell our goods or services more easily or at a premium price.

Research carried out by SCF in 2011 showed that 44% of Scottish consumers were more likely to buy meat labelled as produced on a croft as opposed to equivalent meat labelled as Scottish (31% of UK consumers). Only 2% would be less likely to buy croft-produced meat. The results are similar for crafts, fruit and veg and holidays.

So it makes sense to brand your produce as “croft” and SCF, the only member-led organisation dedicated to promoting crofting, is the scheme which adds value to your products and services.

For more information visit our website which looks clean, professional and easy to navigate or book your goods or services advertised to be part of. And for some this can be registered online through Google’s blogger. A huge number of websites, giving you more control and host you can start building a website, with a variety of sites. Prices vary. However, it can be advantageous to have your own domain name, for example www.skyecrofts.co.uk could be yours.

For your own website you’ll need a host – computer space that holds the files that make up your site. The cost of the hosting depends on what you need; secure hosting for a busy online shop will cost more than a simple site with only a couple of pages. Consider customer service and reliability as well as price and other features.

Once you have a domain name and host you can start building a website.

There are hundreds of packages available to help you build your website, with a variety of costs. Some are free, but sometimes have adverts that you have no control over, or only allow limited features with the free version. It is possible to set up a site for very little. For example, WordPress.com offers free software that you can install on your web host and have a very usable website up and running in minutes.

Many websites are built from scratch using computer languages such as HTML, CSS or PHP. If you have an aptitude for using computers it won’t take long to learn the basics of any of these languages. There are numerous free tutorials online.

If you feel this is beyond you then there are always people free to help who can.

Red Roof Webdesign  
redroofwebdesign.co.uk

**21st century training in a digital age**

SCF training partner Lucy Beattie outlines some of the digital challenges faced by crofters.

T
here is NO better way to learn than “looking over the shoulder” of those who have done it before. Most folk born and brought up on a croft learn the art of natural farming from childhood, be it gathering sheep from the hill at all seasons, lambing and calving, or building a drystone dyke. These are very transferable skills but less tangible.

What all occupiers of land and keepers of livestock have in common is the inevitable intrusion of the digital age into farming. This is a skill that is not passed on from generation to generation. With leaps and bounds happening in technology things change exponentially – and it can be quite frightening to some. It is unavoidable, whether you keep two or 200 cattle, a pet sheep or a flock of breeding ewes.

All too often people involved in small-scale agriculture and food production find themselves overstretched, with little time to do anything else. Work the land, let alone cope with the added stresses of 21st century life when it comes to land management. Requirements for traceability and documentation and record keeping can just become too onerous and take on a life of their own.

A crofter in Sutherland remarked that currently moving her cattle from Achiltibuie to Lochinver, the time it takes to put out passports and post out the corresponding movement cards took almost as long as it did to get the beasts to the trailer and from the one location to another. The British Cattle Movement Service provides a computerised movement reporting service via IACS Online. Once you have registered and used it a couple of times, it becomes a very simple and fail-safe method of dealing with cattle movement reporting. When reporting cattle births the time it takes to fill out a correctly completed card can be over an hour. The technology is expensive, but it is getting cheaper every day and readers can be jointly purchased by townships or neighbouring livestock keepers. The returns can become the bane of people’s lives and often arrive at a time when most crofters are lambing, which can add to the stress of the job. Making the move from paper on-line can be confusing; and even registering to submit paper on-line can take as long as you have to wait for a Government Gateway user number through the post. However, once you have completed on-line, the next year your field data will be saved as well as the name you have for a particular field. This can make the application much easier, when you can immediately see at first glance the name you use for the field rather than its faceless FID number which appears on the paper forms. IACS on-line will also tell you if you have made a mistake in tallying numbers, which can often save a long car journey to the get it checked before 19th May.

Many of the challenges mentioned may at first be daunting, but the benefits to embracing technology in your everyday life cannot be underestimated.

We would like to hear from any of our members about their experiences of technology incrofting, training needs and ideas. Write to us at HQ or email training@crofting.org.
Alternative architecture through crofting

The north Atlantic, connection, broch, wheelhouse and Blackhouse all influenced the local distinctiveness that characterised our built heritage. Such aspects diminished with the advent of DAFS crofter housing type plans and the standard kit house highlighted in the Council’s 1978 Western Isles rural housing study. The presentation sought to re-introduce adaptability of built form to suit local context by utilising the inherent flexibility of new virtual technologies when communicating proposals and describing construction.

It was highlighted, when discussing examples of innovative architecture, that difficulties exist where the planning authority is over prescriptive in the application of its design guidance. The result was to shy away from significant adaptations to the standard form of building when the pressure was on to start construction. It was noted that Scottish planning policy sets out a move away from over-prescription of appropriate in the project. An increased level of resistance, but a circle has the potential to co-operate with the local community at an early stage to ensure support and participation in the project. An increased level of community benefit is also provided from CARES projects.

For more information or to register your interest contact CARES@est.org.uk

One low energy house

SCF member Andrew Squire shares his vision of an energy-efficient house.

In THE UK around half of our total energy consumption is in the home. Typically half of that is for space heating and a quarter for hot water. Meanwhile, in just the last 10 years, electricity costs have risen by 50%, oil costs by 100%, and neither show any signs of slowing down.

Our carbon footprint is another concern. The average carbon emission per person in the UK (12.5 tonnes CO2e pa), though 35% less than the average in the US, is 10 times greater than the average in India and 100 times greater than that of most people in Africa.

In principle, renewable energy sources such as hydro power, wind power and photovoltaics can provide free ‘clean’(ish) energy and may be the only option if mains electricity is unavailable. In reality they can also be costly to set up – and not feasible in many locations. With all this in mind, when my wife and I began planning a low-impact, low-cost house in a township in Lochaber, our strategy was to go back to first principles to minimise the energy we would need.

We made the house circular. Not only does this reduce heat loss by minimising wind resistance, but a circle has the smallest perimeter of any shape to enclose a given floor area, so offers the least amount of external wall through which heat may escape.

We arranged the layout for maximum solar gain, or high in summer, when the house is shaded by trees, and positioned the house to be sheltered from the prevailing wind. We invested in very high insulation standards: 250mm sheep’s wool in floor and roof, straw bales on the inside of the external wall through which heat may escape.

In the Council’s report, SCF member Neil Ferguson summarises the role of regional design panels for managing construction trades when construction takes longer than anticipated and the cost of rental and temporary loan costs where construction can become operational, the loan is designed to be repaid at financial close, ie when capital finance is secured. The scheme is compatible and complimentary with the UK Government Feed in Tariff (FIT) subsidy payments which would ensure an income on top of the export tariff for 20 years. One of the important aspects of the CARES scheme is the focus on community involvement. Rural businesses are encouraged to co-operate with the local community at an early stage to ensure support and participation in the project. An increased level of community benefit is also provided from CARES projects.

For more information or to register your interest contact CARES@est.org.uk

CARES loan scheme for renewable energy projects

Melanie Macrae of Community Energy Scotland outlines a new renewables scheme.

Malcolm Macrae of Community Energy Scotland outlines a new renewables scheme.

URAL businesses interested in developing renewable energy are being encouraged to consider an application to the Scottish Government CARES loan programme.

The Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES) provides loans to community groups and rural businesses (including agricultural businesses) for all pre-development costs associated with a renewable energy project. Eligible technology includes wind, hydro and other forms of revenue-generating renewable energy. CARES supports the Scottish Government’s renewable energy policy.

The government aims to have the equivalent of 100% of Scotland’s electricity demand coming from renewables by 2020. It has also set a target for 500MW to come from community and locally-owned renewable energy by the same year. As an alternative to agreeing a lease or ground rent with a developer, rural businesses are encouraged to consider independently developing their sites using support from CARES. This approach can yield significantly higher returns.

One of the key advantages of CARES over commercial loans is the scheme’s write-off facility. Loans are written off if the project does not progress to an operational stage, for example if planning permission is refused, finance cannot be secured or the project is no longer viable. This factor significantly reduces the applicant’s financial risk in the project as the loan can cover up to 90% of all pre-development costs.

Rural business can apply for up to £150,000 from CARES, which is released in stages as required by the project. An interest rate of 10% applies from drawdown to repayment of the loan. If the project is successful

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Storm pods – the new croft diversification

The storm pod is a fibreglass-shelled accommodation unit that has been constructed and developed to be placed under ground or on the surface to blend in with its environment, providing an appealing look for its owner.

The pod provides an excellent opportunity for crofters to earn a steady second income that will provide year on year returns. The storm pod will make an ideal accommodation unit for tourists, as they are in the same class as caravans and meet the three caravan rules.

The pods provide luxurious accommodation at affordable prices which all means a steady stream. Within a two year period the pod will have been paid off in most circumstances, that’s how popular these units are. The company Storm-pods is based on Islay and is already renting out one pod there, earning a £1000 return each month just for 60% occupancy.

In 2013 Scotland welcomes the world to join in the exciting Year of Homecoming which will bring tourists from far and wide, so why not get organised for the influx and make sure that the tourists visiting your area are welcomed home to a pod on your croft.

“Scotland has the most beautiful countryside and we hope that our pods can be incorporated into the landscape with minimal impact. The double-insulated walls of the model means very low running costs; the double-insulated walls ensure the heat stays in the pod; and the fact they are half buried helps to ensure the heat stays in the pod and the fact they are half buried helps to hold in the heat or protect against the outside weather. All in all, it’s a good investment and a perfect addition to your croft business.

Get in touch with Gus on 01496 300 129 and have a look at www.storm-pods.co.uk.
New entrants group update

A NEW ENTRANTS scheme was launched in May this year for the distribution of £2 million pledged by the cabinet secretary, Richard Lochhead. This was intended as an interim measure to help those who are not currently in receipt of single farm payments. The new entrants advisory panel, on which SCF’s Karen MacRae sits, had been advised to advise how the money would be best spent and ensure that the funding is allocated fairly.

Applications to the scheme closed officially at the end of July. In total there were 599 expressions of interest, of which 815 went on to put an application in to the scheme. The group were tasked with looking at the finer details of how the money should be distributed.

Some of the key criteria that the panel recommended include: agricultural activity, either livestock or growing crops and a basic payment to ensure that everyone receives a reasonable amount, with a top-up based on area. The panel have also requested the £2 million to be made available in one lump sum rather than over two years as initially proposed.

These details will be put to the cabinet secretary and then the allocation of funds will be crunched through the necessary system. It is expected that the payment will be made in October.

Karen would be interested to know if you have applied for this scheme and have heard whether you have been successful or unsuccessful in your application. Also, if there are any other topics that you believe need to be brought up through this group please do let her know by emailing karen@crofting.org or phoning HQ.

A year under SCF spotlight

A GOOD VENUE, a bright day, good company, tea, coffee and biscuits; what more could anyone wish for?

A good turn-out of the SCF’s board and our members who gathered for that annual event that we all look forward to – not exactly a colleen though that sounded like a good idea at the time!

No! We are here talking about the annual general meeting 2013.

You may say that’s not particularly exciting and it’s true in the sense that there were no surprises or fireworks to liven up the proceedings. But some issues should give us all cause for concern.

The first is the SCF’s fiscal management – finances to you and me. Here Patrick Krause, chief executive, presented the financial statement for the year ended (2012). He summarised by saying that turnover was good but overall funding is the perennial problem.

Patrick went on to say that the SCF subscription rate was not currently in receipt of single farm payments. If we needed it, that crofters are quite rightly, of much concern to us.

The meeting closed on a cheerful, somewhat optimistic note with the usual thanks being given to members, our directors and officers for taking time to attend.

Can’t wait for next year’s AGM.

John Banks
Company secretary

Members’ legal helpline

Details of SCF key contacts and working groups in the next issue

A LITTLE over 15 minutes of legal advice offered by the Law Society of Scotland as a specialist in Crofting Law.

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At the shows

Black Isle Show

Dunvegan Show

L-R: Eilidh Ross (Hebrays), SCF chair Derek Flynn, Rob Glen (MP convener of the rural affairs parliamentary committee), Crofting Commission convener Susan Walker

Bus SCF stand

David sheep judging

SCF board member Fraser Matheson and Eilidh draw the winner of the training needs survey prize, RD MacLeod

Cattle champion Willie Nicolson, Glen Conon, with Belted Galloway cow and calf

New SCF Skye and Lochalsh chair Yvonne White at SCF stand
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* Usage between 11pm and 7am is unlimited

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**A great day out**

STRATHNAIRN FARMERS Association's vintage rally display takes place on 28th September at Daviot estate, six miles south of Inverness. This is the seventh year that the rally will be held on Daviot estate, courtesy of Derek and Roz Mackenzie. A special feature this year will be the smiddy, with a working blacksmith demonstrating his craft.

In addition to seeing a 1923 binder and an 1890 Macdonald of Portsoy reaper in action, along with tractors and machinery which were common on crofts and farms in days gone by, you will also get the opportunity to see sheep being sheared and the wool being spun – and lots more.

A corn stack will be threshed along with working demonstrations of old farming methods; there will be a display of static agricultural machinery; horses ploughing; plus a heritage marquee displaying photographs of farming life in years gone by – including the history of the famous blacksmith, Kenneth Mackenzie from Evanton.

A forest harvester will be there for big and small kids to try, plus arts and crafts stalls and Highland dancing and piping with the Inver Ross accordion and fiddle group.

The day will evoke fond memories for the old and be educational for the younger set: a great day out amidst the fine scenery of Strathnairn.

Remember, you don’t need to have a tractor to be there.

---

**Young Farmers**

Young Farmers has provided a social network for young people in rural Scotland for over 75 years and is now looking at extending the network throughout the Highlands and Islands. Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs (SAYFC) north region chairman Stuart Jamieson describes his experiences as a young farmer.

*I’ve been a member of young farmers since the age of 14, 12 years now, and during that time I have taken part in many competitions, social events and travelled across the world. The international travel opportunities have given me my best moment in SAYFC. In 2011 I was lucky enough to go on a study tour to Texas organised by the SAYFC agri-affairs group. A group of 15 members from across Scotland visited farming operations and had a few social visits over two weeks and it was without doubt an amazing and unforgettable experience!*

I’ve developed quite a range of skills as a member of SAYFC; the main one is confidence. People who know me today would hardly recognise the quiet wee boy 12 years ago before I joined SAYFC. Being a member has helped shape me into the person I am today and I’m incredibly grateful for this opportunity.

People assume activities are all agriculturally related but this is far from the truth. We still do activities such as stock judging and sheep shearing, but we also have sporting activities, performing arts, speech-making and arts and crafts. As well as all the YF activities we are also encouraged to get involved in our local community. If you would like to see a new club form in your area contact our Highland regional event manager Fiona Gibson by emailing fiona@sayfc.org. Work has already started on a new club in the Skye area, so watch the local press for more details. Keep up to date with what’s happening on our website, facebook and twitter.

Anyone aged between 14 and 30 can become a YF member and remember ‘It’s not just for those that wear wellies!’

---

**STRATHNAIRN farmers association**

**Working Vintage Rally & Display**

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Concerns over Torridon croft house planning refusal

The SCF recently voiced concern over refusal by the Highland Council and Scottish Government to grant planning consent for a Torridon crofter to live on her croft. SCF-vice-chair Fiona Mandeville said: "It has very worrying implications for crofting and the vibrancy of crofting communities, that a crofter is being refused permission to live on the croft that she works. The decision appears to have been heavily influenced by the objections submitted by holiday home owners in the area, who don’t themselves stay and work in the community yet feel they have the right to dictate on where a crofter can or cannot live."

SCF-member Eilidh Holmes reported that her working croft in Schallabhain, Torridon, was extinguished when her appeal to the Highland Council decision was refused. The Highland Council planning committee, who refused to give planning consent, was split on a 7-7 vote and the decision was made on the casting vote of committee chairman. The committee received nine objections to the application, but Miss Holmes claims that only three of the objectors play an active role in the community.

The decision was made on the grounds that the application was in breach of a council policy and the planning system didn’t and it is to the community’s detriment. Fiona concluded: “The planning system seems to have badly failed this woman, her community and the principles by which crofting is sustained – use of land and retention of people. We would be interested to hear from other crofters with similar stories.”

As we went to press, SCF had written to the Scottish Government minister for local government and planning, Derek MacKay, asking him to consider calling in the Torridon case to examine it in the light of the government’s rural development policies and in the context of the expert opinion provided by SNH on the critical landscape factor by which the principle planning reporter upheld Highland Council’s decision.

The reporter concluded his recommendations by saying: “I recognise that Torridon is a fragile community…There appear to be few obvious opportunities for development within the village. While the appeal proposal would help to maintain Torridon’s population and services, I consider that its adverse impacts on settlement pattern and landscape setting make it contrary to policy 36.”

The SCF letter to the planning minister states: “It seems to us that with these words Scotland’s planning system is demonstrating that it regards Torridon’s dramatic appearance and scenic quality as more important than its people. We must progress from the question of the crofting interest – which in our experience the Directorate of Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA) routinely ignores – these words are indicative of a general lack of understanding amongst urban-based planners of the needs of Scotland’s most remote and fragile rural communities; and of broader government policy.”

“The DPEA’s decision in the Torridon case undermines the credibility of a key pledge on rural development, made this year by the Scottish Government – to enable development in all rural areas which supports prosperous and sustainable communities whilst protecting and enhancing environmental quality. Given SNH’s advice, approval of Ms Holmes’ house would have been in perfect accord with this policy. It would also have met the government’s commitment to support more opportunities for small-scale housing development.”

The letter concludes: “In light of the government’s policy objectives, and taking full account of local need and expert opinion, the SCF requests that you revisit the DPEA’s decision on the Torridon case. Approval of the modest, single-storey dwelling-house could help to restore the credibility of the Scottish Government’s commitments to the well-being of rural Scotland. It will provide a little and new life-blood for a hard-pressed and fragile community. It should also act as a platform for debate on how the urban-based Highland Council can learn to deal fairly and wisely with the development needs of the vast majority of the area for which they are responsible.”

Ivan MacDonald

The future of crofting in North Uist has suffered a drastic loss with the tragic death of young Ivan MacDonald. Ivan was born on 14th November 1979 and died on 9th June 2013. Ivan was a very bright lad, both academically and practically. He achieved a first-class honours degree in rural business management at the Scottish Agricultural College in Aberdeen and won the best student of the year for his thesis, ‘Optimum feeding of the ewe in North Uist community. He was a brilliant piper and was pipe major for the Uist pipe band. He also taught piping in the schools. With his qualifications he could have got a well-paid 9 till 5 job, but Ivan’s passion and ambition was to croft. The future of crofting is in the hands of the young and in Ivan’s strong hands the future seemed very secure.

About two years ago, the crofting business was handed to him from his father and he built his own house and worked extremely hard managing large numbers of cattle and sheep. Most of the sheep grazed on Eaval, the highest peak on North Uist. Ivan was the vice-chair of the North Uist branch of the SCF and he and I used to have long telephone conversations concerning crofting policies.

When we had meetings in Benbecula I could always depend on Ivan for a lift as I hated driving over the causeway during winter evenings. At meetings he always spoke his wise mind in front of any audience. Ivan had a lovely nature, very tolerant, kind and obliging. He was always ready to help others and he did that with great pleasure. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging. His parents have always been very tolerant, kind and obliging.

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“We recommend that the Scottish Government should revisit the DPEA’s decision in the Torridon case. Approval of the modest, single-storey dwelling-house could help to restore the credibility of the Scottish Government’s commitments to the well-being of rural Scotland. It will provide a little and new life-blood for a hard-pressed and fragile community. It should also act as a platform for debate on how the urban-based Highland Council can learn to deal fairly and wisely with the development needs of the vast majority of the area for which they are responsible.”

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**SCF goose petition**

In July SCF raised an online petition in the Scottish Parliament urging the Scottish Government to review its policy on wild geese.

“Everyone seems to be aware of the terrible threat of escalating wild goose numbers,” said SCF director Roddy MacDonald, “yet there is an apparent lack of government action – in fact they are considering reducing the budget to control this pest. We have raised this petition to show the strength of feeling and get some meaningful action before it is too late.”

The petition called on the Scottish Government to address the problems created by increasing populations of wild geese in the crofting areas as a matter of priority; to reassess its decision to stop funding existing goose management programmes, and to assign additional resources to crop protection and adaptive management programmes to ensure this threat to the future of crofting is averted.

Ena MacDonald, an SCF representative in the Uists and a long-term campaigner on the goose problem said: “It is estimated that over 10,000 greylag geese reside here. The government says it supports crofting and wants to help young crofters, but does nothing about geese forcing crofting out. We just cannot compete against these geese anymore.”

As we went to press the petition had well over 200 signatures. It closed on 1st September. Thanks to all who expressed their support.

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**SCF annual gathering 2013**

An event exploring ways to develop opportunities offered to crofters and the wider community through action to improve, protect and manage common grazings, crofting’s greatest land resource.

Thursday 19th and Friday 20th September, Stornoway Town Hall, Isle of Lewis

Our annual gathering has speakers on subjects relevant to this important theme such as: • funding support under CAP for the use of grazings • management structures for appropriate enterprises on common grazings • looking at how common grazings in other parts of the UK are used • diversification of income sources • community assets and ownership • energy generation and managing common grazings as peatlands.

We are also very pleased to announce that we have the minister for environment and climate control Paul Wheelhouse MSP opening the conference.

We are holding the conference itself over two days, running from the middle of Thursday 19th to the middle of Friday 20th. This will allow for ferry timetables and mean that only one overnight is required.

We can offer the full package of the conference and workshops, the dinner (an event in itself!), accommodation and refreshments for the highly subsidised rate to SCF members of only £90. We are asking corporate and business delegates to pay the full rate of £250.

Participants coming from community bodies can get help in meeting costs from HIE – please contact Pam Noble in the Community Assets Team on 01520 722024

Don’t let cost stop you from coming; local authorities have said that they can consider helping individuals or groups with travel costs. Please contact your local ward manager.

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