

## SCF gives evidence on agriculture to the Scottish Parliament

SCF officials attended a session of the Rural Affairs and Island Committee at the Scottish Parliament recently, at which MSPs take evidence from stakeholders on the agricultural reforms currently being developed.

SCF chair Donald MacKinnon led with the assertion that crofting delivers many of the desired objectives and with the right support can deliver more. Common grazings are a significant resource that can be particularly suited to the environmental outcomes sought. They must be factored in to all the design process. Scotland has lost approaching half of its biodiversity, according to research into historical records, but the fact that most High Nature Value areas of Scotland are in the crofting areas says a lot about crofting practice.

There was widespread agreement on many issues, which was really encouraging. The farming industry representative chose to not attend, however. Everyone seemed to recognise

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## Accessible and fit-for-purpose AECS essential

In January Scottish Government launched the new round of the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme (AECS).

AECS aims to promote land management practices which protect and enhance Scotland's natural environments. Yet, under the new scheme a number of elements that are important to crofters have

been suspended due to budgetary pressures.

Conversations with Scottish Government have also brought to light that priority was given to complementary measures, as stand-alone measures are more likely to be cancelled.

The suspended measures under the AECS 2023 round include:

- restoring drystone or flagstone dykes;
- pond creation and restoration for wildlife;
- muirburn and heather cutting;
- primary treatment of bracken – mechanised or chemical;
- follow-up treatment of bracken – mechanised or chemical.

the removal of measures from the scheme, in particular those for drystone dykes, bracken management and public access, which will all impact crofters. Limiting support for bracken control is especially concerning and could have significant impacts on the look, environmental health and usability

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- Managing common grazings
- Development of agricultural reform
- Challenges for women in crofting
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- Threat from free market in crofting
- Peat

*... and much more*

## Delivering environmental outcomes

THE PUBLICATION of Scottish Government's proposals on the Agriculture Bill provided some first insights into the direction of travel for agricultural reform and the recent publication of a routemap and list of draft measures was an important next step.

It's clear that the focus of a new payment system will be on delivering environmental outcomes, notably climate and nature. Whilst this is likely to raise many questions for current recipients of agricultural support, a change of approach may offer opportunities to make a case for more and better-targeted support for crofting. In particular, the new framework could reward maintenance and improvement of High

Nature Value (HNV) agricultural systems within the crofting counties.

HNV areas are where appropriate agricultural land use is linked to high species and habitat diversity. In other words: keeping people on the land is absolutely key, as biodiversity relies on HNV agricultural management. At the same time, as low-input systems, HNV agriculture also relies more heavily on biodiversity, eg for fodder or forage. In most cases HNV systems are extensive livestock, but they can also include low-input arable agriculture or those that integrate trees.

Most of Scotland's HNV agriculture is in the crofting areas. Focusing government attention on

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## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

### Message from the chair...



**W**ELCOME TO the latest edition of *The Crofter*. In this edition you will find a wide range of news, information and comment, with a focus on future agricultural policy and other important topics.

While it has not been the easiest of winters, it does feel like spring is on the way here in Lewis.

Much of our efforts continue to be dominated by the reform of agricultural policy. SCF cautiously welcomed the publication of the Scottish Government's route map last month.

We have been calling for more detail on future policy for years and it is a positive step that we now have a timeline and some information on plans for the future. But we are concerned that key omissions remain, including common grazings, while Less Favoured Area Support scarcely gets a mention. Importantly, the publication does take some of the debate into the public domain. We have been highly critical of the lack of engagement with crofters and the wider agricultural industry on future plans. We do hope that this is the beginning of a better approach to policy making.

We made two trips to Holyrood in recent weeks

to speak to MSPs and have now managed to meet representatives of all the political parties in the Scottish Parliament. With so much important legislation affecting crofting being tabled in this parliamentary session, making politicians aware of our policy positions is crucial.

Last month I gave evidence at the Rural Affairs and Islands committee, which has begun pre-legislative scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill. With a dozen witnesses in attendance, representing varied interests, it was clear how important it is that crofting's specific interests are represented.

Reflecting on all that SCF is currently working on and all that we do to represent members, it is a reminder that this simply would not be possible without the excellent staff that we currently have in place. Recognition is also due to all the volunteers who sit on our working groups, help formulate policy, answer casework queries and help the organisation run smoothly. This is a critical time for crofting and I am confident that SCF is in a strong place to deliver the representation the sector needs.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *The Crofter* and the best of luck with calving and lambing in the coming weeks.

# Enhanced conditionality

**C**ABINET Secretary Mairi Gougeon has declared that at least 50% of future support payments will require enhanced conditionality, meaning that farmers and crofters will be expected to do more than the current minimum to receive part of the direct support available to them.

Scottish Government recently published a list of measures (<https://rb.gy/fhgkyc>) which could form the basis for future enhanced conditionality. The measures associated with the more intensive sectors of agriculture are fairly obvious and straightforward, providing a range of appropriate options for arable farmers and lowland grass. But questions remain about how measures can be made accessible to crofters.

Conditions based on grassland management for soil health and biodiversity could provide appropriate options for most inbye crofts. Measures detailed around livestock health and efficiency should also prove accessible to most livestock keepers. However the suitability of some of the proposed measures for more extensive systems is questionable.

Measures for rough grazing are somewhat lacking in the document



and this is, of course, very relevant to crofting. With a large proportion of crofting land falling into Regions 2 and 3, and the bulk of this taking the form of common grazing, there are clearly some complex unanswered questions here – not least, what the actual conditions could be and how these can be linked in with wider objectives.

There will need to be a mechanism for a crofter to assure government that the agreed condition is being met on common grazing, over which the individual

crofter has no overall control. As discussed on a following page, there could be a role for common grazings committees here. Committees could take responsibility that conditions are being met, such as having a moorland management plan in place, which would then allow individual crofters to claim their share.

It is also important that we consider the crofting businesses that are left out altogether from the current proposals. These include small-scale horticultural producers,

who already struggle to access the current system. This is perhaps where a small producers scheme could prove useful. Units below a certain threshold could opt to access a scheme with a fixed amount of support set at an appropriate level, with basic conditions attached.

There are plenty of questions and not many clear answers, but what is certain is that we need to keep talking about them to make sure that important aspects of the crofting system do not fall between the cracks of any new scheme.

## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

# SCF gives evidence on agriculture to the Scottish Parliament

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that this is the time for a whole new way of looking at agriculture, climate change, loss of biodiversity and the cement that brings these issues together – public funding. It is widely recognised that public money needs to deliver public goods, not be used simply as a way of shoring up an industry that is crucial yet seems to struggle to produce food sustainably.

There was agreement that making payments based on the area of land owned or controlled by individual businesses isn't the best way forward. However, Donald pointed out that basic payments are still needed, as there has been no plausible alternative offered that helps mitigate the volatility associated with food production. These payments should not be based on land area, but rather designed to facilitate transition to a more outcomes-based system and should be capped.

Some three quarters of the agriculture budget was spent

on direct payments, yet research within a sample of parishes dominated by croft holdings showed that 50% of crofters receive under £1500. There is a very strong need for redistribution to smaller producers – a factor recognised in the European Common Agriculture Policy.

The suggestion to cap payments to stop large businesses taking too large a portion of the pot

has a lot of approval, but caused a bit of push-back from landowners, as you would expect. But the argument that large businesses claiming economy of scale need more public money (per hectare) to survive is a hard one to defend. It simply doesn't hold up.

Support to less favoured areas was also discussed, being a vital element in the structure.

It was again widely agreed that the support system designed for the mitigation of natural constraints must be completely redesigned so that it achieves intended outcomes, rather than being seen as a top up payment favouring better quality land, as it currently does.

The meeting finished with the question "What should be on the face of the bill?" Not too much and not too little was the conclusion. A bill needs to set direction without being too prescriptive, so that the system can evolve and adapt. A bill should contain the targets it sets out to achieve and the proposed outcomes, the intentions of the legislation.



## Accessible and fit-for-purpose AECS essential

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of vast areas of land in the Highlands and Islands.

As the new agriculture policy continues to be developed, it is crucial that a fit-for-purpose and accessible replacement for AECS is included. More, rather than less, investment is desperately needed. SCF has asked Scottish Government to give insight into data on the uptake of schemes, as we understand that individual crofters are often struggling to access support due to its competitive nature.

With support for manual bracken control still in place, but with an opportunity to revise the suspension of support for chemical or mechanical control in the next round, Scottish Government would like to understand better what bracken control measures are preferred and in which areas and what improvements can be made to improve access for crofters.

Please share your insights and experiences with SCF policy coordinator, [miranda@crofting.org](mailto:miranda@crofting.org).



## Delivering environmental outcomes

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HNV agriculture in the context of the current reform could mean generating financial support for many crofting businesses for managing HNV areas and for making further improvements to crofting practices.

Important questions, however, remain on where such a support package would fit within SG's proposals. An option could be for HNV agriculture to become part of the enhanced conditionality tier for direct payments, offering crofters a top-up for generating environmental public goods in HNV areas. Another option would be for HNV agriculture to be an elective scheme with priority access. Inspiration may be taken from the Irish outcome-based ACRES scheme which is considered accessible for small producers. It uses a scoring system with different

levels of payment per hectare to generate a maximum payment of €7,300 (average: € 5,000) for low-input grassland or low-input peat grassland management.

SCF policy coordinator Miranda Geelhoed said: "Scottish agricultural reform is looking to reward those who deliver on climate and nature. This offers opportunities for us to highlight the benefits that crofting can deliver for biodiversity if the right support is put in place. There is overlap between SCF's aim to ensure that crofters can croft and the need for appropriate management of HNV crofting areas. We are keen to explore this further with Scottish Government."

SCF would value members' views on support for HNV agriculture under a new payment system. Please contact [miranda@crofting.org](mailto:miranda@crofting.org).

## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

# Areas of Natural Constraint

*What does the future hold for LFASS replacement, asks Janette Sutherland, senior consultant and area manager with SAC Consulting.*

**W**HEN CROFTERS are filling out the upcoming IACS form for support payments, most with livestock will apply for the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the Less Favoured Area Support Scheme (LFASS).

Although they are different payments, the rationale behind payments on Regions 2 and 3 land is based on livestock grazing at certain stocking densities. Both these payments are non-competitive. For many crofters, LFASS will be a much greater payment.

## LFASS replacement – Areas of Natural Constraint scheme?

At this time, we do not know much about the proposed LFASS replacement, ANC – Areas of Natural Constraint. However, we expect it will be based on similar schemes that run in EU, so it's important at this stage that crofting stakeholders learn from experiences of European counterparts in places such as Ireland.

Scottish Government has proposed a 4 Tier model. ANC was put in Tier 4 of the proposals in the new Agricultural Bill. This tier is meant to be complementary to Tiers 1,2 and 3. The BPS replacement is found in Tiers 1 and 2 – where Tier 2 will have additional requirements to help tackle the climate and biodiversity crisis.

In this article I suggest key considerations that crofting stakeholders should consider when looking at upcoming changes and the impact they will have on crofters.

## Budget

Many crofting stakeholders are keen for LFASS to be reformed or replaced. However, it is important that any fairer payment mechanism is not working on a reduced budget, or vital income could be lost to crofting families.

## Actively worked but low stocking situations

At present you need to have livestock grazing on each FID (land parcel identifier) on your IACS form to get LFASS paid on that area. Under current LFASS, if you are lowly stocked, less than 0.09 LU/ha, it is a scaled-back payment. This is akin to being paid pro-rata for a job if you work reduced hours.

For truly extensive places, you want to ensure that low stocking rates don't prevent accessing this payment. I don't envy those formulating this policy, as it's not easy to include these clearly deserving cases without making it easier for those whom many would regard as slipper farmers.

## Support for cattle

Many crofters will get a higher LFASS payment due to having cattle in the past. This money can be essential for supporting many hill cattle herds. It's important, when the biodiversity of hill cattle is becoming more recognised, that this perhaps silent support is not lost in the reform.

Crofters' cattle systems could perform poorly when looked at solely through a carbon footprint



lens. It is imperative that the public goods produced by hill cattle are looked at holistically. These include habitat management, supporting invertebrates and reducing fuel loads on moorlands, thereby reducing wildfire risk.

## Critical mass

De-coupling was a huge jargon word when the Single Farm Payment (SFP) was introduced in 2005. This means subsidy support was for land rather than for animals (headage). However, it's important to realise that in reality, full decoupling has not yet hit the crofting sector, as both BPS paid on Region 2 and Region 3 ground and LFASS have stocking density requirements. It's important to consider that the impact on individual crofters' decisions on

stocking will be impacted by any rule changes as well as payment rates.

Most crofters sell stock at store livestock sales. There are issues of critical mass that need to be considered, as the viability of each crofting business is impacted on the viability of their area. This also affects those whose businesses are built on them, including hauliers, feed merchants etc.



## Subsidy changes

It is only during times of reform that crofting stakeholders can really impact the support framework. After each change, support systems are something that crofters must navigate like the weather. It is vital that crofter stakeholders test any proposed support changes with real life case studies and bear the four points above in mind.

## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

# The importance of high nature value land

*I spend a lot of time talking about the challenges – and opportunities – facing hill farming and crofting in Scotland, writes Davy McCracken, head of SRUC's Hill and Mountain Research Centre.*

**N**ORMALLY start by highlighting that Scotland is unique in Europe, in having between 60% and 70% of its agricultural land under rough grazing.

This compares with around 10% in England, just under 20% in Northern Ireland and around 25% in Wales. Across continental Europe, the majority of EU countries have less than 10% of their agricultural land under rough grazing, with only Greece and Portugal – at around 40% – being close to Scottish levels.

So a very large proportion of Scottish farming is constrained by poor land. The further north and west you go, the more rough grazing dominates any one hill farm or the common grazings associated with crofting townships.

This, coupled with increasing climate change and associated pests like ticks and liver fluke, means that there are major productivity challenges facing hill farming and crofting, especially – but not exclusively – in the Highlands and Islands.

It is, however, also essential to look at the rough grazing figures from a different perspective.

The fact that between 60% and 70% of Scotland's agricultural land



is under rough grazing means that hill farmers and crofters are the principal managers of a huge proportion of Scotland's agricultural land. They have a key role to play, not only in maintaining good-quality food production, but also in providing a wide range of other public benefits to society.

Indeed, many of the habitats and associated wildlife species that we put high nature conservation value on across Europe need livestock grazing to maintain them. Some of these habitats require extensive grazing throughout much of the year, while others only need short bursts of intensive grazing at the right time.

Such High Nature Value (HNV) farming systems have been around for centuries and still cover 30% of Europe's farmland. They are, however, under threat – and we should not take our eyes off the ball about that fact.

In Scotland, HNV farming systems are associated with farms and crofts where semi-natural vegetation makes up a high proportion of the available forage resource and where livestock graze that resource at low densities. These HNV holdings account for less than 5% of the total number of holdings in Scotland, yet the combined area of farmland accounts for over 40% of the agricultural area of Scotland.

Ensuring the continuation of appropriate grazing practices will therefore be fundamental to maintaining the existing biodiversity interest on these HNV hill farms and crofts. But HNV farming systems are not just important for biodiversity. They also have immense social, cultural and landscape values.

Some of us have been highlighting this for decades, whilst policy makers have paid lip service to the HNV term but done little to support these systems effectively.

Nevertheless, existing HNV systems need – and deserve – to be supported. And future agricultural policies need to reflect that.

## New support systems must continue to support our crofters

*The economics of crofting are always under scrutiny, writes SCF director Russell Smith.*

**S**CF'S RECENT survey about costs showed big increases in basic commodities.

Our feed bill has gone up by 50% from 2021 to 2022. The uncertainty about future support payments adds to the difficulties in planning ahead. There has been progress from Scottish Government on how future payments will be divided up but nothing on how much money there will be to pay out.

The suggestion is that maybe half of basic payment/greening will be paid out under Tier 1 and half under Tier 2. Tier 2 will have conditions attached which may be accessible to crofters but even Tier 1 may include having to produce a whole farm plan.

There is of course no such thing as a typical croft, but in one example at least, the value of

sheep sales through the mart is roughly equal to the variable costs of production (ie feed, fuel, medicines, fertilisers etc), meaning a gross margin of nothing. Fixed costs (repairs, machinery, insurance, fencing, SCF membership subscription) therefore need to be met by the support payments. Plus a bit left over to pay the crofter for his or her time, pay off loans and put something aside for a pension.

If the support systems don't keep up then crofters, and many hill farmers, are faced with stark choices. You can stop crofting, which hits good-quality food production and keeping the land in good heart. Or you can amalgamate crofts to get economies of scale (one tractor, rather than 10 crofters each running a tractor) but this means there will only be one family in the community not the 10 families there were before.

Or you plant trees, which could be good for biodiversity and carbon capture if done appropriately, but will cut food production and not

give you an income for 40 years. Or you charge a realistic price for your store lambs which then would work through the supply chain to the end consumer – who wouldn't pay the price required to cover the true cost of production.

And this is before we import tariff-free lamb from Australia and New Zealand under the post-Brexit trade agreements, which even the UK minister who negotiated them thinks are bad deals.

Some crofters in the survey on cost of living were considering reducing stock numbers to bring down costs – but this could actually reduce your profitability, as you cut the variable costs and your income from sales but leave the fixed costs unchanged.

So the new support systems must continue to support our crofters and farmers to maintain communities, produce food and steward the land.



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## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

# Whither the results-based approach in Scotland?

*Defeat out of the jaws of victory? asks Gwyn Jones of the European Forum on Nature Conservation and Pastoralism.*

**A** FEW years ago, I wrote in *The Crofter* of the potential of the so-called results-based or payment-for-outcomes approach to agri-environment schemes.

This was potentially, as our friends in Ireland would argue, a way of working which appeals to the pocket, the head and the heart alike, rewarding the crofter for producing policy outcomes for the public – and doing so in a way which makes sense to him and appeals to her sense of achievement, self-respect and recognition in the community.

Later, my colleagues and I wrote about some pre-pilot projects – a LEADER and NatureScot (NS) funded one in the Western Isles and NS-funded ones led by SAC Consulting and RSPB on croft inbye on Skye and Shetland (as well as other relevant ones on Argyll and Strathspey farms).

We made good progress and looked forward to a proper pilot with funding for trialling payments – something which seemed to be just round the corner. So what's happened?

Seen from a distance here in Wales, I can honestly say that I don't really know. As the father of the Western Isles common grazings project in particular, I feel rather as if I gave my child up for adoption and better life prospects and find myself wondering now whether it's died a death. One rumour is that work has now shifted completely to biodiversity audits – maybe useful, but really quite a different thing.

Another is that there seems to have been a focus not on improving the method itself – its robustness, its efficiency, its friendliness to crofters – but on using a smartphone app. As someone who himself is in the telephonic Iron Age at best, I can understand completely how crofters and farmers, some with no phone or only a dumb phone, might resist being forced to use one and how that might detract attention from the real issues and cause a loss of momentum.

Here in Wales, I've also been exercising the same obsessions with the need for appropriate support for common land and the potential of results-based payments.

Again, various LEADER groups have been very helpful, as have key supporters within NRW, the Welsh equivalent of NS. We've been able to develop the Scottish (and before that, Irish) approach, making it more streamlined and reliable. We haven't been Luddites – we've tested it using tablets and spreadsheets, but without making that leap to an app before we were ready.

Early in 2021 a senior scheme-designing civil servant in the Welsh Government told us "There's no way we'll be having that Irish approach in Wales." Now the door seems open, even though it's very unclear what that means.

What's made all the difference? Quite simply, two study visits to the Irish projects in May and September 2022. The first visit was something of a last throw of the dice – a case of taking the policy-making and policy-influencing horses to water. The Welsh Government scheme design team, Natural Resources Wales, FUW, NFU, RSPB and so on – all of them came and saw,



Welsh policy makers and influencers visiting a participant in the results-based Pearl Mussel Project in Co Kerry, Ireland.



and having seen, it became clear why it has such potential.

If the May visit was a gamble, the September one was a consolidator. It gave the original attendees more members of their team who understood what they were talking about. FUW sent their policy director and deputy-chair to the first trip, but their chair to the second.

I've offered to do the same for Scottish policymakers and policy influencers if funding can be found, but there have been no takers. The offer's still open!

Meanwhile in Wales, interest is growing daily, with more bodies and areas starting to take an interest. The hope now is that we can run a pilot on commons not in Glastir (the Welsh AECS), with real money and a real chance to field test and improve and consolidate the approach.

Most crofters common grazings aren't in AECS; they will struggle to fit into a three level structure in Scotland as in Wales, especially the lowest level. Why not look again at the alternatives?

Ross Lilley, head of natural resource management at NatureScot, has provided the following update.

NatureScot continues to build on the work that the European Forum for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism undertook in the Outer Hebrides with Leader and NatureScot support. We are continuing to explore, under our POBAS (Piloting an Outcome Based Approach in Scotland) project, how nature and climate outcomes can be delivered in a range of farming circumstances across Scotland, including crofting common grazings, through a results-based/outcome approach. The biodiversity audit project referred to in the article is an additional project being developed by NatureScot to also help inform the development of Scottish Government's future support framework.



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## AGRICULTURAL REFORM AND COMMON GRAZINGS



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# Common grazings: how will they fit in future support systems?

*Janette Sutherland looks at the changing financial support system for farming and crofting in Scotland. By 2026, support will come from four different levels, each with a disparate set of demands; some automatic and some conditional on extra work.*

**C**OMMON GRAZINGS don't fit easily into the current support system. Can the next system accommodate, and help improve, these important areas?

Crofters' common grazings offer a huge – and largely untapped – opportunity to deal with the key challenges we face as a nation in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss. Our common grazings cover 13% of the Special Protection Areas designated under the BIRDS Directive and more than 15% of High Nature Value farmland. They also account for 30% of Scotland's area with peat of over two metres in depth.

Grazings offer environmental benefits in a variety of ways, not least the opportunity for healthy livestock systems, space to grow traditional crops and their associated biodiversity benefits, land for grassland meadows producing

wildflowers and ways of managing wildfire risk in upland habitats.

As well, let's not forget the incredible community benefits associated with grazings, particularly those in office – namely grazings that are properly constituted and with an appointed chairperson and clerk. Grazings with well-maintained fences and safe communal handling equipment, for example, can help encourage new and young entrants into crofting. There is also much to be gained from different generations working together, sharing knowledge of the land and building social trust. This fosters co-operative action like storage and marketing, which can bolster business resilience.

### Policy context

The Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture has committed to integrate enhanced conditionality in at least half of all funding for farming and crofting by 2025. Under this conditionality policy, recipients of support will be expected to deliver on targeted outcomes for biodiversity gain and emissions reduction.

The idea of conditionality is good, in that the public can see what they are getting for the support

they provide. However, without adequate planning and testing at an early phase of policy development, poorly-implemented conditionality could be damaging to common graziers.

There is a widespread aspiration to have more common grazings in office. Yet the current support system means that crofters go largely unrewarded under agricultural budgets for the additional efforts required in following such processes.

The administrative burden (eg repaying monies for works) of managing constituted common grazings usually falls on grazing clerks – commonly unpaid volunteers often acting without liability insurance. A number of clerks have expressed concern that grazings committees could be used to bank future conditional support payments.

Without proper consultation, we could find that common graziers are excluded from conditional options – as no one grazier has full management control of all the land – or individual crofters could only be able to access conditional options through a grazing committee, which brings its own set of challenges.

We need policies that support and



incentivise good practice in common grazings. It is clear that we also need to recognise burdens unique to common grazings, such as time spent attending meetings, the costs of advertising meetings and time involved in complying with crofting legislation. These are costs and burdens that do not apply to farmers.

In a policy spotlight document created with SRUC's Rural Policy Centre, *Common Grazings in the Age of Conditionality*, I have set out a series of policy suggestions that rely on cooperative effort, but leave the claiming responsibility with the individual shareholder through their Single Application Form (SAF).

If you would like a copy of the policy suggestions, please email [janette.sutherland@sac.co.uk](mailto:janette.sutherland@sac.co.uk) and we can email or post a copy to you.

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## DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL REFORM

# Na dùbhlain nàdarra



The Croft at Inverness Botanic Garden with two types of seed plants, Shetland cabbage and Swede, a collaboration with Seeds of Scotland. Later this year there will also be Murkle oats, small oats, bere and Uist rye.

**T**HA COMHRAIDHEAN a' dol an-dràsta air cìmar a bhios taic-airgid a' dol gu tuathanaich is croitearan, agus 's e fear de na sgeimichean a tha ga dheasbad Àrainnean aig a bheil Cuingealachd Nàdarra (Areas of Natural Constraint).

Sa chiad dol a-mach, dè tha seo a' ciallachadh? Uel, a rèir an Aonaidh Eòrpaich, agus cò aig a tha fhios, a bheil sinn ga leantainn, ach ma tha, 's e a' phrìomh chuingealachd, ma tha an t-àite beanntach. 'S e sin far a bheil an seasan fàis goirid, agus an talamh buailteach a bhith cas is doirbh obrachadh. An dèidh sin tha feartan eile ann, 's iad fuachd, tiormachd, cus taiseachd san talamh, dìth dreanaireachd, talamh cruaidh, talamh tana, talamh neo-thorrach. Às an liosta seo 's e tiormachd an aon rud nach eil cumanta sa Ghàidhealtachd – ach a-mhàin uaireannan sa Chèitean, agus dh'fhaodamaid an coire a chur air talamh tana, neo-thorrach airson sin.

Ach 's e a' cheist, cìmar a dhèiligeas sinn leis na dùbhlain seo, agus ma bhios dòighean ann, a bheil iad airidh air taic-airgid. Thèid sinn tron liosta ma-tà. An toiseach, fuachd: Chan urrainn dhuinn mòran a dhèanamh mun aimsir, ach bhiodh craobhan a' lughdachadh atharrachadh ann an teodhachd, agus a thaobh glasaich, nì còmhachd diofar, bho phlastaig iseal gu tunail no taigh- gloinne. Bhiodh taic-airgid airson an leithid seo gu feum mòr. A' leum gu cus taiseachd san talamh agus dìth dreanaireachd, 's e an aon duilgheadas a tha seo. Bheir drèanadh uisge air falbh, agus lùghdachaidh sin an taiseachd.

Faodaidh sinn na trì dùbhlain mu dheireadh, talamh cruaidh, talamh tana agus talamh neo-thorrach a ghabhail còmhla. 'S e cnag na cùise leotha seo, nach eil beatha gu leòr san talamh. Ma bhios tuilleadh lus an agus innear a' grodadh san talamh, togaidh sin a thorrachd agus cuiridh e ris an uiread a th' ann dheth. Ma tha an talamh cruaidh ghabhadh fhuasgladh le inneal fo-thalamh (subsoiler) - ma tha doimhneachd gu leòr ann - air neo le bhith a' cur lus domhainn-freumhach leithid caisearbhan (chicory), saoidh-dhearg (sainfoin) no eàrr-thalmhainn (yarrow).

Cìmar a chuidicheas an Riaghaltas leis na dùbhlain seo ma-tà? Gheibhear grantaichean matha airson dìgean a chladhach, agus airson fo-thalamh fhuasgladh bho ChAGS. Airson torrachd na talmhainn àrdachadh, 's e crodh agus innear-chruaidh as fheàrr, agus tha taic-airgid ri faighinn bho Riaghaltas na h-Alba – (bhon "department"). Tha airgead airson craobhan cuideachd ach tha cruaidh fheum air grantaichean airson glasaich agus na diofar sheòrsachan de chòmhachd a tha nan cuideachadh airson blàths agus fasnachd.

The challenges of natural constraints, what they are, how they might be lessened and what grants might be available

## COMMON GRAZINGS

# Apportionments

*We are grateful to Joseph Kerr, head of regulatory support at the Crofting Commission, for the following guidance.*

**T**HE CROFTING Commission thought it would be useful to *Crofter* readers to bring together the four main points which come up regularly:

- Land Court comments on a shareholder not having a right to apportion;
- landlord comments on the commission's role in considering shareholders' applications to apportion;
- apportionments and the commission's new policy plan;
- apportionment fencing requirements.

On the general nature of apportionments, in *Mackenzie v Crofters Commission RN SLC/80/10 2011*, the court commented that there is no right to apportion. The full wording of the decision of the Land Court goes on to note that even if the apportionment is crucial to the efficient running of the croft, it's still not a right for crofters. The commission website has full details and guidance on this issue, which we would urge everyone to consider before making an apportionment application.

In terms of the role of the commission, in *Matheson v Crofters Commission RN SLC/32/10 2012*, the court commented that the commission had a balancing act to carry out. It had to take account of the interests of the other shareholders, but it also had to consider the future. Except where an apportionment is granted temporarily, the land is lost to communal use in perpetuity.

We made a note of decision in this case: "When considering applications for apportionment, as well as taking the aspirations of the applicant into account, the commission must safeguard the present and future interest of the other shareholders." That is an accurate statement of



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the task we had to perform. We have to balance all interests. There is no legal requirement to give one set of interests greater weight than the others.

Our new policy plan contains our updated policy position on apportionments, which is as follows: "When apportioning land, the options available to the commission include apportioning for a set period of time and/or subject to review at fixed intervals. Where the commission decides that it is appropriate to apportion land subject to review at fixed intervals, its policy in most cases is to have a review every ten and twenty years. It will, however, take account of the circumstances of each application.

"The commission's underlying policy in this area is that where the crofter has ceased to use the apportionment, or is not utilising it as intended, or where there are concerns about the use of the apportionment, the possibility of restoring the crofters' common grazing rights over the land should be considered."

## Do apportionments require to be fenced?

Yes. The commission will generally include a condition in an apportionment order that the apportioned area be enclosed with a stock-proof fence. The order will usually include a further condition that the crofter and successors maintain

in a stock-proof condition any new fences and gates erected to complete the enclosure of the apportioned area.

## What is the timescale for fencing an apportionment?

The commission will normally set a condition that the fencing be completed within two years of the date of the apportionment order.

## Will the apportionment set out the boundary line to be fenced by the crofter?

Yes. Every apportionment order will be accompanied by a map setting out the boundary of the apportionment as approved by the commission. The condition will require that the apportionment must be fenced in accordance with the map. It will also set out that if the crofter finds it is not possible to enclose the area with a stock-proof fence in terms of the map, the shareholder must complete the fencing with the line of apportionment. The crofter must not, in any circumstance, encroach onto unapportioned common grazing land over which other shareholders have rights.

## Can a crofter apply for an extension of the two-year period to complete the fencing?

Yes. If crofters find that they need further time to complete the fencing, they can apply to the commission for a review of the apportionment. On such review the commission may vary the fencing condition to allow an extension in the time allowed to complete the fencing.

## What steps can be taken if a crofter fails to fence the apportionment, or does not fence along or within the line set out in the map issued with the apportionment order?

It is open to the grazings committee or the owner of the common grazings to apply to the commission for a review of the apportionment. On such review, the commission may bring an apportionment to an end. Where an apportionment is brought to an end, the formerly apportioned land reverts to being common grazing land.

## The benefits of a fully-functioning grazings committee

*Advice from the Crofting Commission*

**T**HE Crofting Commission has been running a campaign through the winter, to encourage all common grazings to have an active committee in place.

We've partnered with the Farm Advisory Service (FAS) to develop and run a series of workshops to enhance the skills of grazings committees, to help them deal with finances.

Some spaces on these courses are still available in locations throughout the crofting counties. Please check the FAS website, if you would like to book your free place.

Grazings committees are set

up with specific management responsibilities for their common grazings. They are appointed into office by the crofters who share in the common grazings. They have responsibility to make and submit grazings regulations to the commission for approval. Each common grazings has its own grazings regulations, which are administered by the grazings committee, a copy of which is held by the Crofting Commission. A template to create your own common grazings regulations is available in the common grazings section of the Crofting Commission website.

A grazings committee has authority to manage the common grazings on behalf of all the shareholders, fostering strong

communities and delivering economic benefits to their community. They also have power to create new regulations, or amend existing regulations, to suit the needs of their community.

Managing a common grazings well can lead to improvements in the soil, improve biodiversity and create new opportunities for growing innovative crops. Grazings committees can carry out maintenance and improvements on the land and equipment and apply for grant funding for this. There are many opportunities for common grazings, including carbon sequestration, which may prove beneficial for shareholders.

Common grazings committees also provide a recognised point of contact for any parties who

may be interested in approaching the shareholders with potential economic or development opportunities which could be carried out on the common grazings. Committees also help to promote and organise communal working activities and are a valuable source of historic and local knowledge regarding crofting in the locality.

The Crofting Commission recognises the importance of local grazings committees. The commission's grazings team is available to engage with crofters and to assist with information on how to appointment a grazings committee. It will also provide support and assistance to the committee members throughout their term of office.

## THE BIG ISSUES



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# Balancing the interests

*John Toal looks at what has transpired since the SCU first raised concerns about the operation of the free market in crofting 35 years ago.*

**A** RECENT Crofting Commission response, stating that it would continue to seek that all crofts are held by active crofters, might induce a degree of scepticism.

This brought back memories of a detailed Scottish Crofters Union discussion paper of 35 years ago entitled *A Better Crofting Future: Getting Croft Land into Active Occupancy*. It wasn't particularly well received by the then Crofters Commission, but advising authorities on how to do things better tends not to go down too well. However, it was noticeable over the ensuing decade how much of what was contained in this document became practice.

Of course, it was a document of its time, and its criticism of the commission for allowing more than 500 whole croft decroftings over the previous 10 years would not feature today. However, some issues highlighted then have remained unresolved and, indeed, have intensified over this period of time.

In particular the document noted: "This tendency for the transfer of a croft tenancy to become a monetary transaction, governed by the price that can be fetched for the tenancy on the open market, is the source of a good deal of criticism by SCU members – the difficulty being that the open market price obtained by the outgoing crofter is frequently beyond the reach of local people who wish to have the croft."

Any hope that this aspect might be considered within the then framework of crofting legislation was

denied by the initial statements of incoming chair of the commission, Hugh Maclean, in 1989. He was quoted as saying that it would be unwise "to put a ring fence through legislation" around the crofting communities, and insisted crofting should be subject to the same degree of economic development and market forces as any other business.

The approach to this vexed subject changed somewhat after Iain MacAskill took over the commission chair in 1995 and led a more proactive approach to crofting regulation and development. By 1996, the commission required that the price paid for a tenancy assignment was declared. If over a certain threshold, the commission could refuse consent on the basis that such prices were well beyond the value of permanent improvements and what could be expected within the locality and, therefore, contrary to the interest of the local crofting community.

In some instances it did appear to bring down the prices paid, but there was no way of controlling off-the-record payments, which lead to misgivings as to its efficacy.

Another significant development in that timeframe, also recommended in the discussion document, was the commission using its powers to address absenteeism to ensure greater use and occupancy of crofts. For the first time since the early 1960s, in 1997 the commission began a concerted programme to address croft absenteeism. Addressing absenteeism was one of the mechanisms that might assist market regulation

that was suggested to the North West Scotland district valuer, when asked by the commission to examine the feasibility of valuing croft tenancy assignments.

The overall conclusion of the valuer's 1999 report was essentially that unless purchased crofts were subject to the same transfer controls as tenanted crofts, restrictions on tenancy prices would lead to even fewer crofts being available for let. Basically, it would entail greater movement towards croft purchase and subsequent sale rather than to assignment.

The failure of the 2005 Crofting Reform Bill to include any proposals to restrict the free market within crofting became a focal point for debate and criticism at the parliamentary committee stages. The issue ultimately led to the establishment of a modern Committee of Inquiry into Crofting in 2007, chaired by Professor Mark Shucksmith.

While the analysis of the crofting situation as detailed in the Shucksmith Report remain unchallenged, many of the more radical proposals were not seen as palatable solutions. Despite claims that the 2010 Crofting Reform Act would address speculation on croft land, there were few identifiable measures that could be considered relevant to any crofting market controls. The provision of a legal framework to ensure compliance with croft residency and cultivation duties might be considered of some relevance – if rigorously applied rather than avoided, as has been the approach until recently.

The potential consequences of ignoring such issues were starkly

pointed out to the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee by Professor Jim Hunter, prior to the passing of the 2010 Act. He advised that it was parliamentary intervention, by fencing out of market forces, that had secured the survival of crofting within the 1886 Act. But ironically, he stated: "Now inside the fence thus put in place, new market forces are at work. This time the beneficiaries are not landlords but crofters – or some crofters. But these new market forces, if left unchecked, will destroy crofting as surely, maybe more surely, than their pre-1886 equivalents threatened to do. All this is set out clearly and comprehensively in the report delivered to government by Mark Shucksmith and his colleagues."

A decade on, these warnings become more relevant and have been reflected in the views from the SCF young crofters gathering and subsequent on-line workshops on access to crofts. As SCF chair Donald MacKinnon wrote in August 2021: "It is an anomaly that in this regulated system the only thing that is not regulated is the price that tenancies and owner-occupied crofts can change hands for."

Balancing the interests of crofting and the interests of individuals within crofting is not an easy task and it is doubtful that any regulation of the free market in crofting will feature in anticipated reform proposals. Tinkering around the edges is more to be expected. The question remains as to whether such an approach will see a crofting system in existence in 35 years time.

## CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN CROFTING

# From dining room to boardroom

*SCF's Scottish Croft Produce co-ordinator Beth Rose comments on society's expectations of women in agriculture.*

**A**S I STOOD at the station, waiting to meet a fellow woman in agriculture, I hugged the coffee in my hand.

It had not been my intention to buy a coffee – to add further plastic and cardboard to the environment. But after a broken night's sleep due to one child, then chivvying two boys to school and getting that night's tea sorted in the slow cooker, it was on the drive to the station that the need for another coffee kicked in. And while the guilt hung over me, so too did the sleep deprivation.

I had been asked the night before if I would join another board group. They needed volunteers and they needed women. It would be time-consuming. Could I keep up with all the likely emails?

As we journeyed on together, we got chatting. Women, agriculture, jobs, childcare, illness. Expectations, demands, challenges. Two women with very different agricultural setups share similar struggles.

The Scottish Government has done a lot of work to try and balance issues faced by women in agriculture. It has been great that they took some of the raised issues and placed funding to address those needs. While it has broadened the confidence and qualifications of women within agriculture, there are still aspects that would be good to discuss and address.

Society seems to still expect me to hold the fort at home. It is also pushing me to be on the board, to give a voice. As a woman in crofting, I am seen as the one who either has a lot of flexible time to give to society or they think, "Well, if she can juggle all the other tasks, what effect will it have if she joins a board?"

Rather than ask why there are still fairly low



Donald and Uillie Rose gathering up bundles with Tim scything in the background. We did oats and barley last year, with the oats going through our threshing machine which the boys have really enjoyed

numbers of women in the board room, is it worth casting a spotlight to the dining room? Home situations and roles are often unspoken. Chat to a lot of women and they are the cooks, cleaners and child-carers.

Men are participating much more. But history and tradition still cling on. While the ability for women to participate in agriculture is growing, no one asks if the other tasks are being shared. I know plenty women who juggle

and balance a host of responsibilities. Society seems to think we can heap on more.

While opening a door to new adventures is great, is there anything holding us back to even get to the door?

Discussion would help raise awareness, identify the challenges and how addressing them would allow more women to step up, not just in agriculture, but at board level in our society.

## Investment in rural childcare would go a long way

*Miranda Geelhoed, SCF policy coordinator, reflects on a common challenge for women.*

**A**T THE START of the year I attended the online Oxford Real Farming Conference, where rural women across the world, young and old, shared stories of nurture: for communities, for families and for the land.

Although these women spoke with great pride of their caring tasks, they also emphasised the struggles of often underpaid or undervalued work and their lack of choice. I recognised stories that I heard across the crofting counties, notably in relation to childcare. From the medical doctor only able to take a handful of shifts due to childcare issues, to a key advisor in the public sector who is only paid a couple of days a month for her services and is otherwise restricted by school hours. And our own Beth Rose, who

*...Continued on page 15*



Miranda's daughter Sophie Gray

## CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN CROFTING

## Investment in rural childcare would go a long way

...Continued from page 14

worked as a senior theatre nurse, but not since having children.

Based in rural Angus, I am not a crofter. Yet I feel passionate because I too have experienced many problems over the years, juggling work and three young children aged 2-7 years.

Our village school offers no breakfast or after-school club and our amazing childminder has limited availability, with five other families on her waiting list. The Scottish Childminder Association predicts that 64% of childminders will quit between 2016 and 2026. Scottish Government has identified a significant shortage of early years provision (ages 0 to 3). Many parents like us rely on invaluable support from family, yet many others are not so lucky.

Thinking about the similarities between my situation and the circumstances of many young female crofters, a perfect storm is not solely created by lack of childcare. Many women in rural areas have partners who work unpredictable or long hours. My husband manages a mixed farm and is often working seven days a week from dawn to beyond dusk. For many others it is offshore work that takes partners away.

The parent holding the fort is now not only trying to tackle all care responsibilities alone but also must do the job within available hours. The reality is that for many jobs it is simply not feasible to only be available for <6 hours a day and only 40 weeks of the year. And let me not even start talking about school bugs and illnesses... sick days galore. Desk-based jobs may offer flexible and remote options. Yet, flexibility often goes both ways, with expectations of out-of-hours' work or travel for many managerial and higher paid positions.

Investment in rural childcare would go a long way – far beyond benefits of career progression and mental wellbeing for women who have worked hard for their education and the financial security of young families. A strong and diverse healthcare workforce in remote places could be delivered by the fantastic women I mentioned above.

I do not pretend that rural lives directly depend on my ability to work. Yet, with twelve years of legal education under my belt, I still hope to greatly contribute to a sustainable future for rural Scotland, including advocating and campaigning for the future of crofting.



Rory, Emma and their dad Archie making hay on Tiree

## A tricky juggling act

*Morven MacArthur adds her perspective.*

**H**AVING RECENTLY returned home to the Isle of Tiree to raise our young family on the croft, we are quickly realising the juggling act of working, crofting and childcare is a tricky one.

Thankfully, our children seem to enjoy croft life and are usually pleased to join in with feeding, gathering and the likes, but it's difficult to do a lot of chores with little ones in tow asking questions; wanting to enter the cattle pens; drive the quad; jag the sheep. The list goes on, but worse still is when they get bored and grumpy, waiting for the jobs to be finished.

We are very fortunate to have family around to help with childcare, which allows me to work on a part-time basis, but we try not to abuse them as they too are working – and they have their own lives too.

Unfortunately, here on Tiree, unless your children are of pre-school age (3+), there are no childcare facilities. Even if your children are old enough, there's no option for any wrap-around care or holiday clubs.

It's become a major factor in whether parents

can return to work when they have young families on the island, which is ultimately affecting the island economy. During the last Tiree Community Development Trust (TCDT) consultation in 2022, the lack of childcare options on the island was identified as a key priority.

The TCDT has recently employed a consultant, Jen Alcock, to undertake a childcare feasibility study as the first stage of their response to the issue.

Jen explained, "Initially I've been looking at the models other island and rural communities have put in place, and how those options might be managed here in Tiree. The aim of the study is to fully investigate all possible childcare options, with an innovative and open-minded approach. Residents and key stakeholders have been approached to ensure all views are considered and all possible avenues explored."

I'm hoping from the feasibility study that TCDT is able to come up with some good options which will help families with children of all ages. The ultimate goal is to make Tiree a more attractive place to raise your family; supporting the school, the population and the local economy.

# Succession to crofts and time limits revisited

Brian Inkster of Inksters Solicitors reports on a recent legal decision.

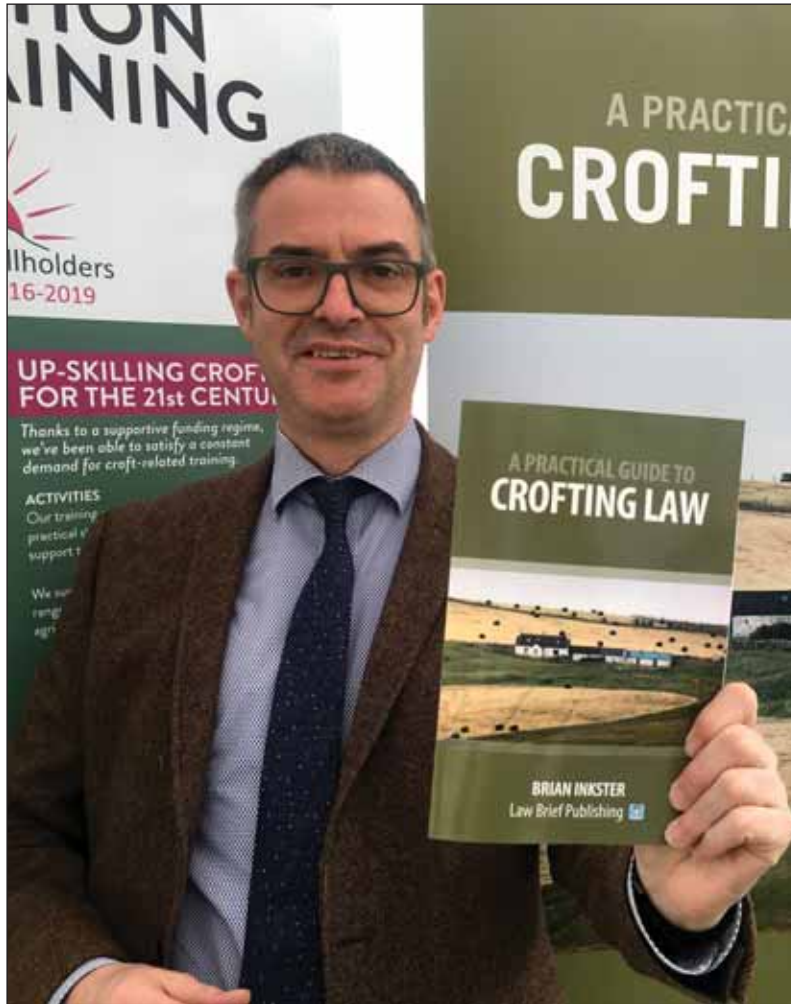
IN THE April 2022 edition of *The Crofter*, the Land Court case of *Mark Pattinson v John Miller Matheson, SLC/6/20 & SLC/7/20*, 23 September 2021, was examined.

In that case the court held that a notice by John Miller Matheson to the landlord, Mark Pattinson, intimating that he had succeeded to two crofts in Shieldaig, was invalid for two reasons. (1) It was not given by the executor; and (2) it was not preceded by any form of transfer of the deceased's interest.

Thus the Land Court held that the landlord's notices purporting to terminate the tenancies were valid.

The steps that the court said should have been followed by John Miller Matheson were to (a) be appointed executor dative on his late father's estate through the Sheriff Court; (b) obtain confirmation to the estate through the Sheriff Court; and (c) sign a docket transfer on a Certificate of Confirmation as executor, transferring the tenancies to himself as an individual.

This decision was appealed to the inner house of the Court of Session who issued their decision on 23 September 2022. The Court of Session disagreed with the approach taken by the Land Court and in doing so reversed the Land Court's earlier decision.



Brian Inkster

The Court of Session held that until confirmation is granted, the intestate estate is in statutory limbo. The landlord cannot give the executor notice to terminate, if there is no executor. However, confirmation, once granted, has retrospective effect to the date

of death. Transfers executed by the executor prior to the grant of confirmation will be validated.

The executor has 24 months from the date of death within which to transfer the tenancy to a beneficiary, after which, the landlord may terminate the lease. Critically

for this case, there is no time limit during which the interest must be transferred. Rather, the 24-month period is a protective one. It simply allows the executor time to carry out the necessary steps to confirm to the estate and to transfer the interest without the threat of termination.

A confirmed executor has the power to circumvent any prohibition on the assignation of a tenant's interest by transferring the interest to a person entitled to inherit on intestacy. No formal requirements are placed by legislation on the mode of transfer of such an interest in such circumstances.

You cannot rely solely on section 16 of the Succession (Scotland) Act 1964, as that by-passes the Crofting Commission's ability to control succession under section 11 of the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993. To do so would be contrary to the spirit of the crofting legislation; a pillar of which is to ensure that a crofter can secure succession to the family croft "without any expense or process of law".

Thus the steps which were thought had all to be taken within 24 months in a certain order do not in fact have to be done in that order. Notice of a transfer can be given almost immediately following the death of a crofting tenant, with confirmation subsequent to that validating the transfer. It no longer appears that a signed docket transfer is strictly necessary to effect the transfer.

## The Crofting Commission's area representatives

**2023** IS the year in which our current team of assessors end their term of office.

The commission is looking to recruit a new team, to be renamed Crofting Commission area representatives, to work with crofters, their communities and the Crofting Commission, to support and encourage crofting in their area.

We are looking for an enthusiastic group of volunteers from across the crofting counties, who will be provided with training and full support from the commission. Our simple application process can be found on our website and we hope to recruit all area representatives by May 2023.

The new role is designed to create a better link between the commission and crofting communities. The number of area representatives will be representative of the number of crofts in that area, with our recruitment target of 30 in total. The table to the right details the percentage of the total number of crofts in each area and how that will look in terms of representatives per area.

The commission encourages all *Crofter* readers who feel that their skills and experience would be of benefit to the wider crofting community to apply for this worthwhile role.

Area	% of total	Area Reps
Argyll	9.2%	3
East Mainland	11.2%	3
Skye	11.1%	3
Uist and Barra	9.33%	3
Lewis & Harris	21.4%	6
West Mainland	12.11%	4
Caithness & Orkney	11.3%	3
Shetland	15.1%	5



## ON THE CROFT



© Robin Haig

# Scottish Crofting Produce: crofting, food and the future



*SCP project officer Beth Rose on the importance of local crofting produce*

**T**HE SCOTTISH Crofting Produce Mark (SCP) was generated to help crofters sell more produce.

Which raises an interesting point, do people understand crofting? Society's views can differ. With the

increase of social media, a lot of crofters have done a huge amount to get crofting onto a much wider screen and letting people see into their daily lives; the good, the bad and the ugly. Many discussions regarding produce from a croft go back to the fundamental question: what is crofting?

Recently, the government's focus has been on local food. But even then, consumer understanding can be completely disconnected from the producer's world. Understanding where food has been grown, how it has been grown, or why it is grown are all questions that would

not just help consumers, but help producers (including crofters) sell their produce.

Using the land, the weather, and whatever else nature throws at us, crofters grow and produce food, whether directly, or indirectly. As crofters, we know we can't provide tomatoes 365 days of the year, regardless of where we are in Scotland. But, as producers, we should be proud of our produce – and we need to help people understand not just our natural habitat, but the challenges we face.

The future of crofting produce could be valued on a much bigger

scale. Making sure our voices are heard as the government's attention turns to the Good Food Nation Act is something that has been a recent focus. But it also focuses on getting the crofting concept and helping people to see the positive impact that crofting has with communities, culture and connections.

While SCF gears up for another season at the shows, these are times to prepare. To help people understand crofting. To see the positive side to crofting. To help promote local produce and to help crofters see the value in their work and take pride in their produce.

## Tomato seed saving

*Now is a good time to think about planning seed saving into your vegetable garden this season, writes SCF member Finlay Keiller.*

**Y**OU MAY ask why bother saving seeds. There are many reasons, not least that you will not have to buy that packet again next year. This is particularly important if your favourite variety is no longer available. Furthermore, many of those packets of seeds for sale in the garden centre may have been produced far away in different climate conditions to ours and will not be well adapted to waking up to a Scottish summer.

Seeds saved in your garden will, over time, become adapted to local weather, growing conditions, your tastes and your style of growing. You will inevitably end up with more seeds than you need which you can swap for new interesting varieties.

If you have access to a covered growing space such as a polytunnel or polycrub, tomatoes are a good crop to start your seed saving journey with. If you can grow tomatoes for eating, you can grow tomatoes for seed saving. In fact, you can eat and save seeds from tomatoes on the same plant.

While there is certainly a little more to consider when planning tomato seed saving, there are a couple of easy rules to follow:

- Choose an Open Pollinated (OP) tomato variety. Seed saved from F1 hybrid varieties will not turn out to be the same as the plants you saved them from.
- If you can, plant your chosen tomatoes away from any other tomato varieties that you are growing (ideally 5m). The further away, the lower the chance of cross-pollination. Tomatoes do not generally cross-pollinate and you should be fine with plants grown closer together. However, it is good practice to be sure.
- Grow several plants of your chosen tomato variety. You will have backups if some plants don't make it, as well as having more choice when deciding which tomatoes to save seed from.
- Your goal should be to save seed from as many healthy plants as possible. If there are signs of disease or infection, don't be afraid to remove affected plants.
- When deciding which tomato plants to save seed from, don't just look at the fruits, assess the whole plant.

In the next edition of *The Crofter* we will go through the process of harvesting, fermenting and storing your tomato seeds.

*Seeds of Scotland*  
[info@seedsofscotland.com](mailto:info@seedsofscotland.com)



A marker on a healthy plant



Scotland Yellow tomato

## ON THE CROFT

# Donald's hortiblog

**CROFTERS KNOW** a lot about peat.

For many of our ancestors it was something that ensured surviving a winter, or not. Thank goodness that is no longer the case, but it's still an important resource, and a right we need to safeguard, especially when the alternatives are oil or coal. This crofting household is one that is kept warm by peat, as well as wood and electricity. I'm writing this in front of a nice peat fire.

We're also crofting horticulturists, which means that we have used peat as a growing medium in the past but have moved away from it in recent years and have tried a variety of alternatives.



Now the Scottish Government is consulting on banning the majority of peat-based products for horticulture and other purposes. See [www.gov.scot/publications/ending-sale-peat-scotland-consultation/pages/8/](http://www.gov.scot/publications/ending-sale-peat-scotland-consultation/pages/8/). They have also sneaked in

questions about the use of peat as domestic fuel, so please respond if you're affected. Closing date is 12th May 2023.

Before I go any further into this minefield, I'm going to try to refer to compost as the stuff we produce at home from croft, garden and kitchen waste – and growing media as what we purchase in bags for seed sowing and potting.

So what about peat-free growing media for these purposes? The choice is endless and bewildering in both content and price, and there's a lot of rubbish out there regardless of cost, with or without peat.

Believe it or not, there are no quality standards for growing media supplied to the horticultural trade or to amateur growers. There are no best before dates, and if you buy these products early in the year, they may well have been stored outside over winter and be cold, wet and leached of nutrients.

Peat substitutes include coir, wool, bracken, wood waste and biochar. The last is controversial in my opinion. It is produced by anaerobic heating of biomass, consuming a lot of energy and releasing a lot of CO<sub>2</sub> and methane. Extravagant claims are made about its long-term benefit to the soil. I'm happy to be contradicted by those with more knowledge of this material.

Our experiment with a wool-based medium last year started well, but degenerated rapidly with an infestation of fungus fly and its larvae, which destroyed our first sowing of tomatoes. This may have been a rogue batch, but it was indicative of quality control issues.

Professional-grade growing media should be worth the extra price, but on top of that there's the transport cost to the highlands and islands. It is possible, though, to find a few local suppliers of better quality stuff. The best we've found is an ethical, peat-based product, the peat originating from filtering drinking water supplies in the English Pennines. It's approved as organic by the Soil Association.

Alternatively, you can make your own if you're a keen compost maker, but it's not easy. You need a hot compost heap, regularly turned then sieved when it's rotted down for at least a year, along with leaf mould if you have it. This is combined with loam (mole hills are ideal), sharp sand or vermiculite for drainage and a little slow-release fertiliser. Seed compost will need almost no fertiliser, a bit more for potting. It's completely unscientific and will not be sterile, but my late mother and father used to do this with good results. You have to be prepared for some growth



of weeds along with the seedlings.

I'm sorry to have no easy solutions to this dilemma, but there's always the option of a seedbed in the soil of a polytunnel or similar structure. A well-worked, fertile soil under cover, or in a well-sheltered site outside using cloches, will successfully raise the hardy vegetable varieties for subsequent transplanting to final positions. This works fine for things like the brassicas, leeks, beets and lettuce.

Dr Audrey Litterick has written about composting and growing media on page 50 of *Horticulture: a Handbook for Crofters* (available from SCF HQ or our website) and she has also produced this guidance note for Farm Advisory Service:- [www.fas.scot/downloads/composts-growing-media-the-facts/](http://www.fas.scot/downloads/composts-growing-media-the-facts/)

Thanks to her for help with this article.

## Disposal of fallen stock

**WITH LAMBING** and calving starting, a reminder about the legal and safe disposal of fallen stock.

Fallen stock means any animal that has died of natural causes or disease on a farm, or that has been killed on a farm for reasons other than human consumption. This also covers animal by-products, including afterbirth and stillborn animals.

It is illegal to bury fallen stock in most areas of Scotland, due to the risk of spreading disease through residues in the soil, groundwater or air

pollution. However, there is derogation from the ban on burial in some parts of Scotland classed as remote areas – which includes most crofts. This does not mean burial should be regarded as the first option in remote areas, rather it should be the very last option considered for disposal purposes.

Most cattle keepers in the remote area are still required to submit adult fallen cattle to a sample site for BSE testing. Contact your local Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) office for advice.

If carcasses are unrecoverable, this must be reported to your local APHA office immediately.

You must also contact your local APHA office immediately if you think an animal has died of a notifiable disease.

It is particularly important that if a euthanized animal is to be buried, it must be done soon and very thoroughly to prevent foxes or dogs from retrieving it. The chemicals used to kill the stock will also harm or kill the predator. If a dog is injured or killed the crofter may be held liable if all precautions were not taken.

## ON THE CROFT

# Stop the spread in the Western Isles

**M**OREDUN Research Institute is leading a Scottish initiative on the Western Isles to tackle sheep scab, funded by the Scottish Government.

Working with the Lewis and Harris Sheep Producers Association, areas requiring further support will be identified using an ELISA blood test to better control sheep scab in the future.

Sheep scab has been identified as one of the most important diseases for UK sheep farmers, from both financial and welfare perspectives. It is considered to be the most contagious endemic ectoparasitic disease affecting sheep in the UK, causing annual losses of £78-200M to the UK sheep industry. Economic losses associated with reduced performance are due to loss of ewe condition, poor lamb growth rate, reduced quality of sheepskins and wool damage. Untreated infestations of sheep scab can, in some cases, be fatal.

The ELISA blood test detects antibodies to a protein found only in the sheep scab mite, which means that the test can accurately say whether infestation is due to the scab mite or another ectoparasite, eg lice. The test can detect the presence of mites within two weeks of infestation and before the onset of clinical signs, which is important to effectively control the parasite.

Moredun has been working with a number of partners across all four nations of the UK to benchmark the use of the blood test in local, regional and national control programmes. The institute is working closely with government agencies, funding bodies, farmers and industry to demonstrate a more sustainable method of controlling the disease through serological testing.

This Lewis and Harris sheep scab project offered free sheep scab testing during the week beginning 13th February 2023. Vets from the Old Mill Veterinary Practice in Stornoway collected blood samples from 12 sheep per flock, with close to 100 crofters participating in the testing.

For flocks which test positive, the project team will provide free treatment advice and will cover reasonable treatment costs to ensure that animals are treated in a timely and coordinated manner.

Stewart Burgess from the Moredun Research Institute, who is leading the project, said: "We're delighted that so many sheepkeepers signed up to this initiative because, with a disease like scab, it's so important that people act in a joined-up way to get on top of the problem. The funding from Scottish Government has allowed us to start this process and we're now looking forward to the benefits in sheep welfare and productivity which will result from a successful campaign."



Testing

## Lyme disease and tick research

SCF council member David Muir reports

**I**MPORTANT research into the high incidence of Lyme disease in the islands of the Uists publicised its findings to date in February.

The research, by NHS Western Isles, NatureScot and students from the University of Glasgow, began in 2018, with input from local health and veterinary professionals and many Uist people, and has the aim of reducing numbers of cases of Lyme disease in the local population.

Two methods are used to diagnose Lyme disease: *Erythema Migrans* (EM), the bullseye-like rash and the *Borrelia* serology antibodies test. Statistics are available for positive diagnosis in patients for each of the islands in the Outer Hebrides. Since 2017, in Uist EM cases peaked at 50 cases in 2019 and decreased steadily to 28 in 2022. Serology case numbers are low and vary from five to nine recorded in 2018, but reduced to two cases in 2022.

By contrast, cases diagnosed using both methods in the other islands of the Outer Hebrides are recorded as zero or in ones and twos, but incidence in Lewis has risen to eight and seven over the past two years.

The reduction points to the success of a wide-ranging tick safe removal and bite prevention awareness-raising campaign run by NHS Western Isles, mainly in Uist. This is set to continue.

Ticks have a two-to-three-year life cycle. They go through four life stages: egg, larva, nymph and adult. After the egg hatches, the larva and nymph each must take a blood meal to develop to the next life stage – and the female needs blood to produce eggs. Larval and nymphal ticks can become infected with Lyme disease bacteria when feeding on an infected host.

In Uist, research has shown that only rats (50% positive) and voles (32% positive) have the *Borrelia* infection. Interestingly, there were no tick infections found with mammal-associated *Borrelia* in Harris or in

Barra – only in Uist.

Of the prevalence of differing genospecies of ticks analysed, *afzelii* (associated with rodents) accounted for 96%+ in Uist while *afzelii* were absent from Harris and Barra. There were a few *B. valasiana* and *garnii* (both associated with birds) making up those that were otherwise positive from each island (Harris 0.4%, Barra 1.1%).

In conclusion, NHS has had success in reducing cases of Lyme disease, but recognises that awareness raising must be continued. Research has shown a high prevalence of Lyme disease bacteria in ticks in Uist compared with neighbouring islands. Rats and voles in Uist carry the bacteria but not other small mammals, while they do not in other islands. Birds have little impact in spread of infection.

This article doesn't touch on the role of sheep and deer as tick reproductive hosts, but will be explored in the next edition of SCF's e-newsletter.

# Local tree nurseries thriving on the Western Isles

*Robin Reid, croft woodlands adviser for the Western Isles, reports on local tree nurseries.*

**T**HE WESTERN Isles are notorious for their extreme climate.

These islands may not be where you would expect to find a thriving tree nursery. However, over the last few years, the Croft Woodland Project (CWP) has been working with local initiatives to source locally-grown trees for Western Isles tree-planting projects.

Until recently all trees supplied via CWP on the islands were sourced from mainland tree nurseries. This came with a significant delivery cost and often meant that the trees being supplied were not of local provenance or origin.

CWP first started sourcing trees from local nurseries as they were establishing in 2019. We now source the majority of our trees from two nurseries on Lewis.

At Horshader near Shawbost, Laura McEwan manages the Horshader Community Development tree nursery, with

*...Continued on page 21*



Horshader Community Development

© Laura McEwan

WOODLAND TRUST SCOTLAND

## Trees for the crofting community

Trees are a valuable source of woodfuel and provide important shelter for your livestock, crops and buildings.

The Woodland Trust offers free planting and woodland management advice to crofters, common grazings and small holders.

Find out how useful trees are.

**Get in touch.**

Image: Phil Lockwood / WTM



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Stark's Ark

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## Local tree nurseries thriving on the Western Isles

*...Continued from page 20*

trees grown in a series of polycrubs and netted tunnels. At Leurbost, Frank Stark has recently expanded his Stark's Ark nursery to a second site on a neighboring croft, where he has been trialing various methods to increase production. Conditions on the islands are unique and it has been necessary to tailor production methods to the short and intense growing season and to the challenges of the often relentless wind.

On Uist, CWP is working with Storas Uibhist and Tagsa Uibhist to establish a further nursery to supply trees for planting in the South Isles.

Between them Laura and Frank are now set up to produce over 50,000 trees per year. In addition to the Croft Woodland Project, they are supplying trees for a range of projects from small-scale garden tree

planting to larger forestry grant schemes and an ambitious nature restoration project on the North Harris hills, where over 100,000 native trees will be planted over the next few years.

Alongside supporting local nurseries, the Woodland Trust has established seed collection hubs across Scotland, with one on the Western Isles. This small group of dedicated volunteers has started collecting seeds from remnants of native woodland across the islands, to build up a bank of seed for use by local tree nurseries to propagate trees of local provenance.

Currently, demand for locally-grown native trees is growing on the islands and alongside community initiatives. Frank Stark's tree nursery is a nice example of croft diversification and a new small business on the island.

# Coming full circle

*Looking out my croft window over to the Spey while reading about what HIE is up to reminds me of how I have, in some ways, come full circle, reflects SCF member Pete Brown.*

**M**Y FIRST JOB in the 1980s was with the HIDB, Inverness based, working with farming and crofting cooperatives.

Hours spent sorting sheep on their way from the islands direct to buyers in the south, days with Uist Calf Producers, Harris and Lewis Livestock, evening meetings all over, discussing sheep health schemes – CASH and HISHA and the Big Stock Country. Remember any of these? I was also in the loop as Jim Hunter led the setting up of the Scottish Crofters Union.

For me these were formative times. I'd studied agriculture at Aberdeen and working in the Highlands and Islands food and farming world led on to my involvement, over 25 years, with farm assurance, organics and similar schemes, based in Edinburgh and Oxford. I never lost my connections with the north and two years ago we returned, buying a croft.

So I'm re-engaged with the world I was part of 30-plus years ago – and I reflect on how much has remained and how much has changed.

I notice, and love to see, a gender and age shift in crofters. Noticing more engaged, youthful crofters could be driven by the fact I'm less youthful myself! I haven't checked how many active female crofters there were in the 1980s but I'd bet it was at best 5%. I see it's now 30+%.

The Crofting Mark is great, encouraging direct sales of meat, vegetables and crafts.

The union has become federation, but is very much still here. I enjoyed the gathering in November, hearing about some of the big issues of the day: net zero, re-wilding and uncertain support



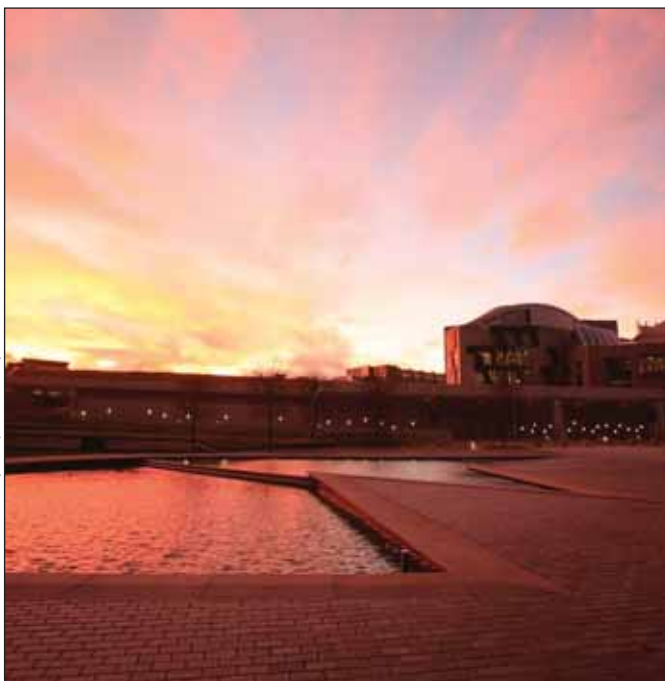
Pete on his croft

systems ahead. I think there are changes ahead that will be difficult to accept and deal with. To shift a livestock-based economy and community to a net zero position is hard to imagine, but also hard to argue with. Climate change and biodiversity loss concerns and affects us all.

The thing that hasn't and won't change

though is the resilience, underlying good humour and passion of those I meet who are crofters. The key, as always, will be to work together and constructively with decent support from ScotGov – who I believe, at heart, continue to see the value of crofting's very special place producing cattle and sheep.

## Speaking up for crofters



**T**HE MOST important work the SCF does for its members is representation.

We are the only organisation dedicated to the representation of crofters and crofting. We do this by putting forward the crofting perspective in stakeholder policy groups, government roundtables, meetings with officials and politicians, responses to consultations and public policy statements.

We attend somewhere around 30 regular groups and policy meetings. SCF staff and unpaid officials clock up hundreds of hours putting forward the case for crofting on your behalf. For example, see the article on representation of crofting to the Rural Affairs and Islands parliamentary committee on the front page of this issue and the many other articles highlighting what we do.

Current official groups we attend include the Agriculture Reform Implementation Oversight Board, the Scottish Parliament Cross Party

Group on Crofting, the Scottish Government Crofting Stakeholder Group, the Scottish Government Crofting Law Reform Bill Group, the National Sea Eagle Forum and the National Goose Forum. We also have representatives attend various trade groups and predator and pest local management groups.

Recently we have responded to the Agriculture Bill consultation and have consultations coming up on protected marine areas, energy and just transition, community wealth, sale of peat and forestry grants.

We publish *The Crofter* and our monthly online newsletter, we report our campaigns in news releases, with regular columns in journals, on TV and radio and on social media.

Our voice is strong, but can always get stronger with more members. Let your neighbours know that SCF is standing up for crofting and that we need all crofters to speak with a collective voice to ensure that all policy is croft-proofed.

# SCF response to small landholders consultation



**I**N JANUARY, SCF responded to the Scottish Government's proposals to reform small landholding tenancies, by calling for small landholders in Scotland to be brought under crofting law and to be given access to the channels of support that exist for crofters.

"The Scottish Government's proposals could introduce elements from agricultural tenancies to the legislation that applies to small landholding tenancies," explained Donald MacKinnon. "Scottish Government also consulted on the need for an umbrella organisation for small landholders. It is unclear to us why they are using limited resources to reinvent the wheel, as a trialled and tested framework for protection of small-scale tenants already exists in Scotland in the form of crofting law, with the Crofting Commission there to regulate and SCF there to support."

Until 1955, all tenanted small landholders across Scotland were protected under the same laws, rights of security of tenure

and fair rent; and compensation for improvements still applies to crofters and small landholders alike. Yet, when crofting tenure was limited to the crofting areas in the Highlands and Islands in 1955, small landholdings outside of those areas became stuck in a regulatory framework that has not kept up with the times. Therefore, since 2013, the Scottish Government has been running working groups to review the law.

The proposals provide no safeguards to protect land for agricultural use and food production, or to protect extensive farming systems in High Nature Value areas. While SCF advocates increasing numbers of small, tenanted holdings across Scotland, some of the proposed measures could have the opposite effect. Bringing small landholdings into the crofting framework would not only be the most logical step, but also the most efficient and best use of public funds, allowing Scottish Government to focus its efforts on a new Agriculture Bill and a new Crofting Bill.

# SCF response to wildlife consultation

**A**T THE END of last year, SCF responded to Scottish Government's consultation on wildlife management, in particular, muirburn and trapping.

Scottish Government proposes to introduce a licensing regime for the use of fire to control vegetation. We understand that the development of such a regime is already in an advanced stage and this was reflected in the leading questions of the consultation. SCF raised concerns regarding the broad scope of the proposed requirements – going beyond what many would consider muirburn. Nonetheless, SCF agrees that an appropriate and accessible

licensing scheme could be a valuable tool to ensure best practice in relation to muirburning, but only if accompanied by adequate and accessible training and awareness raising.

Details are needed to better understand conditions that will be attached to a licence, which may potentially include mandatory training and record keeping. SCF has expressed concerns that licences will be designed with big sporting estates in mind, rather than crofters. Specialised training should specifically target those working at small scales.

SCF also emphasised the need for sound

scientific evidence to underpin any measures, in particular in relation to peatland management. SG "supports well-managed muirburn and recognises its potential to reduce the impact of wildfire". SCF strongly supports measures to protect peatlands and mitigate climate change, but we asked for further research into the positive and negative impacts of muirburn in this context, to ensure that legal measures (definition, restrictions, exemptions) are able to deliver on climate change objectives, with adequate risk assessments, and do not restrict the potential of muirburn for other outcomes.

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# Peatland ACTION

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## ADVERTISING FEATURE



Eroding and degraded peat like this emits carbon instead of storing it



Peatland restoration has benefits for farmers and crofters



Restoring degraded peat helps it to start storing carbon once more

© Lorne Gill/NatureScot

## The benefits of healthy peatlands are many

Peatlands make a major contribution to our landscapes and cultural and natural heritage.

Many of our iconic views are framed and coloured by peatlands. But these areas add much more than dramatic scenery. They provide a special and unique habitat for wildlife and are an essential ingredient for farming, tourism and crofting.

### Peatlands:

- benefit biodiversity – as an internationally important wildlife habitat;
- regulate atmospheric pollutants – by absorbing pollutants such as sulphur dioxide, nitrogen and heavy metals;
- improve water quality – by reducing the amount of carbon in water, which results in water discolouration and requires extra treatment before it comes through our taps;
- reduce flooding – by regulating run-off and maintain base flows in upland streams during dry spells;
- support our economy – whether used in farming, tourism or crofting, or by indirectly benefiting whisky production and fisheries;
- shape our landscapes – enabling recreation and improving our quality of life;
- reveal our past – pollen, plant and insect remains can be studied to tell us about past changes in climate, environment and vegetation.

### Carbon store

One of peatlands' most important attributes, in the light of the current climate crisis, is their ability to store carbon. Scottish peatlands form the largest carbon store on land, holding around 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon, equivalent to 140 years' worth of Scotland's total annual greenhouse gas emissions.

Unfortunately, peatlands are also one of Scotland's largest degraded ecosystems. Much of the 1.7million hectares of Scottish peatland, which account for 22% of the country's land area, is recognised as being in poor condition. When peatlands are degraded, the benefits they bring are lost and they become sources of carbon instead of sinks, contributing to climate change rather than mitigating it. Degraded peatlands increase UK emissions by 3.5%.

### Good news

The good news is that we can put damaged peatlands on the road to recovery. We can restore them to a condition where they are functioning properly once again. Creating conditions to encourage the growth of active peat-forming plant species starts the process of changing the peatland from one that is emitting carbon to one that is actively capturing it.

### The benefits of peatland restoration for farmers and crofters

The Hill, Upland and Crofting Climate Change Group recognises that crofting systems have an important role to play when it comes to protecting peatlands. They believe that protecting peatlands and incorporating them with agricultural land use brings beneficial opportunity and that restoring degraded peatlands is important for helping to reduce significant soil carbon losses.

Other benefits of peatland restoration for crofters:

- By blocking up and re-profiling gullies and grips, there is less chance of stock or grouse chicks, for example, falling into them and becoming trapped.
- Improved water quality means that watercourses are in better condition for salmonid breeding grounds.
- More regular water flows can provide more consistent operation of hydro-schemes.
- Fewer flash floods can prevent hill tracks and gravel road surfaces being scoured out.
- Peatland Action fully funds planning, restoration and in some cases monitoring work.
- It is possible that peatland restoration and peatland management may be a future condition of government funding.
- Peatland restoration is an expanding market, as we aim to restore 250,000ha by 2030, with many opportunities for diversification – we need lots more contractors and surveyors to deliver this target.

### NatureScot's Peatland ACTION fund

NatureScot, through the Peatland ACTION Fund, and the other Peatland ACTION delivery partners (Cairngorms National Park Authority; Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority; Forestry and Land Scotland; and Scottish Water) have made tremendous progress in improving the condition of degraded peatlands across Scotland, putting over 35,000 hectares of peatlands on the road to restoration.

With our team of project officers across Scotland, we can help develop peatland restoration projects by carrying out peat depth studies, feasibility studies and design work. We currently provide up to 100% funding for the restoration, which involves works such as ditch blocking and re-profiling, bare peat restoration and hag restoration. We can provide multi-year funding for restoration, allowing land managers to develop large-scale projects that they can deliver over a number of years.

Peatland ACTION officers can help you:

- develop your project;
- understand how the Peatland ACTION Fund can help you;
- complete the application;
- support project management;
- give you technical and practical advice.

How to apply:

- Check out [www.nature.scot/doc/peatland-action-guidance-eligibility-criteria](http://www.nature.scot/doc/peatland-action-guidance-eligibility-criteria) to see if your project is eligible.
- It's a rolling funding programme, so you can apply any time.
- You'll need to allow at least 12 weeks between applying and the date you want to start work.
- Contact our project officers at [peatlandaction@nature.scot](mailto:peatlandaction@nature.scot) to find out more.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-sustainable-integrated-farming-crofting-activity-hills-uplands-scotland/pages/7/>

# Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Crofting



Great Glen House

**T**HE LAST meeting of the Cross-Party Group on Crofting (CPGoC) was held in person (with facilities to attend online) in March in Great Glen House, Inverness.

SAC consultants led discussions on the work of the Farm Advisory Service in engaging crofters and common grazing committees and an advisory paper entitled Common Grazings in an Age of Conditionality, about the need to consider common grazings at an early stage of subsidy reform.

The Crofting Commission also led a discussion on the work the commission development team is undertaking.

Leanne Townsend from the James Hutton Institute talked about recent research on the role of digital tools for crofting communities.

SCF has organised the CPGoC since the Scottish Parliament was reconvened in 1999. The group is a very powerful forum for informing MSPs and encouraging their support for pressing the Scottish Government to act on crofting issues.

If you wish to attend a CPGoC meeting please let SCF HQ know.

## SCF board and council

**T**HE SCU board and council are your local contacts. The board and council meet regularly and frequent email and Zoom discussions take place between board, council and SCF staff on all crofting matters. You can also contact SCF HQ by email or phone using the contacts on page 28.

If you want to input into SCF policy development, your involvement helps us best

represent crofters with government and agencies.

In addition to our new council members introduced on page 28, existing board and council folk are listed below.

All have a wealth of experience and are happy to help, but do remember that the SCF board and council are not paid staff, they are volunteers who freely give up their own time on members' behalf.

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Billy Neilson, Taynuilt		



## Agricultural show dates 2023

Royal Highland Show	22-25 June
Caithness Show - Wick	14-15 July
Tiree Agricultural Show	21 July
Sutherland Agricultural Show (aka Dornoch Show)	22 July
Black Isle Show	2-3 August
Skye Agriculture Show - 120th Anniversary	5 August

There are many more local shows for which we do not yet have dates.

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# Meet SCF's newest council members



Kenna and Peigi helping Phil with the croft work

## Philip Coghill

Born and brought up in Leurbost, Isle of Lewis, I now live in my wife's native Tìree with our three wee girls Kenna (3), Peigi (18 months) and Mairead (1 month).

My wife is a secondary Gàidhlig and maths teacher and I work for HIE in their community assets team. My wife and I help on the family beef cattle farm and have recently started out ourselves with a three ha croft and 15 cheviot ewes. We are also in the process of trying to build a house on the croft.

Before moving to Tìree, I spent just under five years working for the constituency MSP for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch, Kate Forbes. This gave me an insight into the range of challenges crofters face, as well as insight into the positive and negative impacts that policy can have on crofters and the crofting system.

Crofting is a unique system that has countless wider benefits for communities and it has never been more important for SCF to have a strong voice and for crofters to be represented in policy-making discussions.



## Helen O'Keefe

I'm a crofter in Elphin, Assynt.

I have sheep (mostly Shetlands), chickens, a veg patch, polytunnel and an orchard. I sell meat, wool, yarn, eggs, fruit and veg direct to the public. I've planted a bunch of native trees on my crofts too and we're working on a woodland regeneration project on our common grazings.

I've had the crofts for six years now and have been in the north-west Highlands for eight years. Previously I lived in Australia. I grew up on a hobby farm and then lived in the city, working as an engineer. Now my main income is from the onsite café here. The crofts provide a significant contribution. I also co-run a local food hub (The Green Bowl), am clerk of our common grazings and a trustee of the Highland Good Food Partnership.

There are always too many things I want to do and not enough time (or energy) for them all, but crofting is important to me.

I think we are at a turning point. Crofting is under threat from so many things, from competing land uses (and prices) to simply lack of support, yet it offers positive solutions to so many of the challenges facing our communities, environment and food systems. I think it's really important that we fight for our future and show the world why we deserve to be here.



## Billy Neilson

Billy Neilson from Taynuilt is well known in the crofting areas. He is a QMS inspector and served as a commissioner for the Crofting Commission. We are fortunate to have his wealth of knowledge now on the SCF council.



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