

PRESS RELEASE

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Agricultural Budget: SCF welcomes government announcements on rural support and housing.

SCF broadly welcomes Ministers' announcements relating to agricultural support and other rural policies but criticises cuts to the Croft House Grant Scheme and the lack of any firm financial commitment to goose management. With a view to the new capital grants, safeguards must be put in place so that support reaches the right people who need it the most and that funding is awarded in a fair and transparent manner.

Among the recent announcements by First Minister John Swinney, SCF particularly welcomes that capital funding for small producers has been tripled to £1.5 million and that £9 million capital funding will be invested in the wider food and drink sector. With regard to the continuation of the Future Farming Investment Scheme (FFIS), a lot hinges on how this is delivered: Capital funding for sustainable farming items currently not covered through CAGS can make a real difference for crofters, however, the application procedure and scoring matrix must be improved to better deliver for the scheme's priority groups such as small, tenanted and island businesses this time around.

We welcome that funding levels for the Sea Eagle Management Scheme (SEMS) will be maintained, however, given the increased losses due to white-tailed sea eagle predation in recent years, the advice and support provided by the scheme may not be enough moving forward. Crofters are disappointed that no commitment has been made to allocate funding and resources to local goose management.

Damage caused by ever-increasing numbers of greylag geese across the crofting counties is massively impacting the system of traditional machair cropping carried out by crofters for generations to provide winter feed for cattle. This system is now breaking down because of a lack of landrace seed that can only be locally sourced for sowing this spring as geese have increasingly destroyed ripening crops over previous years before they can be harvested.

SCF Chief Executive Donna Smith said: *"We urge the government to consider an adequate level of multi-year funding to help manage geese numbers before we not only see the elimination of a centuries-old land management practice on the machair, but also a loss of the associated biodiversity which is reliant upon it."*

SCF also took note of the government's plans to develop a Rural and Island Housing Grant Scheme, with an indicative budget of up to £20 million. While this is to be welcomed in principle, the Federation condemns the drastic reductions made to the Croft House Grant Scheme (CHGS) in this year's budget, with overall funds being only half of what had been allocated to the scheme last year.

Officials have informed SCF about the cuts but not yet given any further explanation. If the funds were cut so drastically because of low uptake rates, it is worth pointing out that low uptake does not mean that there is no need but rather demonstrates that individual grants at current levels are not reflecting cost realities and do not provide enough support to make building croft houses affordable for those most in need of support.

Mrs Smith said: *"The budget for the CHGS must, at a minimum, be lifted up to previous levels next year. In addition, we urge government to reintroduce the previously existing croft house loan, as even with grant funding, building costs in many crofting areas have become simply unaffordable for young local families."*

ENDS

For further information or interview requests, please contact mike@crofting.org or donna@crofting.org

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

About the Scottish Crofting Federation

The Scottish Crofting Federation is the only organisation solely dedicated to supporting crofting in Scotland. Our mission is to ensure the sustainability of crofting for future generations and advocate for crofting so that its value is recognised from within communities to government. We support crofters to meet the challenges of a changing world and champion the need for crofting to remain accessible and affordable for young people in crofting communities. As a member-led organisation, SCF works to secure a thriving future for crofting, rooted in community, culture and care for the land.