



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

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Dear Paul

Petition PE01490 on the control of wild goose numbers by Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation

As you are aware Public Petition PE01490¹ on the control of wild goose numbers was referred to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment (RACCE) Committee by the Public Petitions Committee on 29 October 2013² on the grounds that the control of goose populations was included as part of its current work programme.

The petition was submitted by Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation. It called on the Scottish Parliament to—

“urge the Scottish Government to address the problems created by increasing populations of wild geese in the crofting areas as a matter of priority; reassess its decision to stop funding existing goose management programmes, and assign additional resources to Crop Protection and Adaptive Management Programmes to ensure this threat to the future of crofting is averted”.

¹ Petition PE01490. Available at:

<http://external.scottish.parliament.uk/GettingInvolved/Petitions/controlgoosenumbers>.

² Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee. *Official Report 29 October 2013*. Cols 1775-1780.

Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=8598&mode=pdf>.

The RACCE Committee first considered the petition at its meeting on 27 November 2013³ and agreed to write to a selection of stakeholders, including the Scottish Government, seeking views on the issues raised in the petition. At its meeting on 2 April 2014⁴ the Committee considered the responses received and agreed to hear oral evidence on the issues raised.

At its meeting on 18 June 2014⁵ the Committee heard evidence from stakeholders in a roundtable session followed by oral evidence from yourself and your officials at its meeting on 25 June 2014⁶. All the written responses⁷ received are available on the Committee's webpage.

Following the evidence sessions the Committee agreed to write to you outlining its views and recommendations on the issues raised in relation to the petition, and to consider the petition again following your response. The Committee's views and recommendations are outlined below and we would welcome a response from you by **3 October 2014**. This is timely given your recent announcement to extend the Adaptive Management Plan pilot in Orkney for a further year.

Yours sincerely



Rob Gibson MSP
Convener

³ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. *Official Report 27 November 2013*. Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9035&mode=pdf>.

⁴ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. *Official Report 2 April 2014*. Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9094&mode=pdf>.

⁵ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. *Official Report 18 June 2014*. Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/29878.aspx>.

⁶ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. *Official Report 18 June 2014*. Available at:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28862.aspx?r=9291&mode=pdf>.

⁷ Scottish Parliament Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. *Meeting Papers 18 June 2014*. Available at:

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/Meeting%20Papers/Meeting_Papers_06_18_2014.pdf.

Goose species, populations and the international context

In responding to the Committee, stakeholders agreed that the increasing population of wild geese in Scotland is a concern and appropriate measures require to be put in place to deal with this. The Committee heard that there are predominantly two species of goose: the Greenland and Svalbard barnacle goose; and the greylag goose; which are problematic for crofting and agriculture in Scotland, each causing problems in different parts of the country. The Committee understands that the data gathered shows that the populations of barnacle and greylag geese have increased significantly over the last decade.

Greenland and Svalbard barnacle geese

Scotland has around 75 per cent of the world population of barnacle geese which is of considerable international significance for that species. The barnacle goose is protected under annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive (the EU directive) and is not a legal quarry species and cannot be shot unless a licence to shoot is issued once it has been demonstrated that non-lethal alternatives have been fully explored. The Committee heard in written evidence that virtually all of the Greenland barnacle geese wintering in Scotland do so in the crofting counties.

Greylag geese

The other species whose high population numbers are causing problems in Scotland is the breeding, resident greylag goose, whose population has increased markedly in the past few decades. In contrast to the barnacle goose there are fewer than five percent of the world's population of greylag geese in Scotland. The greylag goose is a legal quarry species, so greylags can be legitimately hunted in the open season and can be shot under licence during the close season.

The Committee heard in written evidence that, to date, there has been one national survey of the resident greylag goose population which was in 2008/09. This estimated the population to be around 47,400 geese with the densest populations found on Orkney and the Uists.

The Committee recognises that the increasing population and spread of wild geese in Scotland is of concern. However, the Committee believes that management and control of goose populations in Scotland cannot be considered in isolation. In order for any action taken to be effective we must also consider European and international circumstances to ensure that all species of geese have a habitat in which to live.

The Committee believes that Scotland has an international responsibility to manage the barnacle goose population sensitively and to ensure that nothing we do in Scotland jeopardises the global future of that species. The Committee welcomes confirmation from the Minister in his letter of 24 July 2014⁸ that the Scottish Government has now written to those countries where barnacle geese are found (the Republic of Ireland, Greenland and Iceland) seeking information on plans to manage the migratory population of barnacle geese. The

⁸ Letter from the Minister for Environment and Climate Change. Available at: http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_RuralAffairsClimateChangeandEnvironmentCommittee/General%20Documents/2014.07.24_-_Minister_Goose_management_follow_up.PDF.

Committee is also pleased to note that the Scottish Government has written to the Netherlands to enquire about the goose management measures that are currently being undertaken. The Committee looks forward to receiving this information in due course.

Impact of high goose populations

The petition referred to the negative impacts of wild geese in crofting areas and the responses from stakeholders supported this concern. The Crofting Commission stated that the current size of the goose population in some coastal crofting areas is unsustainable for continuing productive use of crofts, and is a serious disincentive to crofters to cultivate and maintain their crofts which is a legal duty under crofting legislation. The Committee heard that damage caused by geese is rendering the viability of growing cereals questionable in many areas. This was supported by the written evidence received by the Committee. Stakeholders also highlighted concerns that fouling by geese may be having an impact on water quality in catchment areas for public water supply. According to the National Goose Management Review (2010) damage costs as measured by payment rates in the Local Goose Management Schemes vary from around £15 to £52 per goose.

The Committee heard that previous conservation efforts, particularly in relation to barnacle geese, have proved to be successful and have led to the increased population levels we are faced with today. However the Committee understands that while the data is now showing overall goose numbers have stabilised they have done so at a level that is unsustainable and the methods previously employed to create a balance between agricultural and conservation interests, while achieving the best value for the public purse, are no longer sufficient to prevent serious damage to our crofts and farms.

The Committee recognises that there is a consensus between stakeholders and the Scottish Government that current levels of geese in Scotland are causing significant difficulties for crofting and agriculture in certain areas. The Committee considers that the current approach and methods of controlling geese require to be reviewed to ensure that goose populations, and their impact on agriculture and the environment, are effectively managed.

Goose management schemes and the Machair Life Project

Goose management schemes

The Committee understands that since budget cuts to the seven local goose management schemes in 2008 there have been increasing tensions and calls for greater population control. The Committee is aware that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) has been active in establishing local goose management groups in the Outer Hebrides as well as contributing to other goose control initiatives. The Crofting Commission has expressed concerns regarding the lack of coherence in approaches to goose management in different parts of Scotland, with different methods of control and different compensation levels to land managers. The Committee is aware of calls for an approach that supports local land managers, with advice from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), to develop and deliver management plans in local areas and that a pilot project is established to look at this.

Machair Life Project

There is a general consensus regarding the success of the Machair Life Project, of which goose management played a significant part. CNES believes that the project demonstrates that goose numbers can be managed and damage to crops can be mitigated but the resources required to achieve results are significant. The Committee understands that the goose management element of the project is now being carried out on the Uists through the Adaptive Management Plan (AMP) pilot but the Committee heard it was estimated that to keep the crop protection element of the Machair Life project going it would cost between £75,000 and £80,000 with SNH agreeing to fund £45,400 of this for 2014-15. Stakeholders expressed concern that the reduced level of funding would mean the good work achieved by the project will soon be reversed. In addition, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) called for further schemes of this type to be implemented in key areas for biodiversity reasons.

The Committee recognises the success of the Machair Life project and is keen to ensure that the benefits achieved are not eroded. The Committee considers it would be beneficial to continue to run a fully funded crop protection scheme in the Uists until it can be demonstrated that AMP's are effective in protecting crops. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government works with SNH and other stakeholders to find a way to secure the additional funding required to continue the crop protection element of the Machair Life project on this basis. The Committee looks forward to hearing how this has been progressed.

The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to work with stakeholders to identify the need for further funded schemes of this type to be implemented in key areas of biodiversity.

Adaptive Management Plans

The Committee is aware of the support via SNH to a number of AMP pilot schemes in Orkney and the Uists, with others planned for the future. The Committee is also aware of the two year project in Islay to develop a scheme of adaptive management in relation to barnacle geese in order to reduce agricultural damage.

The majority of stakeholders raised concerns in relation to the level of funding to support AMP's. The Committee heard from Orkney Islands Council and CNES that the lack of funding for AMP's is an issue. The Committee understands that in Orkney much of the control is being carried out by volunteers and that a lack of resources is leading to concerns over whether the scheme is going to be able to realise its targets. CNES also believes that £10,000 per annum for the Uist scheme is insufficient to maintain the level of activity required to manage the goose problem effectively.

The Committee understands that some stakeholders, including the RSPB in Scotland and the World Wildlife Trust (WWT) have strong concerns in relation to the operation of the pilots. These concerns focus on the use of lead shot; a lack of monitoring of agricultural damage; a failure to collect of baseline biodiversity data; and inaccurate gathering of hunting mortality data.

The Committee is aware that the problems faced by crofters and farmers differ from area to area and agrees that while the issue of damage caused by goose populations is a national one there is no one size fits all solution and that local solutions using people with local knowledge are required.

Whilst funding may be available via the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) the Committee considers that due to the competitive nature of the SRDP and the localised nature of goose impacts the SRDP may not be the correct vehicle to deliver additional support. The Committee is of the view that this is a national problem that requires to be addressed by the Scottish Government as a matter of urgency.

The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government reconsider its approach to the funding of goose management programmes and allocate additional resources to crop protection and Adaptive Management Plans, ensuring that these programmes follow best practice in terms of stakeholder involvement, management, design, implementation and monitoring.

Non-lethal scaring methods of control

The Committee heard varying views on the effectiveness of non-lethal scaring methods. The RSPB considers that in sensitive crofting areas, properly funded and managed schemes of co-ordinated scaring can effectively alleviate goose impacts on agriculture and crofting systems, at an affordable cost. The Committee understands that the Scottish Government considers that non-lethal scaring methods are only effective for a short time and the Government has challenged stakeholders to come forward with other approaches that would be effective in the longer term.

The Committee notes that there are varying views on the effectiveness of non-lethal scaring methods and notes the Scottish Government's willingness to listen to stakeholders views on alternative approaches. However, the Committee believes that the Scottish Government, in conjunction with SNH, should take a lead in seeking solutions, in discussion with stakeholders.

Shooting geese

The Committee heard concerns about whether the shooting of barnacle geese on Islay was compliant with the EU directive. Stakeholders such as the RSPB and WWF are concerned that the licenced control of Greenland barnacle geese on Islay may contravene the relevant EU directive on the grounds that non-lethal alternatives exist (scaring and compensation) and are regularly used. Aberdeenshire Council and CNES questioned whether a review of the restrictions on the shooting of quarry species was required.

The Committee also heard there are a number of practical issues in the management of goose populations by shooting, including displacement of the population, mixed flocks (quarry and non-quarry species) and the availability of people with appropriate skills to shoot geese. The Committee is also aware that there may be welfare implications if geese are injured and not killed and the Committee understands that the Scottish Government is working alongside the British Association for Shooting and Conservation to train people to target geese properly.

The Committee would welcome clarification from the Minister on the issue of shooting barnacle geese on Islay and whether this is compliant with the relevant EU directive.

The Committee is aware of the issues in relation to the effectiveness of shooting as a means of control and issues in relation to welfare. The Committee considers that the success of shooting can be dependent on the time of the year this occurs and on the availability of the people who are able and willing to take part in this. The Committee welcomes confirmation that training is being made available, if required, to those shooting geese and welcomes further information on how the take up of that training is being encouraged and supported.

Data gathering, the environment and public health

The Committee understands there are potential environmental and public health issues associated with large geese numbers and their management. In particular, concerns were expressed in relation to the availability and monitoring of data, biological impacts of the pilots, the use of lead shot and the impact of fouling.

Availability and monitoring of data

The Committee heard concerns from stakeholders that there are fundamental gaps in the availability of data. For example, the Committee heard that within existing AMP pilots there has been no collection of baseline biodiversity data or monitoring of agricultural damage so it will not be possible to assess the success of the AMP pilots from either a biological or a financial perspective.

The Committee welcomes confirmation from SNH that prior to the AMP's starting, a habitats regulations assessment considering all species of conservation interest was undertaken for each area. However the Committee is concerned that unless the baseline biodiversity data and monitoring of agricultural damage is also included then it will be difficult to understand the impacts and measure the effectiveness of the AMP's in preventing environmental and agricultural damage. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government considers what can be done to collect this data within the existing pilots and ensure that this is included in any future pilots as it is important that the effectiveness of the pilots and the requirement for shooting can be demonstrated.

Monitoring of hunting bag data

The question of the accuracy of the monitoring of hunting bag data was raised by stakeholders. The Committee understands there are concerns about the collection and reliability of data which is dependent on voluntary reporting mechanisms and does not, for example, include an assessment of the age of the geese that have been shot. Some stakeholders suggested that the gathering of data from hunting bags in Scotland is exceedingly poor compared to other countries and that we have no clear idea how many geese of any species are being shot by people participating in hunting and sporting activities.

The Committee considers that sporting sectors hunting bag data is important in meeting the AMP targets in the pilots and as such needs to be accurate to enable an assessment of the success of the pilots. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government considers how gathering of hunting bag data can be improved and considers making the recording of this data mandatory.

Use of lead shot

The Committee understands there are concerns in relation to deposits from lead shot entering the environment and being ingested by grazing wildfowl, resulting in lead poisoning, and, where geese are shot, potentially entering the food chain through the marketing of wild goose meat. However, the Committee understands that lead shot is currently not being used in wetland areas and non-lead alternatives have been trialled, are available, and have proven to be effective.

The Committee understands the concerns in relation to the potential impacts of lead shot on grazing wildfowl and welcomes confirmation that it is illegal to use lead shot over wetlands. The Committee acknowledges the Government's work in this area and would welcome an update on progress in due course.

Impact of fouling

The Committee heard concerns about the potential impact of fouling on water quality in catchment areas for public water supply and it was also noted there are exceedingly high levels of nitrates in and around the Loch of Strathbeg, which has a large goose population. Similar concerns were raised around the potential adverse impact of fouling on the natural environment such as water courses, and potential impacts on other species and livestock such as sheep who can contract salmonella from geese. The Committee is also aware of concerns that fouling from geese in the affected areas is extensive and is damaging pasture and preventing livestock from grazing, particularly in the crofting areas. The Committee understands there no research into the impact of geese on water quality has been undertaken.

The Committee is concerned that fouling can have a potential adverse effect on the natural environment, on other species, and can impact on available pasture for grazing. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government investigates how the impact of goose fouling on public health and the environment could be effectively assessed and considers what action can be taken to minimise this.

Market Opportunities

Whilst the primary purpose of goose management is the protection of crops and control of goose populations the Committee heard that some forms of goose management could help support crofting incomes and act as an incentive for crofters to apply for licences.

Sale of goose carcasses

The Committee understands that the sporting community and conservation groups previously came to a consensus that for conservation reasons there needed to be a ban on the commercial sale of the species. However, SNH has used its powers to licence the limited sale of wild goose carcasses in the AMP trial areas to avoid

unnecessary waste. The Committee understands that this is on a limited basis, for local sale only, and not a truly commercial operation and any extension of the trial would require EU Commission approval.

The Committee heard that this trial was generally welcomed by stakeholders but some felt it could be developed further. It was suggested by some stakeholders that the scheme should be made less restrictive to enable islanders to sell the carcasses and products off the island and to open up new markets, while others were concerned that if the scheme was made fully commercial before there is evidence that the current restrictions on shooting and sales are effective then the culling of geese may become demand driven rather than driven by the need to protect crops and control goose populations.

The Committee agrees that the primary focus should remain on the control and management of goose populations to ensure the continued successful conservation of the species. However it believes that expansion of the market, while still protecting the species, could help crofting incomes and the broader rural economy and act as an incentive for crofters to apply for the appropriate licences. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government holds discussions with stakeholders on how this could be achieved and provides an update to the Committee in due course.

Sporting activity

The Committee heard that sport shooting makes a contribution to controlling goose populations and has a benefit to the local economy through tourism. Sport shooting takes place during the open season and is primarily held on private estates which hold the sporting rights to geese.

The Committee heard from SNH that in Orkney the AMP pilots are working closely with the sporting sector and that both the AMP efforts and sport shooting is required to meet the overall targets. However, the Committee understands that there can be difficulties around sporting rights and the possible barriers they may create for goose management. Whether a crofter can shoot geese on their croft depends on ownership of the sporting rights. Stakeholders considered that crofters were more easily able to secure an agreement to shoot geese to protect their crops if the estate was owned by the community rather than in private ownership. The Committee heard that licenses are only available to crofters during the close season and therefore most of the damage to their crops has already occurred before crofters are allowed to shoot.

The Committee would welcome further information from the Scottish Government assessing the contribution of sporting and non-sporting activity to the control of goose populations in the AMP pilot areas. The Committee recommends that the Scottish Government take the issues of sporting rights and ownership, and their impact on the control of goose populations, into account via the current land reform and agricultural holdings reviews.