

CROSS-PARTY GROUP on CROFTING

Meeting 6 of Parliamentary Session 4

Scottish Parliament, room Q.1.04

Wednesday 21 March 2012 at 17.30

MINUTES

Present:

Jamie McGrigor MSP (Chair)
Patrick Krause SCF (Sec)
Derek Flyn SCF
Hugh Donaldson HIE
Jean Balfour SL&E
Phil Burns SG
Billy McKenzie SG
Maria Schulten SCF
Pam Rodway Crofting Connections
Barbara Stutz visitor
David Smith Office of Jean Urquhart MSP
Murdo MacLennan Crofters Commission
Katrina Marsden SPICe
Kim Karam Office of Tavish Scott MSP
Jo Durno NFUS
Lucy Sumsion NFUS
Douglas Pattullo Office of Jamie McGrigor MSP
Jean Urquhart MSP
Claire Baker MSP
Andrew Midgley SL&E

1. Welcome and Apologies.

Jamie McGrigor welcomed everyone. Apologies received from:

Norman Leask SCF; Russell Smith SCF; Paddy Zakaria SCF; Jim Lugton SCF; Gwyn Jones EFNCP; Dave Thompson MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP; Nigel Miller NFUS; Sarah Anderson NFUS; Elaine Murray MSP; Tavish Scott MSP; Murdo MacKay CnES; Rob Gibson MSP; Isobel McCallum Highland Council; Alasdair Allen MSP; Richard Frew SG; Amy Corrigan RSPB

2. Minutes of the previous meeting

Minutes of 08 February agreed subject to amendment to paragraph 12 page 3 starting 'Highlands and Islands Enterprise'.

3. Matters arising

Bracken control: Asulam can be used this year up to December. The Bracken Control Group (BCG) have a website that has useful information. There is no crofting representative on the BCG. A 120 day derogation has been applied for.

A sub-group met with Billy McKenzie, head of SRDP development team, to discuss the SCF proposal for a crofting support scheme to replace CCAGS and / or a Highland and Islands regional programme. It will meet again following the SRDP working groups and consultation, around August.

A letter was sent to the Minister for Environment regarding crofting commission elections and a reply received and circulated.

A letter was sent to the Minister for transport regarding the loss of RET and a reply was received and circulated.

4. Food and schools

Pam Rodway (Project Coordinator for the Soil Association Scotland and SCF Crofting Connections project) gave a presentation on the work the project is involved in with schools. This has been circulated.

It was noted that funding for initiatives to promote education about food in schools had been announced by the Cabinet Secretary but there was none allocated to Crofting Connections.

Action: The CPG to send a letter to the Cabinet Secretary urging support to the crofting connections project.

Discussion:

A recent survey showed that 60% of young people in crofting communities want to stay in the crofting communities.

The Orkney visit was very useful. It is clear that amalgamation of crofts equates to clearance. The value of crofting is in community, part of the socio-economic fabric. Crofting is not promoted by Orkney Council – food production is portrayed only in economic terms, not in population or community benefit. It is very difficult to justify crofting to young people in economic terms.

Renewables offer an economic return but should not replace agriculture. They should complement each other in an integrated system of land management.

There is a need for off-croft employment too. Young people should be encouraged to train in artisan trades which are useful in crofting and the crofting communities. Small businesses and self-employment tend to be more appropriate to crofting areas.

Scottish Government funding for food education has to be national so funding Crofting Connections can be difficult as it is a regional project. Also match funding from industry is difficult for crofting.

5. CAP - SRDP

Billy McKenzie, Head of SG SRDP development team, gave an update on progress of the SRDP consultative initiative.

Eight working-groups have been set up to cover aspects of SRDP such as Areas of Natural Constraint, Rural Economies, Leader, Agri-Environment and so on, with a mix of SG officials and representative organisations. The crofters / crofting commission isn't represented on the working groups but crofting is represented by the SCF. There will be another meeting with the CPG sub-group after the working groups have finished.

The aim is to have a draft for the next SRDP by the end of 2012 and a consultation in February 2013. Meeting the deadline of end of 2013 for the new programme is the intention but whether the new programme will come into effect in 2014 is uncertain. The UK and Scottish governments have put in proposals for transition and bridging to ensure the SRDP continues even if CAP 2014 isn't implemented in time.

There are concerns about the complexity of the present SRDP. The Committee for Rural Affairs will meet to discuss this and will put out a consultation. The SG is aiming to reduce complexity; the ambition is to not have to use advisors for the simpler, lower cost applications. It wants a 'customer focused approach'.

The SG has tabled some amendments to the EC proposals.

6. Update on implementation of the Crofting Reform Act 2010

Phil Burns. Implementation team, SG Land Tenure Branch gave an update on implementation of the 2010 Act.

The minister appreciated concerns over the way the commissioner elections were organised and has responded to queries. He may appoint the convenor of the commission or may delegate this to the commission.

The minister will go to Inverness on 2nd April to meet the new commission.

6. AOB

Consolidation of the Crofting 2010 Act - (to include the Smallholders Act) was raised again (it is a standing item on this agenda). This needs to take place after implementation of the Act. It must not be allowed to slip as it is crucial. It was agreed by both Mike Russell and Roseanna Cunningham when they were in the ministerial role for crofting that consolidation would be considered.

Protection of seeds – Maria Scholten (SCF Farmers Seeds project manager) gave a presentation on the importance of protecting the sovereignty of seeds, especially of native species.

In Scotland local varieties have survived such as Bere, Small and Shetland oat, Shetland cabbage and several heritage potatoes. Hebrides and Shetland are some of the few places in Europe where indigenous varieties of this rare oat are still grown.

Survival of local varieties depends on local seed production because the seed is not on the market. Conditions of local seed production and dissemination are informal.

Current EU seed legislation restricts marketing of seeds to officially registered varieties on the condition that these pass tests of Distinctness, Uniformity and Stability. Local varieties usually do not meet these requirements and their seed dissemination falls outside the existing regulations.

Some governments in Europe, however, have taken steps to create derogations on EU seed regulation in order to protect local varieties. In Austria the Ministry of Agriculture has welcomed the activities of farmer seed-savers' groups, and allows the sale of small quantities of non-commercial seeds not included in the European Common Catalogue. Swiss seed law has also created legal space for local varieties.

Scottish Government has an excellent ex situ conservation plan in place through the Scottish Landrace Protection Scheme at SASA, In contrast, the conservation carried out by growers on location or 'on farm', 'in situ conservation' is not covered by a SG policy or program on plant genetic resources. It should be noted the EU Directive 2008/62 on

conservation varieties has seen very little uptake by local variety growers and fails its objective of protecting threatened plant genetic resources.

International treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and especially the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for food and agriculture (ITPGRFA) aim at conservation of plant genetic resources such as local varieties. In particular ITPGRFA commits all national governments (in the UK: the devolved authorities) in Article 6 to promote the sustainable use of plant genetic resources; to support and promote local varieties and supporting research; and to adapt regulations. Article 9 is relevant as well: to protect traditional knowledge; to confer the right to farmers to share in decision making as regards plant genetic resources and to remove any limits to farm-saved seed.

We would like to see SG follow the enlightened seed policy of other countries such as Austria and SG is requested to create derogation in Scottish implementation policy on seed legislation for local seed production and small-scale distribution of local varieties.

There are four reasons for this:

1. because of Scotland's commitment to implement international treaties such as ITPGRFA;
2. because of the importance for the future 'on farm' conservation of these resources on the islands;
3. because of the agricultural biodiversity value of these ancient crops;
4. because they form intrinsic component of HNV farming systems and wildlife conservation.

Furthermore, SG is requested to include local varieties and their seed production and seed exchange in the next phase of the SRDP.

Action: The CPG to write to the Cabinet Secretary urging that Scottish seeds be protected.

7. DONM

02 May, evening