

PE2151/B: Grant protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders

Scottish Government written submission, 22 May 2025

I refer to your email of 25 March 2025 regarding Petition PE2151 – Grant Protected Status To Primitive Goat Species In The Scottish Borders, lodged by Kenneth Erik Moffatt, seeking the Scottish Government's views on the action called for in the petition, namely calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to grant full legal protected status to primitive goat species in the Scottish Borders. I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Scottish Government currently has no plans to provide full legal protected status for primitive goats, or feral goats as they are more commonly known. In terms of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, feral goats are considered to be outwith their native range in Scotland, which means it is an offence to release goats into the wild without a licence from NatureScot. Whilst feral goats can bring benefits, they are an invasive non-native species that can cause damage to the natural environment and forestry interests.

The Scottish Government fully understands that feral goats are of local cultural and historical significance, not just in the Scottish Borders, but across Scotland providing opportunities for wildlife watching and wildlife tourism. For example, seeing feral goats is valued as a wildlife experience for many visitors to Cairnsmore of Fleet and Rum National Nature Reserves.

Feral goats can also have positive benefits for biodiversity by preventing open habitats from scrubbing over and providing food for eagles and carrion feeders. Goats have been used to control scrub on a number of nature reserves in Great Britain, including Tentsmuir in Fife.

However, feral goat populations may need to be managed as part of a sustainable grazing management plan. Sometimes feral goat numbers need to be reduced to prevent damage to sensitive habitats or forestry interests, in much the same way deer are required to be managed.

The main impacts are from feral goats browsing native vegetation, particularly trees and shrubs. Goats are able to reach cliff ledges that are inaccessible to other large herbivores.

In Scotland, browsing and trampling by feral goats has been recorded as a negative pressure on 29 protected nature conservation sites, although, in most instances, goats contribute to the overall pressure, along with other large herbivores. The habitats most affected by goats are woodlands, montane scrub, juniper and tall herb ledges and the level of impact from goats varies according to their population density.

Browsing and bark-stripping by feral goats can also have a negative impact on forestry. Impacts on agriculture are low because goat populations tend to be found in areas that support only rough grazing.

In regard to the specific circumstances at Langholm, it is for the landowners Oxygen Conservation Limited to consider how any reduction in the feral goat population should be achieved in practice. We understand that the landowner is not calling for eradication of the feral goats but that all future herbivore management will be informed by monitoring the species, including undertaking goat population surveys and regular Herbivore Impact Assessments.

I hope this sets out the Scottish Government's position on this issue.

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