OFFICIAL REPORT
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Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 9 November 2022

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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RURAL AFFAIRS, ISLANDS AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
29th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
*Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
*Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Rae McKenzie (NatureScot)
Morag Milne (NatureScot)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 9 November 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:05]

Petition

Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)

The Deputy Convener (Beatrice Wishart): Good morning, and welcome to the 29th meeting in 2022 of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee. I remind committee members who are using electronic devices to switch them to silent.

Our first item of business is an evidence session on petition PE1490, on the control of wild goose numbers, which was lodged by Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation. From NatureScot, I am pleased to welcome to the meeting Rae McKenzie, who is the policy and operations manager, and Morag Milne, who is the wildlife policy officer.

Before we begin with questions from Finlay Carson, will you provide an update on where we are with the five-year review of goose management in Scotland? Would Rae or Morag set the scene regarding that?

Rae McKenzie (NatureScot): I can do that. At the moment, we are in the middle of the five-year review. We started off doing a consultation with stakeholders, and the consultation period finished just under two weeks ago. We had 257 responses to the consultation across most of the goose areas and most of the goose stakeholders. It was an anonymous questionnaire. We are currently working through the information that we have got back and considering what the key areas and themes are in what stakeholders are looking for in future goose policy.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for that. Can you give an indication of when it might be completed?

Rae McKenzie: The aim is to produce a report for the minister by the spring of 2023. Once we have got the themes sorted out from what we have got back—we have a lot of data to work through—we will go back to the local goose management groups and ensure that we have the bulk of what they are saying to us correct. We will then write a draft report and pull it all together into a final report for the minister early in the new year.

The Deputy Convener: That is helpful. Thank you for that. We will go to Finlay Carson for his questions.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Thank you, deputy convener, and thanks to the witnesses for joining us. Back in April, you responded to the session that the committee had with the petitioner. You noted that, over the past two years, the shooting effort has probably been reduced because of Covid and that that might make it difficult to assess the impact on reducing goose numbers. We have also had the awful outbreak of avian flu. Will you make predictions on how future goose numbers might be affected by the impact of Covid on shooting effort but also by avian flu?

The Deputy Convener: Who wants to take the question?

Rae McKenzie: I will take the avian flu question and pass the Covid question to Morag Milne, because we each work in slightly different areas.

Avian influenza has obviously hit the Svalbard barnacle goose population in the Solway hard. It was estimated that, from early November last year to March this year, 13,200 geese had died from a population of just under 40,000, so around a third of that population was lost.

With regard to other goose populations, it was estimated that around 2,700 birds from the Greenland goose population, which is distributed around the west coast, on Islay and into Ireland, had been lost to avian flu—1,700 in Ireland, and around 1,000 on Islay. Among greylag geese, around 60 or 70 cases of avian flu were reported, but there were no real concentrations of die-off, and there was much the same picture among pink-footed geese, although there was a small concentration of die-off in Findhorn in the spring, just before they left to migrate north.

We are working without a lot of information about how wild populations might be affected. The situation is absolutely unprecedented. Bird flu has circulated for quite a long time, but the scale of the impacts on geese and seabirds this summer was pretty significant in some places.

We have set up a loose framework of people who are out and about doing various things anyway, such as our nature reserve staff, RSPB wardens and, in some places, bird observers, to ensure that we get an early warning of what is going on when birds come back and to do some testing and monitoring. However, because different populations have been affected in different ways, it is difficult to predict what might happen. We do not know why the Solway barnacle goose population was affected badly yet the Greenland barnacle goose population, which is made up of essentially the same geese, was not

affected as badly, or why the greylag and pink-footed geese in the Solway were not affected in anywhere near the same numbers as the barnacle geese there.

It is pretty difficult to predict what is going to happen. As birds come back from migration and we pull in count data, we will have a better idea of what birds have made it to the breeding grounds and come back, and we will be able to look at things over the next weeks in terms of productivity and numbers coming back. That is where we are.

On management, we are working with a task force of various agencies and people with a lot of expertise, and we are trying to pull together a Scottish plan to better understand and manage the outbreak among wild birds.

Morag Milne can answer the Covid question, as she knows more about those figures.

Morag Milne (NatureScot): Covid is likely to have had a big impact on the number of birds taken through sport shooting. I cannot tell you exactly how great an impact, because we do not have bag numbers coming in from sport shooting, but I can tell you that greylag geese numbers have recovered since 2017 at the four adaptive management sites where we regularly count them in Orkney and the Western Isles. That is likely to have been partly due to the reduced amount of shooting that took place because of the restrictions that were in place during the pandemic.

The Deputy Convener: Does that answer your question, Finlay?

Finlay Carson: Yes, that is a comprehensive answer.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is interesting to hear what has just been said about greylag goose numbers. As I live on the Isle of Lewis, I will declare a sort of interest. Although I am not a crofter, I am, where I live, surrounded by greylag geese and by comment on them.

So that the committee can get a better picture of greylag goose numbers, can you say a bit more about what has changed in relation to their migration patterns and their numbers, and can you also talk about the impact that that has had on agriculture, particularly the sort of agriculture that supports habitats for a wider range of species?

The Deputy Convener: Who wants to start with that? Morag Milne does—I am sorry, I am finding it difficult to work out which of you is doing what.

09:15

Morag Milne: Numbers in the resident population of greylags have increased substantially over the past 20 or 25 years, particularly at certain sites. The reasons for that include a change to the patterns of migration. More migratory Icelandic greylag geese have spent their winter on Orkney than in previous years. Over the past 20 years or so, we have had an increase in the numbers of greylag geese throughout Scotland, and in some places in particular.

Rae McKenzie: We do not have systematic counts of resident greylags across the country, and it seems that resident greylags are causing most of the issues. The Icelandic greylags come in to Orkney and the very north of Scotland, but, on the islands, it is very much about the resident greylags. Their productivity is high. On the islands, they do not have too many natural predators and something connected to climate change has probably allowed them to breed incredibly well.

In the places where we carry out management, we have a good idea of the overall numbers, because we carry out counts there. However, in the rest of Scotland, we do not, and they are increasing just about everywhere.

Alasdair Allan: I am keen to have your comments on the impact not just on agriculture but on the wider environment. My understanding, from looking around me, is that greylag geese are pulling up—despoiling, if you like—areas of agricultural land. They pull up the grass, but they are also making areas ungrazeable—if that is a word—for a long time after they have collectively decided to visit. If, for the agricultural and environmental reasons that we have talked about, the primary method of controlling them is through shooting, how do we address the fact that, in communities where agriculture is part time, we are going to need significant numbers of shooters to deal with the problem?

Morag Milne: There is no dispute that geese cause serious agricultural damage. In particular, as Rae McKenzie has said, greylags are a problem. Certainly, the main method for controlling resident greylag geese has been through shooting. Some egg oiling takes place, but shooting is the main method.

On the Western Isles, where we have supported three demonstration projects to see whether it is possible to control resident greylag birds to reduce agricultural damage while maintaining their conservation interest, traditional methods of shooting and egg oiling have been successful in reducing their numbers to about half, over the short period of a five-year demonstration project.

That was not possible on Orkney. The numbers of resident greylag birds there are much higher, so, to reduce their numbers, a greater number needed to be taken, and there was a shorter period in which to work. To focus attention on

taking resident birds, the reduction cull was carried out during the summer and early autumn months, when the Icelandic birds were not present. Although Orkney farmers worked hard to reduce the number of resident greylag birds using traditional methods, they could not do so. They managed—almost—to contain the numbers to between 20,000 and 25,000 birds, but they were not able to reduce them.

Therefore, for the past two to three years, we have worked with Orkney farmers to find out whether we can use corralling as an additional control method. That has worked well, so the Orkney local goose management group has put forward a plan to achieve a reduction cull using a combination of traditional methods—shooting and egg oiling—as well as corralling.

The Deputy Convener: Could you explain what "corralling" means?

Morag Milne: It is a method of dealing with moult birds, which gather together on lochs in July/August time when they are in moult and do not fly. Using kayaks, the birds are gently shepherded off the water and on to land. Using sheep pens, they are shepherded into a funnel and then dispatched on land.

The Deputy Convener: That was a helpful explanation.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Good morning, and thank you for being with us. You might have already answered my question, but I will come at the issue from a slightly different angle and see what comes out of that.

In a response to the committee, the Scottish Crofting Federation wrote about the damage that wild geese can cause to high nature value land and the world-renowned biodiversity on crofts and farms in crofting areas. Therefore, I would appreciate your professional opinion on how much of the land on crofting areas is of high nature value and world renowned for biodiversity, given that, in the biodiversity intactness index, Scotland is, sadly, 28th from the bottom out of more than 200 countries.

That is the first part of my question. The second part of it is the bit that you might have already answered. I would also appreciate your opinion on whether further reductions in wild geese populations are the best way to protect and enhance biodiversity in such areas. Is it the case that alternative measures might be more effective or should be taken alongside goose management programmes?

Morag Milne: We appreciate that crofting is a very important method of delivering not just agriculture and agricultural produce but biodiversity. Healthy crofting systems will support biodiversity. I do not have with me figures on the amount of crofting land and the amount of diversity that it supports. It is simply the case that crofting land is very important in supporting biodiversity. The control of geese is important in helping to keep those crofting systems going, but the goose issue is only one of the many challenges that crofting faces.

Rae McKenzie: I agree that crofting supports a range of biodiversity, which might be different on different islands and in different locations, and that it is very much the case that geese are only one issue. If we can contribute towards dealing with the goose issue, that will, I hope, make a good contribution to dealing with the wider issues that crofting faces and the support that it needs.

On the point about national and international importance and biodiversity, we can provide you with information on designated sites. We can give you information on areas of machair or sites that are designated for breeding bird populations and so on that are important in the crofting areas.

The Deputy Convener: That would be helpful. Before we move to questions from Jenni Minto, Finlay Carson has a supplementary question.

Finlay Carson: Thank you, convener. It has been so long since I joined a meeting remotely that I have forgotten how to intervene.

I want to go back to the question about corralling. We understand that, between 2001 and 2021, the estimated population of greylag geese on Orkney increased from 1,500 to 26,500. That is a massive increase. My understanding is that corralling involves putting geese into sheep pens and injecting them to put them down humanely. What is the cost per goose of doing that? The geese are then not fit to go into the food chain, and the carcases have to be disposed of. Roughly, what is the cost per bird for corralling and dispatching the geese, just in Orkney, for example?

The Deputy Convener: Rae, do you want to start off on that?

Rae McKenzie: That would be more a question for Morag Milne, as she dealt with the corralling trial.

The Deputy Convener: Okay. I will go to Morag.

Morag Milne: Corralling is expensive compared with traditional methods. I do not have the exact figure, but the cost is in the order of £30 per goose.

Overall, in the period for which we have supported greylag control, which is since 2012, the cost per goose taken has been between £10 and

£20. The figure varies for each of the four sites. That takes into account all the money that has been spent on supporting goose control, so it includes the cost of monitoring and developing the corralling method as well as support for shooting, egg oiling and corralling. Corralling is more expensive than the other methods, but it has been found to be needed on Orkney.

Finlay Carson: On that basis, if we are looking at an increase of nearly 25,000 birds in Orkney, the £50,000 that has been provided to control greylag geese will not go very far. It could be more than spent on Orkney alone, without considering any of the islands on the west coast. That puts the figure of £50,000 into perspective—it is a drop in the ocean of what might be required to control geese numbers.

Morag Milne: Yes. I will give you the amount of money that has been spent over the period for which we have been supporting greylag control, which is since 2012. The demonstration pilots ran from 2012 until 2017. Those were set up as short-term demonstration projects, and we had hoped that, after that, local goose groups would be able to control geese themselves, but that has not been the case, and funding has continued. In total, to date, NatureScot and the Scottish Government have spent £520,000 at the four demonstration sites. By the spring of 2023, we will have spent the remaining £25,000 of the Government support that you talked about, which will bring the total to £575,000.

09:30

I will give you a breakdown of how much will be spent at each of the four sites. By 2023, the total spent on Uist will be £209,565 and on Orkney it will be £204,527. The totals spent on Tiree and Lewis, where the numbers of geese are smaller, will be £61,312 and £99,926. That is a bit more than the £50,000 that the minister offered last February.

You asked me about the cost of the corralling; we have been developing that method, so it has been more expensive. Obviously, when you are doing something new, you take extra precautions. We brought up contractors from England who had experience of using corralling as a method for controlling Canada geese in parks. That was part of their work. We also brought up somebody to give advice on and help with the moult survey and do some of that work. We hope that, with the experience that we have gained, local people will be able to take on that work and will have developed the necessary skills, so that, in the future, we can make economies in that way.

You also mentioned lethal injection. We have used that method, and we had vets present to comment on the animal welfare aspects of the work and to ensure that it was done with animal welfare in mind. We also found that manual dispatch is efficient at the corralling. There are choices and, probably, economies to be made in relation to that particular method.

The Deputy Convener: We have a supplementary question from Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I would like a little more detail on the letter that Patrick Krause sent. I am not sure whether you have seen it, Morag. In the final paragraph, he says:

> "Financial support has to be more equitable, for example, the Islay Goose Management Scheme has a budget of around £1m per year",

but, in my head, that does not really equate with the figures that you have given. Will you explain what that budget covers? You just talked about people with expertise in corralling coming up from England and about other methods possibly needing more expertise. In comparison, Patrick Krause says that

> "Uist receives zero amount directly from NatureScot."

How is that funding broken down, and could it be made equitable?

Morag Milne: The work that I am describing is about control for resident greylag geese. We have on-going long-term schemes for more highly protected geese. Under annex 1 of the birds directive, more restrictions apply to what farmers and crofters can do to protect their crops. So, since 2000, we have supported a range of schemes to help farmers to host those birds and to pay for compensation for the impacts of the birds.

At the moment, the annual budget for those six schemes is £1.3 million, so it is completely different in terms of scale. That is because we have had a direction from the national goose policy to focus our resources on species with the greatest conservation need. We have a long-term series of schemes to support the management of annex 1 species. The resident greylag work that we did involved relatively small-scale demonstration projects that were intended to be short term. There are differences in the scale, the species and the provisions that we make through the different schemes.

Rachael Hamilton: My colleague Ariane Burgess asked a question about high nature value land and biodiversity. Morag, you have just mentioned looking at the funding depending on what needs to be protected in terms of that value. You did not describe it as such, but Patrick Krause describes it in that way. I wonder how NatureScot came up with the criteria. Are they based on the number of geese that are predicted in the count;

on the loss of value of the crop, because you also said that you pay compensation; or on the loss of biodiversity value? You said in your previous answer that they are not based on high nature value. Is there some contradiction there?

Morag Milne: The bases for payments are completely different for the two types of support that we give. The basis for payments for the annex 1 species fit with state aid. The money that is given is payment for additional costs incurred and profit forgone. It fits the state aid rules, and money is paid to the farmers—the individuals who are hosting the geese—to support the population of geese and the farming that they impact.

The payments for the adaptive management pilots—the demonstration pilots—are not made to individual farmers. They are for particular activity. They are to support the control of a population and to reduce its size. The four sites that were selected for those demonstration pilots are sites where there were particularly high concentrations or densities of resident greylag geese. They are sites where the local goose management group applied to join the demonstration projects. A couple of local groups that were eligible chose not to come into the demonstration projects.

In those pilots, the money does not go to the individual farmers. It is given for the activity of shooting. It is organised slightly differently in each of the four demonstration pilots, but, in essence, the money pays for the co-ordination of work, which involves linking farmers who want control to happen with shooters who are willing to shoot. On most of the sites, they are volunteer shooters. On Uist, it is mostly done through paid marksmen. The costs of co-ordination and ammunition are the main costs. The money is provided to meet the costs of delivering that particular activity. It is not paid to individual farmers.

I might have missed something there, so Rae McKenzie might wish to add something.

The Deputy Convener: Does Rae McKenzie want to come in?

Rae McKenzie: Sorry—I was just waiting for my microphone to come back on. I will add a couple of things. Morag is describing how we manage greylags as opposed to how we manage protected species such as barnacle geese and greater white-fronted geese.

The £1.3 million budget does not all go to Islay. There are six schemes, which are in Islay, Solway, Tiree and Coll, Kintyre, South Walls and Uist. We have schemes in three crofting areas in which we manage barnacle geese in the same way as we manage them on Islay. Those are focused on the areas where barnacle geese are causing serious agricultural damage and farmers are very limited in what they can do to scare off and manage the geese.

There is quite a big difference between the species. Greylags can be shot all year round. They are quarry species in the winter and they are on a general licence for the rest of the year, so farmers can shoot them to prevent damage. However, with protected species, it is much more difficult for them to do that, hence the difference in the two approaches.

It is not only Islay that gets the larger payments for managing barnacle geese. On Coll, Uist and South Walls, all crofting areas and areas that are managed intensely tend to attract barnacle geese, so payments are made to farmers there on a similar basis to those on Islay.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank Rae McKenzie and Morag Milne for joining us. Like Alasdair Allan, I have a constituency that is impacted by geese, as Islay and Tiree are part of it. Rae and I often meet on Kilchoman beach while walking our dogs. I can attest to the number of seabirds that were, sadly, washed up on Islay's shores as a result of bird flu.

Morag Milne, in your answers to my colleague Rachael Hamilton, you have gone into some of the issues that I was hoping to ask about. As both witnesses have mentioned, not every situation is the same in the four pilot areas. What are the major differences between them? What have you and the communities learned from the work that is being done?

Morag Milne: There is a big difference between Orkney and the Western Isles. On the former, the resident greylag population is—I will round up the figures—about 25,000 birds, which is joined by a migratory greylag population of about 47,000 birds. During the demonstration projects, we have supported control of the resident greylag population at a time when migratory birds were not present, which is mostly during summer and early autumn. Therefore, every bird that was shot was a resident bird. That is important, because resident birds are the ones that are causing particular difficulties by stripping barley crops, flattening them and making them difficult to harvest.

Even though they worked hard, it was not possible for Orkney farmers to reduce the size of the resident population, because they have a much bigger population to deal with. In comparison, those in the Western Isles have a longer period over which they can control birds. In addition, the resident birds are not joined by large numbers of Icelandic birds. They were able to control the birds and choose the time when they did that. However, they still had particular problems with the resident greylags eating barley and the traditional crops of crofts.

09:45

The numbers are much smaller—there are fewer than 10,000 birds at each of those sites. I will again round up the numbers. The latest counts tell us that there were about 3,000 birds on Tiree and Coll, 4,000 birds on Lewis and Harris, and 7,000 to 8,000 birds on Uist. That compares to 24,000 birds on Orkney.

At each of the sites in the Western Isles, during the five-year pilots, the local goose management groups were able to reduce the populations by about half. However, since the Covid pandemic, their numbers have recovered.

Jenni Minto: Have you learned from the trials anything about how best to manage the geese? You have mentioned egg oiling and shooting. I was also interested in your comment that some goose management groups decided not to be involved in the pilots. Why was that?

Morag Milne: The main thing that we learned is that local groups can control resident birds if they take action soon enough. When matters are left until numbers of birds reach the magnitude of the numbers that are resident in Orkney, the farmers have great difficulty in controlling the birds. There is a need to act early.

Recently, I have been approached by other groups in Caithness and Speyside that have had issues with greylags. We encourage them to control the birds early; if they have particular problems and are considering controlling the birds, they need to do so early. If action is taken early, traditional methods can be successful. However, it takes continued effort. If you relax and let up, numbers will recover.

We have learned that numbers can be controlled without jeopardising the resident population and that local groups can do that. We have also learned that those groups can take the carcases and sell them without jeopardising the population. Before we licensed that activity, that was a concern.

Those are our main lessons.

Jenni Minto: Rae, do you have anything to add to Morag Milne's points?

Rae McKenzie: I can add some detail on the Islay situation, in particular. Back in 2012, the Islay group put in a bid to join the pilot scheme. The group decided that, given the amount of money that was offered and the various constraints that would have been placed on it around numbers and on how things would be done, it would be better off doing greylag management by itself.

At that point, there was a growing issue because of the increasing amount of barley that was being grown; demand from distilleries meant that quite a lot of Islay farmers were increasing the areas of land on which to grow barley. The Islay group decided to go it alone, with the support of the distilleries, to try to manage the greylag population. It was relatively successful in shooting quite a lot of geese. However, given the significant amount of barley on Islay in the autumn, one of the things that we are seeing now is that, although farmers are shooting a lot of greylags, their numbers are still continuing to rise during that time.

The numbers are very low by spring; we count the greylags all winter when we do the barnacle geese counts, and we find that, over the winter, the numbers decline from the 3,000 or 4,000 that we have in the autumn to 600 birds in the spring. What that tells us is that management of greylag geese on Islay is creating a sink for birds to come in from Northern Ireland, mainland Argyll, Mull and other islands. In other words, the all-round increase in greylag is causing an additional problem for the Islay farmers. They certainly put in a lot of effort to manage the geese, but, if other people in different places see no need for such management and do not do it, that can have an impact.

The fact is that, although we are dealing with resident greylag birds, they move about the country at key times for feeding opportunities. As I have said, the Islay farmers have been proactive and have done a really good job, but they have had industry support in that respect.

Jenni Minto: I have one final question that I will also direct to you, Rae. Can you explain, for the record, the difference between annex 1 and annex 2 geese?

Rae McKenzie: That relates to European birds directive listings. Annex 1 birds are highly protected and can be managed and shot only under licence, and those licences are issued only for specific reasons, which include public health, air safety and, in our case, the prevention of serious agricultural damage. An application for a licence has to go through quite a rigorous assessment before a licence can be issued.

As for annex 2 species, they are quarry species, and there is a season, generally in the winter, for shooting them. We can issue licences at other times of the year, as we were doing for greylag and, in some places, for barnacle geese, but, for the past three years, those birds have been on a general licence, which means that we do not have to ask farmers and crofters to apply: they can shoot the birds in order to prevent serious agricultural damage. It is one of the tools that we are trying to put in place to help with the management side of things and to make life a bit easier for people who are suffering damage and need to manage the geese.

Jenni Minto: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: Alasdair Allan has a supplementary question.

Alasdair Allan: I think—if I have picked her up rightly—that Morag Milne alluded to the licensing of meat from greylag geese. I realise that, in the short term, we are never going to sell all the meat that results from shooting the geese. Nonetheless, I can confirm that goose burgers are very nice. Has part of the problem been that licensing of the meat for sale has happened on a short-term or sporadic basis that has not encouraged businesses to exploit and make something of that market?

Morag Milne: I think that that has been an issue. We would certainly love every carcase that is taken to be sold, eaten and used, and we have tried our best to make it possible for people to sell and to give assurance that such sales can continue. While the United Kingdom was part of the European Union, we sought European Commission approval for our proposals, which was given on the basis that the take was controlled and was part of an adaptive management project to ensure that the number of birds and the number that were taken were known. There were regular counts, and the bag that was taken as part of the adaptive management bag was adjusted each year in the light of the count data and the project's impacts on the local population.

Since Brexit, we have put sales on our general licence 15: we allow sales through that. However, through the pilot process, we have regularly asked for the European Commission's approval for what we were doing. There has been some uncertainty from time to time about whether that would continue, and I appreciate that that has possibly had an impact on whether people were able to invest in sales.

The Deputy Convener: Jim Fairlie has questions about distribution.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Aye—but if it is okay I will go back to Rae McKenzie first, on a practical thought process that went through my head while she was answering Jenni Minto's questions. I presume that annex 1 and annex 2 birds do not fly separately and that they are in the same flocks. How do the shooters ensure that they shoot annex 2 birds only? Do they do that by rifle or by shotgun?

Rae McKenzie: The birds do not all tend to fly in the same flock or to graze mixed up in fields. They can do, but it does not happen very often. Different species tend to be in different parts of fields, and they have different preferences for what they look for in fields. Barnacle geese like short, green, improved grass—they will graze on that—whereas greylag geese and white-fronted geese, for example, might at times graze in longer and more tussocky grass. Therefore, the geese are not often mixed up.

The shooting is done when the birds are on the ground. It is not like wildfowling, in which people shoot as birds come off the roost. In general, although species can be in the same places and can mix, people can see what they are shooting at on the ground. Anybody who shoots a goose for any reason should be able to see what they are shooting at.

People use shotguns and rifles. Obviously, the choice of type of gun is down to the judgment of the marksman or the shooter at the time and whether they are able to take a shot that will target only the species that they are after. On Islay, where barnacle geese are shot under licence, there are restrictions on shooting if there are other species in the flock. Anybody who fires a gun needs to know what they are shooting at, and any skilled marksman will know what they are shooting at. They will be pretty sure of hitting only what they are after.

Jim Fairlie: Okay. Thanks for that clarity. That shows my lack of knowledge of geese, despite the fact that I have been bird watching all my life.

Why is the problem predominantly on an island off the west coast? I live under the Loch Leven flight path, in which vast numbers of geese head to grazing grounds, but I have no constituency issues relating to that; people do not contact me to say that we need to get rid of greylag geese. Malt and barley are grown in Perthshire, by the way. Why are there not the same problems on the mainland that seem to exist on the west coast and the islands?

Rae McKenzie: I think that you will mostly see pink-footed geese around Loch Leven. They are massively the biggest goose population that comes in. Other geese come into Britain in tens of thousands; about half a million pink-footed geese come in. Quite a lot of them remain in Scotland over the winter. They tend to feed on stubble. They come in after the barley has been harvested and for things such as sugar beet in the south-east of England. They tend to feed on spent fields and do not appear to cause the damage that geese that winter on grass and the geese that go into the barley cause.

10:00

That is not to say that there are not increasing numbers of greylags in various places. As Morag Milne mentioned, people in Strathspey and Caithness are starting to say that they are having problems. Pink-footed geese are a quarry species, and there is a lot of interest in shooting them, so

farmers bring in shooting parties over the winter. For the majority of the time when pink-footed geese are here, they can be managed, scared off or shot. It is a behavioural thing.

In relation to why there is a concentration on the west coast, barnacle geese are there because of the proximity of salt marsh roosting to feeding areas. Up and down the west coast, there are some big areas and even some small areas of salt marsh close to improved fields, which is what the geese look for. If you go anywhere along the migration routes for barnacle geese in Iceland and Svalbard geese in north-west Europe, you will see something very similar to what the geese look for in Scotland. The issue is to do with feeding habitats in proximity to appropriate roosting areas, and the west coast has quite a lot of those; the east coast is a bit different.

Jim Fairlie: Thank you very much. That shows that I did not recognise greylags, either.

The Deputy Convener: I have a question relating to where geese populations are found. I hear from constituents in Shetland that the issue is becoming increasingly damaging. I have been told that geese are eating a huge portion of grass that is needed for pregnant or nursing ewes and that that is an increasing expense for crofters and farmers. We have not touched on Shetland at all. What do you know about geese numbers in Shetland?

Morag Milne: When we were looking to start the greylag demonstration pilots, we identified a number of places that had a particularly high density of geese in relation to the amount of improved farmland, and Shetland was one of the places with the highest numbers. Although our last national census was in 2008, so the numbers will be a bit out of date now, I expect that Shetland will still have a high density of resident greylag geese. There have been some surveys and local counts, and I know that there have been issues with resident greylag geese in Shetland. Shetland was offered the chance to join the demonstration pilot, but it chose not to do so. There will have been local reasons for that, but I am not aware of any specific reason; Shetland simply decided not to take part. However, there are certainly issues on Shetland.

There are other places in Scotland with high densities of greylag geese. We have had the demonstration project at four sites and people with that experience are asking for continued Government support to control greylag geese, but other places across Scotland will be looking for similar support.

The Deputy Convener: That follows on from what you said about taking action to control numbers early doors, rather than letting the issue build up and become a problem.

Finlay Carson: We have heard from the Scottish Crofters Federation that the impact of any reduction in funding

"would not only be in terms of degradation of the unique environment created and maintained by machair cropping, but also on the economic and mental wellbeing of individual crofters."

We must not forget the impact on the wellbeing of the people who farm in those areas. Do you have any confidence that the report will be published and that a way forward will be put in place in time to fund the spring 2023 culls? Back in April, we heard that the culls were fast approaching, and we are now into November. Will the report allow us to look at the pilots and put in place a workable scheme that will address crofters' concerns?

Morag Milne: The pilot sites on Lewis, Harris, Coll, Tiree and Uist have all been offered funding by the minister, so they will be funded for spring 2023. Other sites do not have funding. If they are looking for support, they will be looking for the outcome of the national policy review. To date, NatureScot's role has been to try to enable farmers and crofters to control resident greylag geese by providing advice on licences and demonstration projects. To meet the extra demand that might be out there would be a significant departure from current national goose policy, which directs us to focus our resources on species of greatest conservation need.

We need to wait for the outcome of the policy review. Certainly, early feedback from the people who have been responding to questionnaires indicates that there is a big demand for support for controlling resident greylag geese.

The Deputy Convener: We have a supplementary question from Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: It is not a supplementary; it is a separate question. Would you like me to ask it?

The Deputy Convener: Okay.

Rachael Hamilton: The question is for Rae McKenzie. In an earlier answer, you talked about not having systematic monitoring. I presume that that was about the count, although I am not quite sure what you meant by it and whether I have that right. Could you clarify that?

Also, given the dire threat of avian flu right now and the fact that NatureScot has already set up a surveillance network for it, is there any plan for NatureScot to merge the two activities to monitor what has been effective in the pilot projects on control of migratory birds and the natural deaths of migratory birds through avian flu? To my mind, the two are not mutually exclusive.

Rae McKenzie: All our goose and swan populations are part of a fairly broad-scale goose and swan monitoring programme that involves a national census of different species at different time intervals, depending on what we need to know and how the status might or might not be changing. The most recent resident greylag census in Scotland was done in 2008. Since then, as we have been carrying out the adaptive management pilots, there have been annual counts on the key sites to monitor the impacts or otherwise of the pilots.

We are currently working on a forward plan for avian flu. At the request of the Scottish Government, NatureScot has set up a task force involving various agencies. We are pulling together the best information and the best science that we have, as well as ideas on monitoring and so on. Our approach going forward will very much be part of that plan. It will cover all species, and not just greylag geese. We are getting advice from NatureScot's scientific advisory committee, which is mostly made up of academics and which has been asked to consider those kinds of questions and think about a forward monitoring plan.

What the group advises and recommends, and what we will do, will absolutely be based on some sort of prioritisation and on affordability. There is certainly potential for avian influenza to affect all goose species. The more information that we can pull together to better understand that, the better.

Despite the fact that the current outbreak—if we want to call it that—really picked up speed last November in the Solway area, it was kind of contained in the Solway population and cases elsewhere were on a par with what we might expect over the winter, apart from on Islay. However, as we see what is happening and how different populations are impacted, we will work through the prioritisation for monitoring and picking up data.

I hope that that answers your question.

Rachael Hamilton: Thank you. That was really helpful. Because the matter is part of our remit, it would be useful for the committee to understand what plans NatureScot develops with the academics.

Rae McKenzie: NatureScot is leading the task force, but it includes the Animal and Plant Health Agency, the Scottish Government's wildlife management branch, Marine Scotland, RSPB Scotland and various other organisations, including public health organisations because, obviously, there are potential impacts on human health. There are also environmental health issues, such as what we do about the collection and so on of carcases. All that will be considered in the plan, the draft of which is due to be published fairly soon. Once that is done, we can share it with the committee.

The Deputy Convener: That brings us to the end of our questions. I thank Rae McKenzie and Morag Milne for their time and their helpful evidence.

I invite members to consider the next steps on the issue. You will see from our papers that it is suggested that the committee might wish to await publication of the five-yearly review of goose management in Scotland and consider the issue again at that point. Are members happy with that course of action?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Rural Support (Simplification and Improvement) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/206)

10:12

The Deputy Convener: Our second item of business is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument. I refer members to paper 2, which is from page 10 forwards in our meeting pack. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

There are no comments. The committee agrees to make no recommendations in relation to the instrument.

Trade in Animals and Related Products (Amendment and Legislative Functions) Regulations 2022

The Deputy Convener: Our final agenda item is consideration of a consent notification relating to a United Kingdom statutory instrument. I refer members to papers 3 and 4, which are from page 17 forwards in the meeting pack. Do members have any comments on the notification?

As there are no comments, are members content to agree with the Scottish Government's decision to consent to the provisions that are set out in the notification being included in UK rather than Scottish subordinate legislation?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Meeting closed at 10:13.

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