



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Session 6



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RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr John Armstrong (Scottish Government)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Dr Antje Branding (Scottish Government)

George Burgess (Scottish Government)

Mairi Gougeon (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands) (SNP)

Dr Stuart Middlemas (Scottish Government)

Iain Wallace (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 22 January 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:17]

Subordinate Legislation

Conservation of Salmon (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 (SSI 2024/368)

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the third meeting in 2025 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Please ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent.

I inform committee members that Colin Beattie has resigned his membership of the committee. We thank him for his contribution to the committee's scrutiny work. We will have a new member next week.

I welcome Jackie Baillie, who will take part in agenda items 1 and 2.

Our first item of business is consideration of a negative Scottish statutory instrument: the Conservation of Salmon (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024. I welcome, remotely, Mairi Gougeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, and I welcome, in person, her officials: Antje Branding, marine environment, and Dr John Armstrong and Dr Stuart Middlemas, science evidence, data and digital, from the marine directorate.

I ask the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Good morning, convener and committee members. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 2024 salmon regulations and outline their vital importance to the protection and conservation of that iconic species.

First and foremost, I want to make it clear that the regulations are designed to sustainably manage the exploitation of salmon. They allow anglers to pursue their hobby and enable fishery owners to earn an income from selling fishing permits.

The regulations are key to delivering the wild salmon strategy. Scottish rivers have healthy

populations of wild salmon. Wild salmon management is evidence based, and the environmental and socioeconomic benefits that arise from wild salmon are maximised. Using the best available data, marine directorate scientists have identified, as they have in previous years since 2016, the river systems in which salmon are most at risk and in need of protection through mandatory catch and release.

I realise that some people see that as a deterrent for anglers and are worried that the income from selling fishing permits might decrease, but the opposite is the case. The majority of anglers in Scotland have long recognised that the health of our salmon stocks is more fragile than ever, which is why many areas already operate a voluntary catch-and-release regime, such as has been practised on the River Dee for the past 30 years. More recently, there was a unanimous vote for the introduction of the same approach on the River Tweed.

Overall, the rate of catch and release of wild salmon practised in Scotland has steadily increased in past years, and it was at 96 per cent in 2023. That reflects the forward-thinking nature of those who enjoy fishing for salmon.

However, the wild salmon strategy and the associated implementation plan do not focus on anglers alone; they also aim to tackle the wide range of pressures in rivers and at the coast over which we have some control. The delivery of the wild salmon strategy depends critically on actions taken at national and local levels by the Government and by fishery managers and anglers.

The conservation regulations and associated gradings use the best available evidence and data. In the case of the River Endrick, catches have declined in recent years, and the proposed mandatory catch and release is required to support the recovery of stocks in the river. We cannot allocate gradings to rivers that do not reflect the data that we have on salmon, and it would set quite a dangerous precedent not to provide the salmon in the River Endrick special area of conservation with the protection that they need.

I believe that the regulations are a much-needed contribution to our collective efforts to reverse the fortunes of wild salmon, which is a magnificent species that is iconic for Scotland. It is therefore our duty to conserve our wild populations for future generations.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I think that I speak for the committee when I say that we have a strong desire to do everything possible to protect what we regard as an iconic species. However, there is an annual debate

about the regulations and, although we know that they are in place to protect salmon, there are always arguments about how data is collected and analysed. Are you comfortable that, unlike maybe five or six years ago, when there were real concerns about the methodology, we are getting the modelling and the data collection right to ensure that the river gradings are accurate?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, I believe that we are using the best available data, but we, of course, always consider improvements that could be made. I am sure that officials can give a bit more detail on the methodology that is used. Primarily, we use all the data that is provided to us through the statutory catch return forms. Some of the methodology that we are using will be peer reviewed, too.

We are open to receiving information from the fisheries themselves. In fact, I think that, for a couple of the rivers that had been assessed, their assessment was changed on the back of further information that we received. Therefore, we have that dialogue and we consider carefully the further information that we get.

I will hand over to officials, who will be able to say a bit more about the methodology that is used, if the committee would find that helpful.

Dr Stuart Middlemas (Scottish Government): Part of the methodology that we use is being peer reviewed at the moment, and we are waiting for the outcome of that. The methodology has been scrutinised by lots of people and is based on international standard methods, but it is tailored to Scottish needs and Scottish data. It is used by groups such as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea working group on North Atlantic salmon, which has accepted that this is the method that Scotland uses. It is not the case that there has been no scrutiny—the methodology has been scrutinised a lot more than most things that go to and have been through peer review.

As the cabinet secretary said, it is true that methods can always be improved, but we must use the best available methods and the best available science. We are doing that, but that is not to say that we are not working in the background to update the methods.

We want to keep the methods stable when it comes to feedback from the committee and anglers. We do not want to change the methods every year, so it might look like nothing is changing and we are not working on them, but the idea is to develop them to a certain stage and then consult and bring in changes at one time. That means that there are no big changes year on year that make it difficult to plan for fisheries.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I

have a quick question. If the motion to annul the regulations was agreed to, what would the effect be?

Mairi Gougeon: I would be concerned if the motion to annul was agreed to, primarily because that would mean that the regulations that were passed in 2023 would apply. Some of the changes that we are introducing through the regulations that are before the committee—12 river systems will fall one grade and nine of those will be subject to mandatory catch and release, while four will rise one grade and three of those will no longer have mandatory catch and release—would not apply, because we would rely on the regulations that were passed in 2023. Ultimately, if the motion to annul was agreed to, rod-caught fish would be killed in some of those rivers. Given the precarious state of the species, I would be seriously concerned about that if the committee agreed to the motion to annul.

The Convener: Is there any evidence that there is widespread killing of fish, or is it taken that, no matter the grading of the river, anglers are as conscious as anybody of the precarious position that salmon are in? Is catch and release not the adopted practice now, whatever the status of the river?

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. What you said is right. I alluded to that in my opening comments and mentioned some of the rivers that have practised catch and release for a long time anyway. However, we need the regulations in place, given the evidence and data that we have and the assessments that we have undertaken that show that the status of the populations has changed in some areas. It is not just about some rivers going down a level; others are moving up, which means that mandatory catch and release would not be in place for some rivers.

I believe that anglers genuinely want to do the right thing for the species, and it is in everybody's best interests that that happens. That is why it is important that the committee does not agree to the motion to annul. We need to work on the best available evidence and data, which is what has been put forward and is why we are amending the previous regulations in the way that we are today.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Nearly half of the respondents to the consultation on the changes are concerned about how data is collected. What proportion of data do you receive back from owners of the different beats? What proportion actually submit returns? When they do not submit returns, what do you do about that lack of data?

Mairi Gougeon: I ask officials to comment on some of those points, because they have more of the detailed information.

Dr Middlemas: Primarily, we use catch returns. We send out more than 2,000 forms a year. If we do not get an initial response, we follow those up with reminder letters. We get a return rate of more than 90 per cent. That rate has been fairly stable. I think that it is 93 per cent. I can find the exact figure and let the committee know, but it is certainly 92 or 93 per cent.

A lot of the people who do not get back to us tend to be in areas that we have not heard from for a number of years and where we believe that there are no significant fisheries, but it is difficult to chase them too much.

Rhoda Grant: You write to every fishery on every river to ask them for their returns, and you then chase them up and get 90 per cent back eventually—is that correct?

Dr Middlemas: We have a database of all active fisheries, which are written to every year. We note some fisheries as dormant, but we check to make sure that they are still dormant. Not all fisheries are active; not all fisheries fish. Some fisheries have never fished—the fishing has perhaps not been particularly good—and some do not fish on conservation grounds, but we check on all dormant fisheries periodically and we write to the fisheries to get a return every year.

09:30

Rhoda Grant: Just to be clear, you get a 90 per cent return for the fisheries that you believe fish, not for all fisheries.

Dr Middlemas: We get back 90 per cent of the forms that we send out.

Rhoda Grant: Yes, but you do not send forms to every fishery, because you do not send forms to those that you believe are dormant.

Dr Middlemas: We check the dormancy status. I would need to double check the exact procedure, because it has changed over the years, but we do check the dormancy of fisheries.

Rhoda Grant: How often do you do that?

Dr Middlemas: I believe that it used to be done every few years, but, again, I will need to come back to you on that, because that is not done by my department. I am sorry not to answer the question, but I am struggling to remember. Rather than give you false information, we can provide the answer for you later.

Rhoda Grant: That would be useful. Thank you.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Cabinet secretary, the submission from Fisheries Management Scotland says:

“The River Annan is one of only two rivers in Schedule 1 in which there is not a set period in the early part of the

year (during the annual close time) in which fishing by rod and line is permitted.”

I know that it is important to support the conservation of wild salmon, but the Fisheries Management Scotland submission says:

“If the instrument is annulled, this would mean that the fishery on the River Annan would not be permitted to operate between 25 February and 31 March. This would have a significant impact on the local economy.”

We know that it is important to conserve wild salmon—we have heard a lot about that in recent months—but I am interested in what the wider impact on the local economy would be if the instrument was annulled.

Mairi Gougeon: You have touched on a really important point, particularly in relation to the River Annan. You are absolutely right about what Fisheries Management Scotland has said. If the motion to annul was passed, there would be a big economic impact, particularly on that area, because it would mean that the early season would be unlawful, which would have a significant impact. That is another vital reason why the regulations need to proceed. I hope that the motion to annul is not supported today.

Emma Harper: My understanding is that some of the fishermen and fisherwomen—fisherpeople—fish only on the River Annan, which means that they would not be able to catch and release at all, anywhere, if the motion was annulled—is that correct?

Mairi Gougeon: It would make the early season unlawful, so it would not be able to take place. I do not know whether there is any further information on the specifics of the economic impact that you mentioned in your first question, but the business and regulatory impact assessment, which has been published as part of the regulations, picks up on some of that.

If the regulations were not to go ahead, I would be concerned about the impact on the Annan, as well as about the wider issues of wild salmon conservation.

The Convener: One of the difficulties is that the regulations are in two parts. If we do not like the part that sets the categories of the rivers and we annul the regulations, we will be, by default, rejecting what appears to be a move that we would welcome—amending the annual closure times—and that would have an impact on the River Annan. It is rather difficult to look at those points and consider annulling the instrument, because that could have unintended consequences for something that the committee would, on the face of it, support.

I will ask one more question before I bring in Jackie Baillie. In the past, there were concerns

about the methodology and the data that was collected. Data is only as good as the people who provide it to us. One of the commitments from a few years back—I think that it was when the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee dealt with the issue—was to have more fish counters on our rivers, because that would take away some of the uncertainty over fishing effort by looking at how many people have been fishing the river, and the model could consider whether salmon had entered a river, whether that had to do with a dry summer or exceptionally high tides, and so on. A range of things affect fish coming to a river.

Has there been an increase in the number of fish counters? That would mean that some of the uncertainty over fishing effort and so on could be removed and we would know the actual number of fish that were entering a river.

Mairi Gougeon: I am sure that officials can provide more detail on that. When it comes to wild salmon conservation, a number of pieces of work are under way. I mentioned in my opening comments the wild salmon strategy and its implementation. Over the past few years, we have invested nearly £5 million in actions as part of that strategy, including those relating to the counter network.

The Convener: Would anyone else like to take on that question?

Dr Middlemas: I will start, and others can help.

Through work with partners in the local trust network and the Atlantic Salmon Trust, two counters have been put in the River Laxford, in north-west Scotland, and the River Deveron, in the Grampian area. Information from those was used last year in the conservation regulations for those rivers, but we are also studying the results from those counters to apply them elsewhere. We are starting to get more information from a wider number of areas. There are also discussions on a counter to go in the Western Isles, and funding has been provided to local groups for other counters, including one to go in the North Esk.

Dr Antje Branding (Scottish Government): The purchase and operation of fish counters is very costly, time consuming and resource consuming. The marine fund Scotland provided funding last year for fish counters to be installed—the district salmon fishery boards, angling trusts and angling associations were given counters.

At the same time, we are funding pilots to explore the use of artificial intelligence so that the data can be automatically assessed and used in our assessment methodologies. We have seen a lot of innovation in that area, which will help to achieve more automation in the future and ensure that we have a widespread counter network that is

fit for purpose. That will underpin not just the conservation regulations but all our efforts on salmon conservation.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for your helpful remarks. There is no doubt in my mind that salmon is an iconic species and one that we want to protect. I had not seen the regulations before, because I am pretty new to the committee, but I had an email ping in about them while Dr Middlemas was speaking.

As has been touched on, there seem to be some issues with how we collect and utilise the data. For clarity, I ask you to explain what the promise is. If we agree to the regulations today, how do we improve the data collection and ensure the right outcomes for our rivers with respect to closed periods and so on?

Mairi Gougeon: You raise a really important point. As we have said, we work on the best available data. Of course, wherever we can improve it, we would like to do so. You have just heard about the investment that is taking place in the counter network. Dr Middlemas touched on the fact that part of the methodology that we use will be peer reviewed, but he also pointed out that the methodology and the way that we use the data that we have hold up internationally. We look forward to the outcome of the peer review process, and, where there are recommendations for areas of improvement, we will consider them.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Good morning to you, cabinet secretary and your officials. Dr Middlemas talked about change that is being developed in the background. Perhaps the counters are part of that, but I go back to Tim Eagle's question, which I liked: what is the promise here? Can you explain the work that is happening in the background? I understand that it is about rolling all of this out in a package in the future to ensure that we do not have to come back to the issue.

Dr Middlemas: Essentially, there are two parts to the process, when we break it down. It is very complicated—there is a lot of mathematical modelling—but, simply put, it is all about how many fish we have and how many we need. Those questions are difficult to answer, but we are working on both of them. The counters give us information on how many fish we have, which is very useful, and we can use the relationship between catches and counters to get an idea of how many fish we have in areas without rivers. We are working on that.

We are working with the new information from the new counters, but we are also working to incorporate information on effort. Traditionally, Scotland did not collect information on fishing

effort—say, the number of rod days that we have. We started to collect that information in 2019, and we are now working on incorporating it, because it is easy for people to understand that fishing effort will affect rod catch. We want to incorporate that into the assessments, and we are working with the data. Unfortunately, it takes time to collect it and to have enough to put it into a useable format, but that is what we are working on, as far as that side of things is concerned.

As for the number of fish that we need, we hope to be able to do that work as near as possible on a river-by-river basis once we have information from enough years. We started to collect river-based information in 2011. I will not bore people with the mathematics, stock recruitment relationships and all those things, but we need to have a long time series before we can use that information to say, “This is the number that we need” and compare it with the number that we have. As I said, we are hoping to do that work river by river. Instead of knowing the numbers for some rivers and having to extrapolate them for others, we will have them for most rivers. Again, though, that takes time. We need to have the data and the time series, and they are being developed.

I hope that, when we have all of that as a package, we will be able to take the step forward. The information that we have will be better and it will be based on the best use of local information. That is not to say that we are not making the best use of local information at the moment; it is just that we are not yet able to turn it into something that can be used for the conservation regulations without further work. That is where we are aiming to get to.

Ariane Burgess: You said that getting information on effort and information on a river-by-river basis will take time. Are we talking about a few years?

Dr Middlemas: I hope that we will be able to report on progress towards getting that done in a year or maybe two. We might not have the answer then, but we should be able to report on progress and tell you what we have done and what the prognosis is over the next couple of years.

Dr John Armstrong (Scottish Government): Things are changing with salmon. It is not just the numbers that are decreasing; the salmon are getting smaller, and smaller salmon have fewer eggs. As a result, it is important to understand changes in the size of the fish, and a process is in place to get better information on how size is changing with time. That is an important component of the assessment. Moreover, it will be an on-going process. We will not just reach an end point; we need to carry on counting fish and looking at the changes.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you.

Tim Eagle: I guess that the problem with data is that you can constantly keep collecting it and not doing things. Of the recommendations in the salmon interactions working group report, which is on interactions between wild and farmed salmon, I think that only one has been completed. Dr Middlemas talked about a period of two years, which is quite a long time. Is there any way of speeding things up? We want the species to recover and we want better management of it. My worry is that we will delay and delay while we get more and more data and that we will not actually push forward.

09:45

Dr Middlemas: It is really difficult. With data collection, we are dependent on people going out fishing to get information back every year. If something is data dependent, it is really difficult to speed it up. If it is people and manpower dependent, that might be possible, but there are lots of other calls and priorities.

We could not speed up the data collection. For example, we do not have five years' worth of effort data yet, and it might turn out that we need six or seven years' worth. I guess that what I am saying is that we can continually review that—we can see what we can do now and what we can do next year, and so on. We are not saying, “We need 10 years' worth of data, so we won't do anything until we get that.” We continually review and see what can be done at each point.

Tim Eagle: Maybe I picked you up wrongly.

We have had some interaction with people who are not sure how the information that they feed back to you guys is being utilised when it comes to the regulations. The talk of fish counters sounds promising, but we probably need to roll out more of them. Ultimately, all of this has to feed into the protection of the species so that we see more fish. How do we do that? How do we get that done on the ground?

Dr Middlemas: The fish counters are a good example. With the work that was done on the Deveron and the Laxford, we were able to feed that information directly into the regulations. The people on the ground could see that having the fish counter made a direct impact and that the information fed directly into the assessments.

The Convener: I have another question, which is really for the cabinet secretary. Where does protection of wild salmon come on your list of priorities? I ask that in the light of Tim Eagle's point that only one of 42 recommendations from a report that has been in place for some time has been completed. I am looking at correspondence

that we had in 2020, in which stakeholders expressed disappointment in the progress. Are you confident that we are making enough progress? Is the issue a high enough priority? Are we putting enough effort and resources into protecting our wild salmon?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, it is a high priority, but we cannot look at that piece of work in isolation. I have touched on the wild salmon strategy and the implementation plan for that. If it would be helpful for the committee, I am happy to write with further information on progress on those. We know that our wild salmon face a number of pressures, and it is important that we take action against each of those. This is not a case of doing one piece of work; it is about trying to take action across the piece where it is within our power to do so.

Tim Eagle touched on an important point on the salmon interactions working group report. In relation to the key focus of that, a few recommendations have been taken forward. We have identified SEPA as the key regulator and have implemented the SEPA sea lice framework. We cannot overestimate just how much work was involved in developing that framework and in its implementation. I am happy to provide the committee with more information on the work that is on-going and what has already been undertaken, to ensure that the committee has the most up-to-date information.

The Convener: Ariane Burgess has a brief supplementary question.

Ariane Burgess: It follows on from your bigger-picture question about protecting wild salmon, convener.

I thank the cabinet secretary for mentioning the wild salmon strategy and implementation plan—it would be good to see that information. In her opening statement, she said that the instrument is designed to regulate the “exploitation” of wild salmon. Do we need to reflect on that? If we want to protect wild salmon, maybe we need to change our language and talk about things that are designed to regenerate wild salmon rather than protect them from exploitation.

Language is important. Sitting on this committee, I notice that we talk a lot about exploiting Scotland’s nature—wild salmon and other animals. However, we should perhaps move towards talking about regeneration in the way that we are now talking about regenerative agriculture. That would be a good shift and it would help us to understand that what we are trying to do is regenerate a species rather than protect what little is left.

Mairi Gougeon: I completely appreciate your point. I point out that that word is being used specifically in relation to the regulations, but I

acknowledge the point that you make. The issue is not about exploitation; it is about how we ensure that the species recovers. That is exactly where we want to be. Salmon is an iconic Scottish species, and we want to enhance it and reverse some of the trends that we have seen so that the populations grow. That is the ultimate goal, and that work is broadly covered by what we are trying to achieve across the wild salmon strategy. We know that no single issue is causing the decline in populations. The issue is multifaceted, which means that we need a broader approach.

As I said, I will provide the committee with further information. I hope that you will find it helpful, as it will allow you to see the action that we are taking across a number of areas to address the pressures where they exist.

The Convener: I invite Jackie Baillie to ask her questions.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I have a number of questions about the Endrick Water. Cabinet secretary, do you know yet how many riparian owners there are on the Endrick?

Mairi Gougeon: I will ask officials to comment specifically on that. I know that we have had correspondence on that point previously. We have been aware of 18 fisheries on the Endrick, and we have asked the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association to provide us with further information if that information was not correct. We have not received that yet, so I do not know whether the position has changed.

Dr Middlemas: I can provide a little bit of background. The Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association is concerned with the fishery owners, not the riparian owners. The fact that someone owns the ground does not mean that they own the fishing rights. We are aware of 18 fishery owners. That is an increase on the number that we gave the last time we discussed the issue with the committee, following the receipt of information from the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association. We have also approached Registers of Scotland, but it said that we would not necessarily get what we were looking for by going through its process.

Jackie Baillie: The suggestion is, therefore, that the information on the number of owners—whether we call them owners or fisheries—is incomplete.

Dr Middlemas: We have updated the figures with the information that we have from, I think, 2017-18—

Jackie Baillie: It was 2017.

Dr Middlemas: That is as complete a record as we have at the moment. It uses all the information that was provided by the locals.

Jackie Baillie: Absolutely—they are the ones who know. However, eight years have passed and there has been no update or attempt to complete that data set.

How many returns have you received from those fisheries? What enforcement action, if any, have you taken against those that do not return catch data?

Dr Middlemas: We have a note of whether the fisheries are active. There are a number of active fisheries, and it is not just the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association that provides us with catch returns. We provided you with that information in a letter from the cabinet secretary.

Jackie Baillie: Not all the fisheries provide catch returns.

Dr Middlemas: Many of them are not active fisheries.

Jackie Baillie: But there are some active fisheries. I understand what you said to my colleague earlier about a series of letters. Is any enforcement action taken if active fisheries do not provide returns?

Dr Middlemas: We get a lot of zero returns for the River Endrick, but no enforcement action has been taken at the end of that process.

Dr Branding: I will provide further clarification. The marine directorate critically depends on local collaboration with fisheries, district salmon fishery boards, trusts and angling associations, as we rely on them to provide a lot of information to us. The Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association employs bailiffs, who will have quite a lot of information about where fishing and poaching take place. We would welcome any further data from the association that shows that areas that fisheries have indicated to us as dormant are, in fact, active. The association has the best information to hand, as the marine directorate cannot have the oversight and the detailed knowledge. We do not have bailiffs on the ground who monitor all angling activity, which is why the engagement with angling associations, boards and trusts is so important. They help us with the information so that our records can be kept up to date to adequately reflect what is going on on the ground.

Jackie Baillie: The Government has been trying to do that for years, convener.

The Convener: Do you have any further questions?

Jackie Baillie: No, thank you.

The Convener: The discussion has raised a point: if there is a lack of robust evidence or data relating to a river, what action will you take before making a decision? What is the default position if you come to the conclusion that there is not robust or significant evidence on which to base a decision?

Mairi Gougeon: Officials may want to come in with more information, but it is important to reflect on the process that we follow and what we have set out. As we have said throughout the evidence session, we base our decisions on the best available science and the information that we have, and we then go to consultation. As Dr Antje Branding mentioned, we also regularly engage with fisheries boards and trusts. We rely on the information that we receive from them and we also act on it. As I said earlier, on the back of some information that we received, classifications were changed in two recent cases in which there were concerns about the data.

Officials have met the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association and there have been requests for further information. As far as I am aware, the information has not been received. I want to be clear about the process and show that we engage and listen where possible.

The Convener: In practice, who decides whether the data that has been received is sufficient and robust enough for a classification to be based on it? My question is not about what happens then. I know that, as you have said, you will make an effort to make contact. At what point does someone decide whether the data is sufficient to base a decision on it?

Dr Middlemas: The

Under the conservation regulations, the default is no retention of fish. Because it is a conservation measure, the default is to protect the fish. If there is insufficient information on a river, it will be treated in the same way as a river that has been graded as having poor conservation status—grade 3—and there will be no retention. The requirement is for sufficient information to allow retention. That is how it should be looked at, rather than thinking that the information is being used to prevent retention.

The Convener: That is really helpful. Thank you.

As members have no further questions, we move to the formal consideration of the motion. I invite Jackie Baillie to speak to and move motion S6M-16130.

10:00

Jackie Baillie: I am grateful to you, convener, and to the committee for affording me time to

speaking to the Conservation of Salmon (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024. I do so with a heavy heart, because I believe that everyone around the table shares a desire to conserve and—dare I say it?—regenerate salmon stocks in Scottish rivers. I believe that that also applies to the cabinet secretary and to the anglers in my constituency. However, we must do that on the basis of accurate data.

Those of you who know me will appreciate that this is not my specialist subject, but it is not the first time that I have had to raise concerns from my local community about such regulations. In this context, I have been contacted by the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association, an organisation in my constituency that I believe is approaching its centenary, which means that it is safe to say that those anglers know the local rivers well.

My first such outing on the subject was back in 2017, and I came before the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee—of which this committee's convener was a member—in March 2018. The story now is remarkably similar, so today feels a little like groundhog day. The data has not improved in eight years. I will be absolutely clear: the problem is not with the methodology but with the data that is gathered and used as the basis for the regulations.

The cabinet secretary promised to make the best use of information and data, but we have been providing local information since 2016-17 and that does not appear to have been taken on board. In 2017, the issue was the lack of data and evidence on which similar regulations were based. If we roll forward eight years, we find ourselves here with a new set of regulations but the same problems with a lack of data.

The members of the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association are not shy and have been in dialogue with the Government for a long time, so to suggest that they are not providing information is slightly remiss. I say at the outset that the association has no desire to stop the provisions that relate to the Annan salmon fishery district, nor does it wish to criticise, object to or endorse proposals for any other rivers or their catchment areas, because we do not know the details of those. However, I note that 46 per cent of respondents to the consultation had concerns about the data used by the marine directorate.

The association's concerns relate specifically to the Endrick Water special area of conservation, which is linked to the adjoining Loch Lomond catchment area. Those concerns were first raised in 2016. Meetings with marine directorate officials followed, and there have been letters to the cabinet secretary over the years. Most recently,

the association emailed officials about the regulations, which resulted in a meeting in October 2024. The cabinet secretary is aware that I wrote to her in November and December 2024 to outline those concerns, in the hope that they would be listened to and that the regulations would be amended before publication.

I take a moment to note that the association does not allow salmon to be retained until 1 May and for the whole month of October—which is more than is required by statute—in order to protect spring salmon, fish nearing spawning and late-running fish. This is not about stopping the conservation or regeneration of salmon but is quite the contrary, as the association's practices demonstrate.

At the heart of the problem is the lack of data. The cabinet secretary rightly talked about best evidence and data, but the best evidence and data in this respect is poor. The association reports the data about salmon catches on the stretches of the Endrick that it owns but, until 2017, the marine directorate did not appear to have much knowledge of fishery owners on other stretches of the Endrick. The association helped by supplying that information, but it is clear from the earlier evidence that the marine directorate does not know all the fisheries that are operating, which means that the data is incomplete.

Unfortunately, very few fishery owners supply catch information, despite there being an existing legislative requirement to do so. It is also clear from the evidence that the committee has just heard that no enforcement action is in place regarding owners who do not supply information. A freedom of information request revealed that, in 2016, only two returns of catch data were submitted by fishery owners and that one of those came from the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association. In 2017, there were three returns, one of which was from the association. There are many more fishery owners on the Endrick, but the marine directorate does not appear to have pursued them for catch data. The association also contests that nil catches were declared. Its water bailiffs have seen and recorded catches from other stretches of the Endrick not in the association's ownership, where owners have declared nil returns.

All of that information has been shared in great detail with the marine directorate since 2016 right up to now, but it does not appear to have resulted in any substantial change. I am interested in hearing whether there are any plans to put a counter on the Endrick, given the number of times that I have had to appear at this committee, making the case for local data.

In summary, I understand that 99 per cent of the fish recorded on the Endrick are returned, but its

poor grading would mean that Loch Lomond itself, the River Fruin and the River Leven, which are classed as moderate, would drop to poor, too. That is the detrimental impact of having flawed data.

I ask the committee to invite the Government to withdraw the regulations. It can resubmit them, removing the change to the Endrick's grading until it has evidence for that, and it can do so at pace, so as not to affect the provisions in the regulations that members support. It has done so with regulations in other circumstances in a matter of days; it should do the right thing here and withdraw the regulations. However, if it fails to do so, I hope that the committee will support my motion to annul them.

I move,

That the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee recommends that the Conservation of Salmon (Miscellaneous Amendment) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 be annulled.

The Convener: Thank you. Do any members wish to debate the motion?

Ariane Burgess: I want to thank Jackie Baillie for those very thoughtful comments. I do not fully understand this from what we have heard, as we did not get into it in our previous discussion, but is it the case that, if we were to annul the instrument, the Government and the marine directorate could work at pace to do what she is asking for? What has come up in evidence is that data is an issue, enforcement is an issue and action from the marine directorate is an issue, too.

I am concerned about the information that we have received from Fisheries Management Scotland. It is a difficult situation, because I feel that I do not have the information that I need to know whether the marine directorate can take action swiftly enough. My overall sense is that this instrument is working to protect Scotland's iconic species, and I am therefore minded to vote against its annulment on the basis of our not having enough information.

Tim Eagle: I thought that what we heard from Jackie Baillie was quite telling. I was not aware of some of that information, and now my mind is whizzing. I would like to hear a response to that, if possible, because I wonder what take the cabinet secretary and her officials have on it.

The last point that was made was particularly interesting. Does the Government have the capacity to withdraw the instrument, and quickly? It is not meant to come into place until 1 March, I think, so is there a possibility of withdrawing it, making a quick change and then resubmitting it? The committee might well have the ability to reconsider it, but the convener will know more

about that than I do. I would be very interested in hearing a response on that.

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate the discussion that we have had and the questions that committee members have asked.

As far as withdrawing and resubmitting the instrument is concerned, we would have to look at the basis of that, first of all, and then I would have to take advice to see what the timescales would be. After all, we cannot forget the other part of these regulations, which relates to the Annan. That will come into effect for the early season, which is from 25 February, so I do not think that we would have the time to take the instrument away and resubmit it. Again, the question is, what would be the basis for our doing that and what information would we base that on?

As I have mentioned in my comments to committee members, we are aware of 18 fisheries on the Endrick. We updated what we had on the back of information that I believed we had received from Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association. As for the association having further evidence and feeling that the information that we have is not correct, we have not, as I understand it, received any further information from the association in spite of our asking for it.

I have serious concerns about the motion being annulled today. Much of that concern has been outlined by Fisheries Management Scotland, because such a move will affect a number of rivers. As I have mentioned, 12 rivers are due to be downgraded, but it would also affect the three that would no longer have mandatory catch and release, and there would also be the impact on the Annan and the economic impact of not implementing the instrument.

That is why I urge the committee not to support the motion to annul today. We are working with the best evidence that we have, and it is vital that the regulations proceed.

Rhoda Grant: The cabinet secretary confirmed earlier that, in spite of the regulations, most anglers are now using catch and release as the norm, whether or not they are forced to by legislation. It seems to me that this is not the first time—certainly on this subject, and on other subjects, too—that we have been presented with an instrument for which the data and information do not stack up. We are being told by the Government that, because we are on a tight timescale, we need to accept the instrument. It seems that nothing changes. We, as a committee, need to take a stand to ensure that the evidence and information that we are getting to back up statutory instruments, which are legislation, merit the acceptance of that legislation.

Ariane Burgess: I have a general comment. Colleagues have mentioned that there are two elements to the instrument. That has happened before, when the beef suckler scheme and good environmental status were conflated because the instrument was about compliance. I would appreciate it if the cabinet secretary acknowledged that the committee will be looking at a lot of SSIs and that, when two issues are put together and there is one issue on which we would like to do something different, that makes it very difficult for us to do our work. I want to put it out there that the cabinet secretary could bear that in mind when she introduces SSIs, because it would make it easier for us to address the issues that we really need to address.

Elena Whitham: I thank Jackie Baillie for coming to the committee to represent her constituents. Having witnessed electrofishing counting take place on the river right in front of my house, which my father has worked on with the River Irvine angling improvement association, I understand the views of local people who do that work. I also understand acutely that we have a responsibility to the iconic species that is our wild salmon. I understand and appreciate the issues surrounding data, what the correct data is and how we deploy it, and I urge that there be close working between associations, trusts and the Government to ensure that we have the correct information.

At this point in time, I feel that I cannot support a motion to annul, simply because I would be concerned that we would be removing protections for salmon stocks in our rivers. However, I take on board everything that everyone has said and hope that we can get to a position in the near future where this does not have to be a perennial issue that comes to the committee. I would have concerns that associations up and down the country would take issue with some of the data at some point and we could end up doing this all the time, with different associations making representations every year.

Tim Eagle: My slight problem is that, although I agree with Elena Whitham that there is a danger if we annul, I, like Rhoda Grant, do not like to be put in a position where I feel that things are being compromised. That worries me. I am hearing that the people on the ground are saying that they have submitted data but Marine Scotland is saying that it has not received that data. That feels odd. What is going on? I go back to my earlier question about the promise. You are probably right, cabinet secretary, that you do not have time to bring the instrument back, but, if I do not vote to annul it today, what guarantee is there that we will not be in the same situation next year?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank committee members for the points that they have raised.

There are a number of issues bound up in this. We have talked about the data and about working from the best evidence that we have. As Dr Middlemas outlined, some of that takes more time to build up and develop. This is not necessarily about resources that we can easily put in place to fix things; it requires time and constant improvements to the methodology and how we assess that evidence.

We have to look at the bigger picture and the wider context of the work that we have talked about today—the wild salmon strategy and the implementation plan. I have already said that I am happy to write to the committee and provide more information on that, so that you can see—

10:15

The Convener: I am sorry, cabinet secretary, but I do not think that you are addressing Mr Eagle's point. It was about how we stop a situation in which the committee is faced with making a decision when we agree with 99 per cent of the regulations but are not, on the basis of evidence that we have heard from constituents, comfortable with how one part of them will affect one area. I think that the question was about how we address that in the future. It was not about the broader, general approach, but about how we address those anomalies.

Mairi Gougeon: Some of those issues are picked up only through scrutiny of the instruments. The issue here is one fishery, but a number of river systems are covered by the regulations, and it makes sense for us to bring them together in the round. We might be in a position where another fishery contests the data that we have put forward, but, as I have outlined, where such issues arise, we try to address them at an early stage. Indeed, that information and the work that we are doing have already resulted in the gradings of two river systems being changed.

Can we say categorically that everyone will be happy with the assessment of a river system? Of course not, and there is no saying that we will not end up in such a position again. That is why the work that we are doing on the data and the peer review work that is being undertaken on the methodology are important. Given that work, and given what Dr Middlemas has outlined to the committee today, I am confident—as much as I can be—that the methodology stands up to international scrutiny and is in line with how this activity is carried out elsewhere. It is really important to bear that in mind.

As committee members have pointed out, we have to do what we can to protect this iconic

species for Scotland. That is exactly what the regulations set out to do, which is why it is vital that they are approved by the Parliament.

Rhoda Grant: For the record, we are not talking about one river or one fishery. The Government admits that 46 per cent of respondents to the SSI had concerns about the data. I think that people might have given up trying to get improvements because this has been an on-going issue, but I would just highlight that nearly half of the respondents had concerns.

Mairi Gougeon: We have listened to those concerns, and we have shown that we have responded to them. Can we solve all problems that have been identified for all rivers? Potentially not, but, as we have highlighted, we have changed assessments where we have had that information or where the methodology or the data that we have received has been queried. That shows that we do listen and that we do respond.

The Convener: I feel that the committee might find this quite difficult. Can I just get this on the record, cabinet secretary? We have heard at length the evidence that Jackie Baillie has provided, some of which came via FOIs. Do you dispute Jackie Baillie's contribution and the evidence that she has given today? Perhaps "dispute" is a bit hard—do you recognise the issue that Jackie Baillie's constituents have raised? That is my first question.

Secondly, it is understood that the regulations need to come into force on 24 February to ensure that there are no unintended consequences, as there could be if we annulled the regulations, with rivers such as the Annan being put at detriment. If the committee were minded to annul the regulations, would there, in practice, be time for you and your officials to go away, revisit the issues that Jackie Baillie has brought up and amend the instrument, and for the committee to consider it in time for it to be actioned by 24 February?

Mairi Gougeon: On your second point, I think that there is no way that I could commit to that without getting legal advice or seeing what resource and so on would be required. Also, what would be the basis for doing that? If the instrument were to be annulled, would the basis of the information and my advice from officials change? I do not believe so. We could just end up in a similar position. I am concerned about the timescales; they are increasingly tight, and I would be concerned that we would not be able to do this in time.

I am sorry, convener, but can you remind me of your first question? Oh yes—it was about Jackie Baillie and the concerns of her constituents. Jackie Baillie has written to me on behalf of the Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association, and I,

of course, take that correspondence seriously, just as I take all the correspondence that I receive seriously and consider the points that are raised before issuing any response. I know that officials have engaged directly with the association, too, which I think shows that we are engaging and listening.

Tim Eagle: On that point, cabinet secretary, I go back to the convener's point about the timeframe for changes. Jackie Baillie has written to you. Would there be the option of further engagement following the passing of the regulations, perhaps during the spring or summer, with the bodies that have responded, including the one that Rhoda Grant mentioned, and with Jackie Baillie's constituents, to ensure that, by this time next year, we are all absolutely on the same page about how data comes into the marine directorate and to ensure that nothing gets lost? Would you commit to ensuring that such engagement happens in the next year?

Mairi Gougeon: There is engagement. As I have already outlined, officials have engaged with the angling association, and they engage with fisheries boards and trusts. I again highlight the fact that we have taken direct action in response to some of the information that we have received.

The regulations will not change the basis of the information or advice that I receive. We will still have to work with the available methodology and with the data and information that we get. That might improve in the coming years if we get more information from fisheries boards and trusts than we receive already and if that gives us a more complete picture, but there might not be a radical change from where we are at the moment.

I give an assurance that we will undertake engagement. The discussions that take place are part and parcel of our work anyway, as I am sure officials would agree.

The Convener: I have one final question before I ask Jackie Baillie to come back in. The committee has concerns, and I feel as though I am almost being held to ransom here, because we have to make a decision. This is not the first time that the committee has been in the position of being told that we have to do something with an SSI, or that there is a cliff edge, or that there will be a disaster, while we still have concerns about some parts of the instrument in question.

Is there any potential for you to continue looking at the evidence provided by the constituent whom Jackie Baillie represents and to lodge an amendment to the SSI if the data suggests a different grading from the current one? The committee could consider that later, without adverse implications for the Annan or other rivers. Is that a possibility?

Mairi Gougeon: We have sought further information. Unfortunately, at this stage, I cannot categorically commit to lodging an amendment to the instrument, because we have not had those discussions. We are all bound by the timescales for the scrutiny of statutory instruments and, in this case, we are dealing with a negative instrument. I cannot categorically say that I will lodge an amendment to the instrument, as that would depend on considering any further information that was received and my having to seek further advice on it.

The Convener: I think that the committee would find it helpful to have a more detailed explanation of how the marine directorate will address some of the issues that we have heard about today before we, inevitably, end up considering a very similar SSI this time next year. That would be helpful.

As members have no further comments, I invite Jackie Baillie to wind up.

Jackie Baillie: Who knew that salmon protection and conservation could be so interesting?

The Convener: We did.

Jackie Baillie: It has been a great debate. I say as a matter of record that I am always happy to engage with the cabinet secretary at any point, but it is fair to say that my constituents have been engaging since 2016 and they feel that nothing has really changed, that it is groundhog day and that they keep coming back to talk about the same thing.

For the record, it is not the methodology that matters—I entirely accept what the cabinet secretary has said about its being benchmarked against others. The reality is that it is the input data that matters. That is the issue before us, and we have been trying for more than eight years to get some sense in terms of the data that is processed using the methodology.

I also want to say a little bit about the legislative process, because I am always very much of the view that where there is a will there is always a way. This Parliament has introduced regulations from scratch in days—I point you to the regulations on cremations and burials, which affected my constituents directly. We have gone through stages 1, 2 and 3 of primary legislation in a day, dealing with bills whose actual evolution has taken less than a week. Taking the convener's lead, I would suggest that you could amend the subordinate legislation; indeed, you could resubmit it tomorrow, having removed the contentious provisions and leaving in the provisions related to the Annan and other rivers. It is that easy. Therefore, I invite the committee to consider carefully what option it wishes to encourage the Government to follow.

Neither I nor others with an interest in Loch Lomond can speak to what is going on in other rivers, but, as Rhoda Grant has highlighted, 46 per cent of those consulted raised issues about the data. We cannot keep going on like this, year after year, having the same conversations, just because the data has not improved. We are not doing salmon conservation—or regeneration, for that matter—any good if we continue to lack the evidence to act.

The Convener: Thank you. Do you wish to press or withdraw the motion?

Jackie Baillie: I intend to press it, convener.

The Convener: The question is, that motion S6M-16130 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

For

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 1, Against 7, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Convener: Finally, is the committee content to delegate authority to me to sign off a report on our deliberations on this negative instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That completes consideration of the instrument. I suspend the meeting until 10:40 to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

10:27

Meeting suspended.

10:40

On resuming—

Budget Scrutiny 2025-26

The Convener: Our next item of business is evidence from the Scottish Government on its budget for 2025-26. I welcome back Mairi Gougeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, who is supported by, from the Scottish Government, George Burgess, director of agriculture and rural economy; Helen Carter, who is joint head of finance in the agriculture and rural economy directorate; and Iain Wallace, director of marine.

The cabinet secretary is attending the meeting remotely, and we are disappointed not to have the officials in the room—they, too, are attending remotely—given how long the appointment has been in the diary and the importance of the agenda item.

I remind everybody that we have approximately two hours for this part of the meeting. I invite the cabinet secretary to make a brief opening statement.

Mairi Gougeon: Thank you, convener. When I attended the committee's pre-budget scrutiny session in September, I set out my priorities for my portfolio. I am pleased to come back today to outline how the 2025-26 Scottish budget, which was presented to the Parliament in December, will help to deliver on those priorities within the wider context of the Government's priorities.

I believe that this is a budget for delivery. It directly addresses the issues that people are concerned about. It is a budget for hope that builds on the positive change that we are delivering for Scotland by helping to create more jobs and putting more money in people's pockets. The budget will also protect and build on the substantial investment that the Government has already delivered for the people of Scotland.

The budget focuses resource across the four key priorities that are set out in the programme for government: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency, and ensuring high-quality and sustainable public services. However, the budget is also set against the continued and unprecedented challenges for public finances. The Government has been clear that the extent of those challenges will not be addressed in a single year. The UK autumn budget was a step in the right direction, but although the additional funding that has been received is welcome, the block grant position represents just a 1 per cent real-terms increase in resource. Although there is a 7 per cent real-terms

increase for capital, the projected gap between forecast funding and planned spending is growing.

Despite that challenge, the budget will invest more than £1 billion in 2025-26 in the rural affairs, land reform and islands portfolio. In investing more than £660 million in support for agriculture, it will continue to provide Scotland's farmers, crofters and land managers with the most generous package of direct support in the UK. While the UK Government has removed its ring-fenced support for agriculture, we have continued to apply that to the funding received in the block grant.

The budget returns £20 million to the RALRI budget as additional funding to support transformation and reform in Scotland's farming and food production industry, as was pledged to the sector, and it commits to returning the remaining deferred funding in 2026-27.

More than £150 million in funding is committed to ensuring that our land and forests will help to tackle climate change, protect nature and support green jobs, skills and businesses.

We also want to support our island communities to be resilient and successful. More than £9 million will go directly to where it is most needed to help us to meet the ambitions that are outlined in our national islands plan.

In addition, we will continue to target our marine budget towards our responsibilities for the integrated management of Scotland's seas.

My priorities are clear. The budget that is allocated to my portfolio will continue to make a vital difference to our coastal, rural and island economies. I look forward to discussing some of those issues with the committee today.

The Convener: I will kick off the questions. You suggested that the budget is a lot of things, but you did not suggest that it is a budget of disappointment. As cabinet secretary, you have failed to increase the budget, as is the case in every other sector. Despite the 1 per cent increase in revenue funding and the 7 per cent increase in capital funding, we are seeing a more than 3 per cent decrease in funding for your portfolio. To call it a budget of disappointment is probably to underestimate what people in forestry, marine and agriculture are thinking.

In our report on the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, we called on the Government to ensure that multiyear ring-fenced funding would be provided, but, now that the ring-fenced element has been removed from the UK block grant, can you set out exactly how the Scottish Government will provide certainty to farmers and crofters?

10:45

Mairi Gurgeon: Yes, I would be happy to, convener. First of all, though, I want to address your initial comments. If you are basing them on some of the information that has been provided by the Scottish Parliament information centre on the budget, I have to say that I disagree with the figures as they have been presented. I should point out that, if you are making comparisons with other portfolios, the figures do not take account of in-year transfers and changes to the portfolio budget as a result of our switching from resource to capital funding. Moreover, they do not take into consideration our capital funding or the climate package funding of £150 million, some of which will be direct funding to the portfolio.

It is really important for those things to be taken into account. Yes, resource overall has decreased by 2.6 per cent in real terms, but, when we combine that with the 19.7 per cent real-terms increase in capital, we will see a real-terms increase on last year's budget of 0.3 per cent, which equates to a 2.7 per cent increase in cash terms. It is important that I clarify that, first and foremost.

There is no doubt that difficult choices have still had to be made right across Government. With regard to the agriculture budget, which you mentioned, and particularly the request for multiyear settlements, we were seriously concerned about the decisions taken by the UK Government, such as the removal of ring fencing and, indeed, the Barnettising of the funding coming to Scotland, which takes no account of our overall land size. Previously, we received around 17 per cent of the overall budget, so we had serious concerns about what that would mean for us.

I appreciate that calls have been made for multiyear funding. The Government would very much like to give that multiyear certainty and clarity, but that is not what we have been given; instead, we have just been given an annual settlement. Of course, there is a spending review coming up, and, if that were to result in more multiyear certainty, I would look to provide the same as soon as we were in a position to do so.

As I have highlighted in my comments—and, indeed, as the First Minister has said in his own statements on ring fencing—the funding from the UK Government has been passed on in full to agriculture. We have, of course, provided additional funding, too. I should also highlight that it was the £620.7 million that was baselined into the budget for the coming year.

The Convener: I am still concerned about the fact that you continue to talk about ring-fenced funding, because the Scottish Government is now

totally responsible for budget allocation. No longer can it say that its rural funding is dependent on ring-fenced money coming from Westminster. We have seen a record increase in the block grant; indeed, I think that only once since devolution has the block grant decreased in real terms. The question remains: we are going to have a multiyear rural support plan, but is it not the case that the only way that you can expect anybody to have any confidence in that plan is by having multiyear funding?

Mairi Gurgeon: It would be completely irresponsible of me to commit to funding that I do not yet have. As I have said, the UK Government is expected to outline what funding could look like over a three-year period. Of course, we would very much welcome such a multiyear settlement, but it would be irresponsible of me to commit to a multiyear funding package when I do not yet have assurance of the moneys that I will be receiving from the UK Government.

The Convener: I call Tim Eagle, with our next questions.

Tim Eagle: Can I ask a question on the back of that one, convener?

The Convener: Certainly.

Tim Eagle: Thank you for those comments, cabinet secretary. On multiyear funding, I have spoken to a number of bodies about the issue and I know that it was a massive ask, not least from the National Farmers Union Scotland. Can you not just put in a caveat?

You are absolutely right in saying that, if you are going to have a five-year or seven-year—whatever it will be—ask of the agriculture industry in the rural support plan, we need to be protected as we move forward with that. Is there a reason why you could not say, “The Scottish Government will promise to deliver this funding for five years, with the caveat that we get the money from the United Kingdom Government”?

Mairi Gurgeon: I absolutely appreciate that call from stakeholders, which I hear regularly during my engagement with them, but I believe that it would be irresponsible of me to say that we are committing to multiyear funding. I appreciate your suggestion about providing a caveat to that, but I hope that that is what I am trying to set out and to make clear.

During the passage of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, I said that, if we were in a position to offer multiyear funding, we would. As well as helping with Government planning, knowing what funding they have as they plan ahead has wider benefits for the industry, our producers and our stakeholders across the portfolio. Until we have that assurance and we

know what funding will be received from the UK Government, I will not be in a position to make that commitment. However, I hope that the position will change.

Tim Eagle: The convener referred to a cut in the rural portfolio budget. According to the graph on page 4 of the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing, it looks as though there is a clear cut to the rural portfolio. You laid out a few things that suggested that it was not a cut. Has what you said been put in writing to the committee? I could not write down everything that you said. If you have not—

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to—

Apologies, I did not mean to interrupt you.

Tim Eagle: That is fine.

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to follow that up and to set out in writing the figures that I outlined to the convener.

Tim Eagle: Thank you.

On the wider context of the tier 1 and tier 2 funding, I can see that that funding has not changed very much in eight or nine years. If we take inflation into account, which is what farmers have faced on the ground, the £620 million—I think that it is £682 million this year—should probably be about £50 million to £70 million higher. A discussion needs to be had about how the tier 1 and tier 2 payments will increase. It would be great if you could touch on that.

My main question is about the iron-clad commitment that John Swinney made to return the £46 million. A commitment has been made to do that over two years, although we thought that it would be done in one year. Since the budget has been announced, what has the department done to progress that? What will the agricultural transformation fund look like?

Mairi Gougeon: I want to make sure that I cover all the points that you have raised. On the budget that is available for what would equate to the pillar 1 support that we provide by means of direct payments, you are absolutely right that we have been at that figure for a number of years. The £620 million is the baseline that we received from the UK Government. When you consider what that would be worth, it works out as a 10.4 per cent decrease in what the payment should be, as we should be receiving just under £700 million.

That brings me to an outstanding recommendation from the Bew review, which was for the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to engage in a conversation to discuss intra-UK allocations of that spend. We wrote to the previous UK Government and we have written to the current UK Government to ask

for that discussion to take place, because we still need to have that discussion in order to ensure that we get our fair share of funding. As yet, we have not had a response to those calls. It is vital that we have a discussion about what fair funding looks like, because, when we consider Scotland's land mass and what we are able to do for food production, climate and nature, I think that we are entitled to a wider share of any UK land-based funding.

Could you remind me of your second question?

Tim Eagle: It was about the agricultural transformation fund. It would be nice to understand why you have decided to award the £46 million over two years rather than one year. Why have you put that money into the agricultural transformation fund? Has any work been done on that? What will the agricultural transformation fund look like?

Mairi Gougeon: Thank you for clarifying that, and I am sorry that I did not respond to that question the first time.

You are absolutely right about the agricultural transformation fund. There have been a number of asks from the industry on what that funding could be used for. It was important that we had those discussions with industry to see how that funding could best be allocated and used.

It is also important that that money is additional. Our greatest requirement has been for capital funding, which is why it is capital funding. It could have all come back in one year, but it is important that we are able to spend that funding, so the lion's share of it will be returned next year. That is positive, because it enables us to fully utilise the funding within a year, knowing that there will be a return of that funding next year as well, depending on what schemes we are looking at.

There have been some suggestions. I will list some areas that I am keen that we look at, on which we are undertaking work at pace or that we have heard about from our stakeholders. There is concern that we have not had a food processing, marketing and co-operation grant for a number of years because of the significant constraint that we have had on our capital budget. Are there options for that? What can we do for the next generation—new entrants to farming? Can we provide them with capital support that could be helpful?

I am afraid that, at the moment, I do not have cast-iron plans for how that funding will be spent, but I would be more than happy to keep the committee informed when we know how the agricultural transformation fund as a whole is intended to be utilised.

Tim Eagle: Do you have a timeline for that? Obviously, there is still a bit of work to go, but when do you hope that the scheme will kick off?

Mairi Gougeon: Ideally, we want to have the plans for that in place as soon as possible, because we want to have the funds up and running so that people can apply early in the financial year. We appreciate that, if there were schemes for which people needed, say, planning permission, that would take time, so the earlier we are able to say what will and will not form part of the schemes, the earlier people can apply and we can ensure that we use that money.

We are working at pace to see, first of all, what the biggest requirement is but also what is deliverable within that timeframe. I am more than happy to keep the committee updated on that, because I appreciate the interest that there will be in those capital funds.

Tim Eagle: Obviously, the money that we are talking about was the fair share that we got from the last Bew review discussions. I would be very supportive of any discussion with the UK Government about a fair share for Scotland, but I hope that the Scottish Government will ensure that that stays in the farming portfolio.

Mairi Gougeon: Yes.

The Convener: Mr Burgess has indicated that he wishes to come in.

George Burgess (Scottish Government): To respond to Mr Eagle's initial question about what work is being done, a meeting is going on right now among my officials to frame advice to the cabinet secretary on the matter. She has outlined a number of different areas that might deserve additional funding. We need to look at whether we use some of our existing grant mechanisms or create new ones and how we deliver support for the food processing sector. I give an assurance that a lot of work is being done on exactly that question so that we can make decisions and give an indication to the sector as soon as we possibly can.

On the split of funding between the next financial year and the year after, I do not want to put words into its mouth, but the NFUS's reaction to the larger sum of money being available in the second year has been positive, not least because that will help businesses to plan. The budget document gives the certainty that that money is coming back, so it helps businesses to plan for that.

Tim Eagle: Thank you, Mr Burgess.

At the moment, there is a lot of talk in Europe about bureaucracy, red tape and the depth of the application process. I suppose that I want to make a shout-out. I ask you to consider ensuring that,

whatever grant mechanism you come up with, the application process is not a very complicated one that new entrants have to spend thousands of pounds in consultants on in order to access the grant.

Mairi Gougeon: I see that George Burgess is nodding, and I am nodding as well, because we are very cognisant of that. We do not want to make it too onerous for people to apply to the scheme, let alone for us to administer it. I completely appreciate your point.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I will ask about the 75 per cent funding cut in the national test programme, which is occurring in the year in which the Government wants to introduce part of the whole-farm plan. Will you explain the emphasis on increasing uptake at a time when there is a budgetary cut?

11:00

Mairi Gougeon: I am happy to do that. I will break down the overall funding that is available in the agriculture reform programme. I think that the delivery costs of the programme are staying at the same level, which is £5 million. On the national test programme, importantly, we now have capital available over the course of the year contributing to that. Previously, when we have had higher amounts allocated to the national test programme, we have not been able to fully utilise that funding.

In previous meetings, we have talked about the level of claims that have come through for the preparing for sustainable farming—PSF—scheme. We have allocated an amount that we believe will be fully utilised by the claims that are coming through. In a year in which we will make some requirements for the whole-farm plan mandatory, such as those on carbon audits, soil sampling analysis and animal health and welfare plans, it is important that we continue to provide support for that. That is a reflection of the greater level of spend that we have been able to undertake over the past few years.

Beatrice Wishart: It is important that funding is available for those who have two or three plans to put in place, as there are costs involved in that. I echo Tim Eagle's point that plans cost money.

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right. Obviously, the situation in the first year was disappointing. In one of my appearances at the committee to discuss the budget, I think that I said that we had seen a low level of claims initially. I understand that it is a new scheme and that it is very much demand led. However, over the past few years, demand has gradually increased as more people have become aware of the scheme and as we are approaching the point at which some of the requirements of the whole-farm plan

will become mandatory. I completely agree with your point. It is really important that we continue to provide support, and we have allocated funding for that in the coming year. The trajectory that we have seen has been positive.

The number of claims that we are seeing this year is probably not as high as the number that we saw last year, but we still have a couple of months to go. In the final period in the claims window, there is always a large uptick in the number of people processing their claims.

The Convener: I have a question on the back of that. You talked about the PSF scheme, which has a carbon audit element. There is also carbon audit funding through the farm advisory service. It is my understanding that the PSF scheme was not fully committed the last time round. Will you give us clarification on whether that scheme is likely to reopen and, if so, when? Also, the farm advisory service scheme was paused in September 2024. Is that likely to reopen or is it permanently closed?

Mairi Gougeon: The year 2024-25 was due to be the last one in which we offered support for carbon audits and soil sampling, but I am keen that that continues in the coming year, given that some of the audits will become mandatory. I will look to confirm further details of that in due course. I am not in a position to say exactly when that will reopen or relaunch, but that is what we are considering for the coming year.

You are right in relation to the carbon audits that the farm advisory service was offering, but we also had that avenue available through the PSF scheme, and I believe that people were being redirected to that.

I do not know whether George Burgess has more information on what exactly will be available through FAS next year. That has been part of the offering in previous financial years, and I would expect that to be the case this time round, but perhaps George has further information.

George Burgess: I think that we expect a similar level of funding to be available for FAS. As the cabinet secretary said, the fact that the carbon audit stream from FAS had to close in September, as has happened in previous years, has not meant that farmers were unable to get support; it is just that the support has instead been delivered through preparing for sustainable farming. PSF closed at the end of December, as it normally does. As the cabinet secretary said, farmers still have until late February to come in with claims for that, and the intention is to reopen PSF so that businesses can claim again. During the past few years, we have seen a sort of hockey stick curve, with relatively low claims being made in the early part of the year and a big peak towards the end of the year.

The Convener: There will certainly be a big peak if farmers feel that the scheme is going to close at the end of February and not reopen. For clarification, it is likely that the PSF will reopen, although we are still waiting for clarification about when that will happen, and carbon audit funding will not be available through FAS—is that correct?

Mairi Gougeon: It is not available at the moment, but, as George Burgess said, we are providing FAS with a slight increase in funding during the coming financial year, so I expect that that will still be the offering. It is my intention to run the PSF scheme in the coming year, but I will update the committee when I have more details on that.

Ariane Burgess: I want to ask about the soil sampling part of the national test programme. It is good to hear that there is more uptake, but I am aware that not everyone is sampling their soil. I have become aware that we might need something like a pathway for people who are beginning; there are other people who are much deeper into soil sampling. What support will there be for that? As you know, we amended the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill to recognise that we need to support farmers to look at soil biology. Will that come into the national test programme, or will it be part of the direction of travel within the whole-farm plans?

Mairi Gougeon: You raise some important points. As you say, during the passage of the bill, we talked about the importance of soil health and soil biology, and some amendments recognised that. Nevertheless, there are no plans to extend what is available through PSF at the moment. We are focusing on the core audits that are currently available, and I do not expect that to change dramatically if we continue the scheme in the coming year. However, the on-going work and support is important, and we have touched on that in some of our previous discussions. It is all very well to undertake the analysis when it comes to carbon audits, but the work that is undertaken afterwards and the advice that is made available are important.

We are not directly supporting that through the funding schemes that we have available, but, as we look to implement the future tiers of the support framework and the continuous learning and development that we talked about during the passage of the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, that will feature heavily and it will be really important.

Emma Harper: Before I ask my question about agri-environment schemes, it occurs to me that we were briefly talking about multi-annual funding. If the UK Government committed to multi-annual funding, which is what we had before our

unfortunate exit from the European Union, would that make it easier for you to commit to it?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, it would, because we would have the security of knowing what we were going to receive and when. That would enable us to do it. If we had a multi-annual commitment, we would be in a better position to look at that.

Emma Harper: Thank you for clarifying that. I am interested in exploring the budget lines on agri-environment schemes. I think that I am correct in saying that the Government wants to support active farming, sustainable food production and the promotion of food security. Will you tell me about the budget allocation plans to support farmers, crofters and land managers with regard to agri-environment schemes?

I know that there are a lot of different schemes out there. You have just talked about soil sampling, so I would be interested in hearing about the budget for that.

Mairi Gougeon: Sometimes, how the budget is set out does not necessarily help, because it does not always cover the full extent of a scheme when it is under a more general heading and a number of different schemes are within it. The biggest element of funding is what we pay through the basic payments scheme and greening, which now have their own conditions attached through voluntary coupled support.

However, one of our key schemes, which you rightly mentioned, is the agri-environment climate scheme. It is probably the most key of the schemes that help us to achieve what we are trying to do with food production and working with the land in a way that also works for climate and nature. It is important to point out that, when it comes to the way that the funding for that is presented in the budget, it looks as though a fairly small capital element is allocated to the AECS scheme this year; however, as I touched on, a climate change fund is available, of which some has been allocated to AECS, so the full AECS funding is not listed in the RALRI budget. That other element falls within the net zero budget line; we are due to receive an extra £4.15 million, I think, in capital, to support the AECS scheme for the coming year. That would enable us to bundle the eligible applications that we received for last year's round as well as fund the five-year contracts on which AECS runs, including all our previous contracts.

However, that is by no means our only scheme for doing that. Last year, we also used the agricultural transformation fund to support AECS, to help businesses on their way to adhering to the water environment regulations that will come into force at the start of next year. That involved slurry

storage, irrigation lagoons and, a couple of years ago, slurry spreading equipment.

Within the business development line of the budget, too, we have a number of schemes—for example, the knowledge transfer and innovation fund, as well as a host of others—that people can apply to. Such funds are important in supporting and encouraging the innovation that we want in farming and crofting. Our key fund for achieving all our outcomes is probably the AECS, but it is important to point out the others.

Another thing that I have so far neglected to mention is the funding that we provide to NatureScot, which is helping us to pilot different approaches. Over the past year, we have supported its farming with nature programme, which has been piloting biodiversity audit and the app that is being considered. It has also been looking at piloting an outcomes-based approach for farming. We have provided funding to enable it to undertake that work for us, which has proved vital. Especially for biodiversity auditing, having such tools available is important.

Emma Harper: I have a final quick question. You have described lots of different schemes. I assume that some schemes might end and others might come on board because of innovation and farming practices that are wide ranging—applying to beef, sheep and dairy, for instance, as well as arable. Is there a schematic of what is out there that we could see? That would help us to understand the diversity of the schemes that are available.

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, I would be happy to set that out for the committee and show what will be available. On top of that, as you were speaking, I was reminded that we also provide funding for the Scottish dairy growth board. That is another example. We have a number of different funding schemes to help industry both directly and indirectly. I would be happy to set that out for the committee to provide transparency.

Tim Eagle: I have a quick practical point, cabinet secretary, for confirmation about the AECS. One of the slight barriers to accessing the scheme that I have heard of in the past is capital costs for things such as fencing, for example, if you want to manage an area of ground for grazing grass that is, at the moment, one big field. Is there an ability to access capital works, if needed, in this year's application process?

Mairi Gougeon: We have not as yet opened the round for the coming year, and we are considering that at the moment. Over the past couple of years, we have had to have more restricted rounds because of the capital situation that we have faced. It is all part of what we are considering at the moment, but, again, I would be happy to take

that point away and consider it for future iterations of AECS.

11:15

The Convener: Before we move away from agriculture funding, I want to go back to a comment that you made in response to Emma Harper. You seek a multiyear funding commitment from the UK Government, which, by its very nature, would suggest that a ring-fenced allocation of that funding would be in place for the rural portfolio. How would that ring-fenced money be calculated? Would it be on the basis of a percentage of the spend on agriculture and rural affairs south of the border and, therefore, in some way connected to rural policy there? How would you negotiate what a ring-fenced settlement might look like?

Mairi Gougeon: The fact that the funding has now been Barnettised, in essence, means that we will be tied to that. I will hand over to George Burgess, who will be able to provide more detail.

George Burgess: The recommendation in the original Bew review was for all Administrations to sit around the table and discuss exactly that question. As the cabinet secretary has said, that recommendation was agreed—although not acted on—by the previous UK Government, and the current UK Government has instead decided to move to Barnett. Future funding being based on a percentage of the spend south of the border would probably be a better position than the one in which we will end up under Barnett. The real answer is that we need to get around the table with the UK Government.

Various stakeholders, including the NFUS, have made the case that Scotland, with its larger landmass and greater potential to make improvements on biodiversity and climate change, is perhaps deserving of a greater share of the funding. However, it does not look likely that we will be able to have that discussion with the UK Government at the moment, so we might be stuck with Barnett.

I want to provide further clarity on AECS. Although our budgets are generally single year, AECS is one of the areas in which we provide multiyear commitments. The budget for the 2025-26 financial year will deliver on AECS commitments that have been entered into over the past couple of years. The applications that have come in for the 2024 AECS round have been assessed and we are clear that the budget is sufficient to meet the funding of the applicants who are deserving of it.

The Convener: We will move to our second theme, which is forestry.

Elena Whitham: Last week, the committee took evidence from forestry stakeholders, who collectively expressed a need for stable funding and investment to provide confidence and to enable the sector to meet its targets. One stakeholder likened the matter to a supertanker, which is not easily stopped, turned around or restarted. Given the reduction in the funding that was available last year due to the budgetary constraints and pressures, stakeholders expect that the planting targets for this year will be missed. In the light of that, it would be helpful for the committee to understand why woodland grants have not yet been restored to 2023-24 levels in the draft budget and how you envisage target realisation in that allocation.

Mairi Gougeon: Your characterisation of the position is absolutely right. As I have said to the committee previously, we were absolutely not where we had hoped to be in relation to woodland grants and support for forestry creation, because of the significant cuts to that budget over the course of last year. However, it has been really positive to see the increases in the budget that we have allocated to forestry, with an increase of 18 per cent this year.

As you have outlined, and as you have heard from different stakeholders in evidence, we will not meet the 18,000 hectares target. The peak of the planting over the course of last year was 15,000 hectares. We had been on such a positive trajectory, and it is really unfortunate that, because of last year's budget cuts, we were not on track to meet the 18,000 hectares target and will still not be on track to do it this year. I go back to your characterisation of the situation as like trying to turn a tanker around, because it is going to take time to build that figure up again.

Even if there had been an even bigger increase in the budget for woodland creation or the funding available for Scottish Forestry, I do not know whether all of that could have been used. We have to match the funding to projects that we know can come through the pipeline. I hope that, now that there has been an increase in funding, we can continue on a positive trajectory and rebuild confidence in the sector, so that it can continue to plan and invest.

Elena Whitham: The committee is very aware from stakeholders and our constituencies that forestry plays a hugely significant role in the rural economy and, I would also argue, in supply chains for the companies that use the timber. In my constituency, EGGER UK, which is part of the wood panel industry, brings high-quality jobs to a low-productivity area. There are concerns that, in 20 years' time, the availability of timber might start to drop off. At a time when we are looking to ensure that we have more home-grown timber so

that we can weather the issues resulting from the war in Ukraine, which interrupted supply—or, indeed, from Brexit, which has also complicated things—I am concerned that Forestry and Land Scotland, which employs more than 10,000 people across Scotland and is one of our prominent timber producers, has had its capital budget reduced by £3.4 million. Given that we know that demand for timber across Scotland will increase, why has that budget been cut this year?

Mairi Gougeon: There are a few issues to highlight in that respect. First, I absolutely recognise your point about the importance of forestry and the wider industry. According to statistics that we published fairly recently, the industry is worth more than £1 billion to our economy and employs more than 34,000 people. The fact that the UK is one of the biggest importers of timber always strikes me as not seeming right. There is so much more that we can and should do to utilise our home-grown resources, precisely because of all the challenges that you mentioned. It is really important that we are able to have continuity of supply, and I recognise that building the industry is very important.

We have two forestry agencies: Scottish Forestry and Forestry and Land Scotland. Scottish Forestry's budget has increased by 18 per cent, as that is where the majority of the funding for the woodland creation grants come from. You are right about Forestry and Land Scotland, but I would point out that, overall, there has been a 2 per cent increase compared with the budget in previous years. Of course, there are some differences in how the budget is communicated this year, because we have made in-year transfers. Forestry and Land Scotland is a key partner in peatland restoration and other important areas of work, but the important element that we should be focusing on is the increase in the woodland creation grant and the funding available for that, as it will enable us to plant more hectares of woodland.

Elena Whitham: It would be beneficial for the committee to understand the in-year transfers up front, but I know that we cannot really do that; the fact that they happen in year makes that difficult. When we look at budget lines and think about the year ahead, in-year transfers that we cannot really account for will always make things tricky for us.

Mairi Gougeon: I am more than happy to provide further information on that, because it is the case across the portfolio. For example, we tend to transfer our allocation for peatland restoration to different agencies that deliver the work on our behalf.

Tim Eagle: If I have got it right, we have a target of planting 200,000 hectares by 2032, but the work is only about 25 per cent complete. From

the emails that I have received, I know that the industry took quite a big hit last year. As the committee's briefing papers note, and as I have heard from the industry, some of the big companies are putting in hundreds of millions of pounds of investment. It is not cheap to put in the processes to extract or grow timber, and it takes a long time.

One graph that I have seen shows that production will increase slightly over the next few years and then drop off significantly. Potentially, that situation was made worse by last year's significant budget cuts. In hindsight, do you regret the fact that the money was cut from the budget, given that that has contributed to the industry's current lack of confidence?

Mairi Gougeon: I have been up front and honest about the impact. I have heard strong views in my engagement with different parts of the industry, including environmental non-governmental organisations, industry representatives and different businesses, and that point came across loud and clear.

It was particularly disappointing. As I have said to the committee, we were on such a positive trajectory and had planted 15,000 hectares—the highest-ever level—so to take that step back was bitterly disappointing. We had significant problems with capital funding right across Government last year. Every portfolio faced difficult choices, and the situation last year was particularly challenging. I never want to be in a position again of having to make such decisions and such significant cuts.

I must look to the future. We have to try to bring back or rebuild that confidence in the sector by ensuring that we maintain and increase funding in the years ahead, to enable us to reach our targets. You are absolutely right, and I was open about this last year: we were not going to meet the targets with the funding that we had available. We were trying to work within the funding that we had and trying to adjust it to maximise planting. About half of the funding applications that we receive through the forestry grant scheme come from smaller farms and businesses, and it is important to continue that support. I want to continue on that positive trajectory from here, so that we can rebuild towards the target and not be in the position that we faced last year.

Ariane Burgess: Good morning again, cabinet secretary. I wanted to pick up on something that came up at our forestry round table. We are talking about increasing planting and attempting to increase the amount of timber grown in Scotland, but, for me, what came out strongly in our discussion was the challenge of getting people into various jobs in the supply chain and the forestry sector. I was wondering where in the budget there was support for doing more of that

by, for instance, highlighting forestry as a job for young people. If we want to meet the targets and ambitions, and if we want Scotland to become a forest nation where, for example, we use home-grown timber to build housing, we need people to be excited about taking up roles in forestry and the respective supply chains.

Mairi Gurgeon: You are absolutely right, and we recognise that as an area that needs focus and attention. I do not know whether the committee is aware of the UK task force that has been established to consider woodland creation, in which the different Administrations come together to talk about the work that is taking place, about where it makes sense for us to work together and about whether there are areas where we could consider collaboration. Skills is one of the key areas, and you are absolutely right to focus on that.

Around the start of last year, I think, I hosted a woodland creation summit at which a mix of stakeholders from industry as well as from ENGOs considered the key challenges and how we could work together to tackle them. It was a really productive session and a lot of actions were taken on the back of it. Work is now being undertaken to see how we can encourage people to consider forestry as a career of choice, because there is no doubt that we are going to need the skills.

We have a number of working groups, and the industry leadership group is bringing together another part of the sector, so I offer the assurance that a lot of work is under way to consider the matter. I will meet the chief forester in a couple of weeks' time to discuss the plans and the key areas of focus. As I have said in previous responses, I hope that we are on that positive trajectory. I recognise that there is work to do in all areas—in woodland creation, on the timber and production side of things and, importantly, on skills—but we are taking action in each of those areas.

11:30

The Convener: You say that we are now on a positive trajectory, but that is only after last year's hugely damaging cut to the budget. Do you think that increasing the budget by significantly less than what the industry is looking for is a positive move? Does it not send the message to the industry that forestry is not a Government priority? We are still seeing funding that falls far short of what the industry needs.

We heard from Tim Eagle that some of our major industry players are looking outwith the UK to ensure stability for their businesses. Is an increase in this year's budget, after last year's

massive damaging cuts, adequate to turn around the oil tanker, as Elena Whitham referred to it?

Mairi Gurgeon: I hope so. I hope that I can get us back on track and on to a positive trajectory. I have not shied away from—indeed, I have very much confronted—the challenges that last year's budget presented, particularly in relation to forestry, but we have heard completely what stakeholders have said to us about that.

We must also consider what will be deliverable over the course of the coming year. There would be nothing to gain from massively increasing the budget—if that were possible—if the money was then not spent because the projects were not there. We must be careful about the allocations, because we all want to see them fully utilised.

I realise that confidence has been dented. We want to repair and build it again, and I believe that the budget that we have before us is a step in the right direction.

The Convener: We will move on to our third theme, which is NatureScot. We have a question from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart: NatureScot has received quite a significant cash-terms budget cut of £10 million, or 12.8 per cent. What implications will that have across your portfolio?

Mairi Gurgeon: The budget for NatureScot does not fall within my portfolio, and I do not have overall responsibility for the agency, so I am not too clear what the implications would be. As I mentioned, we provide funding to NatureScot through the farming with nature programme. The funding would be provided specifically to carry out that work, if it is to go ahead. It is hard for me to provide more detail as to exactly what that would mean for NatureScot, because I have not had discussions on that with it.

Beatrice Wishart: Have you had discussions with your counterpart in net zero and energy?

Mairi Gurgeon: Not specifically in relation to the NatureScot budget. Obviously, there are areas that impact my portfolio, as I have outlined. I do not have the overall portfolio responsibility for NatureScot, so it is hard for me to answer in any detail as to what the implications would be.

Beatrice Wishart: I suppose that I am talking about the funding for peatland restoration.

Mairi Gurgeon: We have had an increase in the peatland restoration funding that is available, and we pay a number of different agencies, including the national park authorities and NatureScot, to carry out that work on our behalf. We will see an increase in the funding that is provided for peatland restoration over the coming year, which will enable us to restore more

degraded peat. Over the past year, we have restored around 10,000 hectares, and we have a target of restoring around 250,000 hectares. The funding that we have available over the coming year will lead to potentially around 16,000 hectares being restored.

Beatrice Wishart: In relation to skills and the businesses that do the work, it is important for there to be confidence in the pipeline of funding.

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right. It is very similar to the conversation that we have just had on forestry. Peatland restoration is still a relatively young industry. We want to see it continue to build and grow, and we need that confidence to enable that to happen. That means that we must continue to provide funding to enable growth to take place and, exactly as you have said, to ensure that we build the skills, career opportunities and training opportunities. I believe that the funding that we have available in the budget this year puts us in that positive space, where we are able to restore more and, I hope, continue to build confidence in the industry.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, although you do not have overall responsibility for NatureScot, you must appreciate that, through its licensing functions, distribution of funds and, as you have touched on, peatland and nature restoration, as well as planning and advisory roles, NatureScot is responsible for areas that affect your portfolio in sectors such as aquaculture and forestry. Therefore, NatureScot's ability to perform will have a significant impact on your portfolio.

Given that NatureScot has had a 12 per cent cut in cash terms, or a 15 per cent cut in real terms, what discussions do you have about that with your counterpart, the Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy? Obviously, that cut will have a massive impact on the ability to deliver on your ambitions.

Mairi Gougeon: In preparation for appearing before the committee to discuss the budget, I was preparing for scrutiny in the areas of my overall portfolio responsibility. As I said, there are areas of funding that we transfer to NatureScot, so I just wanted to be clear on that. I am more than happy to follow up with more details for the committee on what that will look like for NatureScot.

Of course, there are impacts across my portfolio. NatureScot delivers a number of important functions, and we work closely with the organisation—I want to be absolutely clear on that. With regard to the absolute detail and how that is being managed for NatureScot, again, I am not able to answer that today. On the funding that is provided from my portfolio for those specific functions, I still fully expect that work to be undertaken and have an impact. I am more than

happy to follow up with further information on that for the committee.

The Convener: That would be appreciated.

We will move to theme 4, which is fisheries. The first question is from Tim Eagle.

Tim Eagle: This theme is of interest to me, and I have been doing a wee bit of research into it. I am getting increasingly worried about the marine directorate and its future. We heard this morning about issues in relation to salmon, and I am hearing lots of conversations from the fishing industry about what the directorate is doing. I was not a member of this committee at the time of the visit to the facilities, but I heard that they are not in a particularly good state. All of that leads me to worry that the marine directorate is not in a position to deliver the functions that are critical for Scotland. On top of that, it had a budget cut last year and has had another budget cut this year. How do you address the concerns that the marine directorate's capacity to deliver its functions simply is not possible within the context of a budget cut?

Mairi Gougeon: You have raised a number of hugely important points, and there are a few things that I want to touch on.

The presentation of the figures has not helped in any way. What looks like an overall budget cut is based on the budget revision. When you compare it with the original 2024-25 budget as it was published, you see that there has been a 1 per cent increase in the funding—I want to be clear on that point. It is more of a presentational issue, because of the changes in the way that the budget has been presented.

I visited Aberdeen recently to see the marine directorate—I have visited it previously—and I understand the committee's concerns about the site in Aberdeen. The directorate carries out vital functions for us in relation to science, compliance, enforcement and a number of different areas, as well as all the work that is being undertaken in relation to the marine environment. I believe that the directorate undertakes that role very well, and we are continuing to invest in the marine directorate as a whole.

I will touch on some of the particular issues that you raised. In the pre-budget committee evidence, we covered in some detail committee members' concerns about the estate in Aberdeen. At that time, I outlined the establishment of a project board to look at short-term measures for some of the issues at the site as well as at the medium-term and longer-term plans. That work is still very much under way.

It is important to highlight that, as challenging as the estate in Aberdeen is, there has been significant investment over the past few years.

Around £9 million has been spent on the estate, but further work is planned over the course of the coming year as we work towards longer-term solutions on the site. I listened carefully to the evidence that the committee received and to the concerns from a variety of stakeholders, and we are continuing to invest in the marine directorate because of the vital functions that it undertakes.

Ariane Burgess: We are aware of multiple strands of work that are being carried out by the marine directorate. Its commitments for this session of Parliament include fisheries management measures for marine protected areas and priority marine features, as well as work on fisheries stock assessments. I would like an update on the work on marine protected areas and priority marine features. There is a commitment to have that work completed by the end of this session, but is there enough resource in place for that and for the fisheries stock assessment? Will those tasks be carried out by different teams?

Mairi Gougeon: In a minute, I will hand over to Iain Wallace, who will be able to provide further detail.

The work on MPAs and PMFs is led by the net zero portfolio, although it sits within the marine directorate. We consulted on offshore measures last year and the results of that consultation are being analysed.

As I have told the committee, there are resource pressures on specific areas of work right across Government. The work on the inshore marine protected areas and the PMFs has taken a lot longer than was anticipated, purely because that has been such a big and complex piece of work on more than 160 different sites. We have proceeded with the offshore element, but I cannot provide a more specific timeframe for the work on the inshore element. I emphasise that that is a big and complex piece of work and one that is still very much on-going.

Iain may be able to give some further information.

Iain Wallace (Scottish Government): As the cabinet secretary said, we are undertaking an analysis of the consultation on offshore MPAs at the moment and will look to implement the measures later this year. The onshore work is more complex because there are 160 sites. We are working through that now and will provide a further update on the timeline in due course.

You also asked about the strategy work on fisheries management. We will provide an update this spring on all the actions that we have undertaken and will set out the next steps that we will take on that strategy.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you for those responses, but the root of my question was about whether there is enough resource in both places to meet those commitments. Is there enough funding in the budget?

Mairi Gougeon: We have an overall allocation for the marine directorate and there are different budget lines within that for the initial allocations. Iain Wallace will be able to give more detail, but at the moment there are indicative allocations, which are the starting point for business planning to look at the key priorities and decide where resources can best be placed. As I have said, we will be happy to provide the committee with further information about the internal allocations across each of the portfolios within the marine directorate if that would be helpful.

Ariane Burgess: That would be welcome. Thank you.

Beatrice Wishart: My question builds on the issue of resourcing. We were previously told that restructuring and a reduction in staff costs had resulted in a fall in the number of full-time marine directorate staff from 825 in December 2022 to 760 in December 2023. Is that staff reduction across the board or has it taken place in particular areas of the marine directorate? The obvious implication is that the marine directorate is lacking capacity to deliver its remit, which is of concern.

11:45

Mairi Gougeon: I will hand over to Iain Wallace, who will be able to give more information on what the staff reduction looks like. It is more appropriate for him to answer, because it is more of a workforce question.

There have been structural changes and people have transferred between directorates, which has not necessarily changed the work but makes it appear as if there have been bigger changes than there have been.

One key area that the directorate is constantly looking at is how to improve and become more efficient, and it is looking at wider transformation work as well. I have seen some of those initiatives at first hand. In my previous appearance at the committee, when we discussed some of those issues, I used the example of drone technology, which increases our capabilities and can help us in a number of ways.

However, there have also been changes in other areas, such as onshore operations. There has been an overall resource reduction of about 12 per cent but also a 39 per cent increase in the overall number of port inspections, and that is because workloads have been reprioritised.

I will hand over to Iain to give more information specifically about the workforce.

Iain Wallace: Thank you. I am happy to go through that. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, at the marine directorate we are very focused on workforce planning and how we get—[*Inaudible.*—]and efficiencies as we move forward. I can give you some key headlines, which relate to the changes that happened in 2022, and then share a bit about what we are planning to do in the future.

Since 2022, some short-term, temporary work has stopped, which has resulted in a change to our full-time equivalents. For example, we had 12 FTEs on a directorate information technology project, which involved external people coming in, and that project successfully concluded. We did have some FTEs on our transformation work, which involved starting to look at our structures and the efficiencies that we could get.

As we have previously outlined to the committee, restructuring took place across the directorate, and, as the cabinet secretary said, there were other structural changes in the directorate. In total, 14 FTEs moved over to the offshore wind directorate after it was created. Although it appears that there has been a reduction in the amount of marine work being done, that work is still happening across the Scottish Government but it is offshore directorate work.

The cabinet secretary mentioned that efficiencies are being made in operations. Some have come about through digitisation and some have come about through prioritisation. That is encouraging, because there has also been an uplift in productivity.

We continue to look at our annual delivery plan. In future years, we will be looking to keep up the theme of continuous improvement throughout our organisation, so that we can develop our strategic workforce plan and continue to deliver value for money.

Last year's drone trial on the marine protection vessel Hirta was really successful. We are starting to look at how that technology can improve our capability. We are working through our business cases and considering our next options, and we will provide some information on those in the coming months.

The committee is also aware of our science and innovation strategy, in which we are working with internal and external stakeholders on areas of research interest and the implementation plan. That is due to be published in April.

I hope that that helps to answer the question and explains the trajectory since 2022 in regard to the workforce.

Beatrice Wishart: Thank you.

Tim Eagle: Let us turn to vessel replacement. I do not want to mention the dreaded word “ferries”—although I just have—but we need to have the vessels out there. At the moment, some in the fishing industry are slightly worried about what is going on out at sea and whether we are boarding the right boats. I know that it is about risk, not nationality, but, fundamentally, is there enough money in the budget to continue to replace or upgrade vessels, where needed, so that our fleet and aircraft are always ready to maintain our fishing sector?

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right—those are a vital component of our important compliance and enforcement work. The committee will be aware that we have three marine protection vessels, two marine research vessels and, of course, aircraft and inshore patrol vessels.

Investing in that fleet is hugely important. Like any vessel, our vessels will reach an end-of-life stage. The two that are closest to that are the MRV Scotia and the MPV Minna. We are looking at a procurement exercise for those vessels and at what that might look like. I want to give an assurance that we are acutely aware of the issue and are trying to prepare for the future.

As I touched on in a previous answer, this is also about how we can best utilise new technologies. The pilot that was undertaken with the drone was very important. It is a really vital capability that we could well bring forward. It could very much help with compliance and enforcement, because we have a vast marine area to patrol. Looking at those other capabilities and at where we can best utilise new technologies will be really critical, as will maximising our resources. I give an assurance that that is very much at the forefront of our minds and that we are constantly looking to adapt and to add to our capabilities.

Tim Eagle: I have a very quick follow-up question. I do not disagree with your point: we should be looking at new and emerging technologies and how they can help in all sectors. However, can I double check that there is money in the budget to do that? Are you confident that the marine directorate has the funding to look into using drone technology, whether water based or airborne?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes—to investigate its use. We have already undertaken the pilot, so the evaluation of that pilot work will, of course, be important in how we take that forward. I do not have any concerns about the budget allocation that we have available for that. There is also a

long lead-in time, initially, when it comes to vessel procurement. I do not have any concerns about our being able to take forward that work in relation to the new technologies.

The Convener: Before I bring in Rhoda Grant, I have a question about vessel replacement off the back of that. If you run an organisation that has a minibus, you know that, after a certain time, it will need to be replaced. Every year, you build up a reserve so that it is there when the time comes and it needs to be replaced. Given that we have a static capital budget of £7.3 million for costs such as the marine labs and vessel running costs, is there a contingency fund or pot that has been built up with a view to the vessels being replaced when the time arises?

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right. Everything approaches its end-of-life period, and that is what we are planning for at the moment.

Of course, there are other costs that we also have to bear within the budget. Some of the biggest increases that we have seen relate to fuel costs, which have risen dramatically. To give the committee an idea of the impact of that, which can be very big, if fuel goes up by 13p a litre, that is an extra £50,000 a month in fuel costs for the vessels. That is a cost that we have to control and manage while we plan for new vessels as the vessels that we have approach their end-of-service years.

Rhoda Grant: The cabinet secretary will know that seafarers in the marine directorate are significantly underpaid compared with other seafarers employed by the Scottish Government. Does the budget allow there to be parity between them and people who work with Caledonian MacBrayne, for example, rather than their being underpaid so significantly?

Mairi Gougeon: I will have to ask Iain Wallace to provide more information on that.

Iain Wallace: I am happy to do so. Our marine pay negotiations are due to start in the coming months, so we can give further updates on that as they start to progress.

We have seen significant uplifts in pay. The last pay deal that was agreed with the marine unions was a two-year pay deal that will run out this year. That included some reform options, which gave seafarer colleagues options to do call-back on the vessels, which was also well received.

We can give further updates as we start to progress through the marine pay negotiations. However, we are content that there is sufficient money in the budget.

Rhoda Grant: It would be useful to see the comparisons, with your seafarers and those who work with CalMac progressing towards equality.

Ariane Burgess: Cabinet secretary, I am interested in the inshore fisheries management improvement programme, which I believe is referred to as IFMI—another acronym to add to our lives. Has there been an assessment of the anticipated costs of developing a new inshore fisheries framework under IFMI to ensure that it is funded sufficiently?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, we have some wonderful acronyms, particularly in this portfolio. I think that costs will very much feature in the programme of work for inshore fisheries, but I do not think that we are at that stage at the moment. As the committee will be aware, we have undertaken an initial call for evidence, so we are still very much at the early stages of that work. Of course, any costs will feature as that work progresses.

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I will raise something that was brought up in last year's budget discussions, which is that the marine directorate could maximise income generated through the likes of commercial science, licensing fees and energy consenting fees. Has there been an increase in those revenues as a result? If so, how are they being reinvested?

Mairi Gougeon: We seek to maximise income from those areas where we can. I do not have specific figures on that in front of me. Iain, do you have that information to hand?

Iain Wallace: I can provide the headline figure. In the past year, the marine directorate has received £9 million in total income from the variety of sources that Emma Roddick talked about. Some of that has come from our licensing functions, some from our science colleagues and some from using our aircraft. We can follow up with a breakdown of that £9 million.

Emma Roddick: That would be helpful. Are you exploring other potential options for revenue raising that is not happening at the moment?

Iain Wallace: That is something that we will pick up through the implementation plan for our science and innovation strategy. As part of that, we will consider what options there may be in future years from a science perspective.

The Convener: I have a question that was raised when the committee visited the marine directorate's science laboratories in Aberdeen. It is about how priorities are identified in the annual delivery plan. I understand that the annual delivery plan is being formulated and will be published in due course.

Cabinet secretary, you will be delighted to hear that I am going to raise the topic of cockles, for which we have a fishery whose work on stock assessment has, up to now, been almost entirely

funded via UK grant schemes and facilitated by local fishermen and scientists. At the moment, it is quite clear that there is an economically viable cockle fishery based on vessels in the Solway. The missing element is the stakeholders, including South of Scotland Enterprise, which is interested in the economic sustainability of Dumfries and Galloway as a region. How do we trigger an investigation into possibilities such as the opening of a new cockle fishery in the annual delivery plan, given that, based on the information that I have seen, which is in the public domain, it would be cost neutral and potentially generate more than £3 million for the economy that the fishery would border?

Mairi Gougeon: Discussions on the annual delivery plan are about looking at priorities for the coming year and how to best allocate resources within that year. We have had discussions on this previously, convener, and I have not received final advice in relation to potential next steps for the proposal. As we have said in previous conversations, it would feature in the wider discussion that we will have about overall priorities. However, it is important for me to be in receipt of that advice first.

The Convener: How do you juggle national priorities and local priorities?

Mairi Gougeon: That is part of the discussions that we have on overall resource allocation. Something being a local issue rather than a national one does not make it less important, because it can be economically significant for a particular part of the country, which makes it important. Those matters are all part of the balanced discussions that have to take place.

The Convener: Thank you. We will now move on to our final theme—theme 5—which is on the islands.

12:00

Beatrice Wishart: Cabinet secretary, can you say whether the £26 million spend on the islands programme has had a positive impact on population levels and economic development in the islands?

Mairi Gougeon: I am not too sure that I would be able to provide precise information on a definitive connection or exact statistics. What is important is that, when we look at applications to the islands programme, we require them to meet our objectives in the overall national islands plan across a number of different areas.

I would hope that the islands programme is having a positive impact on the economy and local populations through some of the programmes and projects that we have funded. One that

automatically springs to mind is a new nursery that is being constructed in Orkney. I visited the project in September, when I heard about the positive impact that it will have for people when it is up and running.

The islands programme has funded specific initiatives that might not have taken place otherwise that I think will have positive impacts on the economy as well as on populations. It has helped to fund various projects on the islands, depending on the differing needs of different communities, such as accommodation for temporary workers. In past few years that the islands programme has been in operation, I think that there have been more than 70 projects across 50 different islands. I believe that, as a whole, they have had a positive impact.

Beatrice Wishart: In the national islands plan review, the majority of respondents thought that there had been no progress on 11 of the 13 objectives. That relates to objective 3, on transport, and to the objective on fuel poverty.

Mairi Gougeon: We listened really carefully to the outcomes of that consultation and to what islanders are saying about a new national islands plan. All of that will be taken into consideration. As the committee will be aware, we are in the process of developing a new national islands plan, and we are considering how best to update the first plan to reflect the needs of island communities. There will, of course, be further engagement on that as we go forward. We have to listen carefully to what islanders are telling us.

Beatrice Wishart: Thank you.

Emma Roddick: Although there is undoubtedly positivity in the islands about the funding that has been made available through the islands plan, the committee has heard concerns from some local authorities about the competitive bidding approach. I have raised that issue in the past, and projects in the Shetland Islands and in Highland Council areas have raised it with me. They do not want to compete against one another and they say that making allocations to the authorities to distribute might be a better way forward. Will future islands plan funding use the same approach that has been used?

Mairi Gougeon: I know that the committee has scrutinised that issue over the past few years. It is important to know that we have listened carefully to all the recommendations that the committee has made on the back of that scrutiny on how we can improve our allocation of that funding and the make-up of the programme board. We have very much listened to, taken in and acted on that feedback.

It is always difficult when considering whether to use a direct allocation model or a competitive bid

model—there is no getting around that. If you directly allocate, that naturally means that there is not as much money—that is, smaller pots might go to different islands, which means that bigger projects might not be able to go forward because the level of funding will not be there to support them. That is just one of the trade-offs that there are when the two different models are considered.

We have retained the competitive bid model and have refined it over the past couple years. Although I completely understand that some local authorities can see that they might lose out in one round, we believe that that model allows bigger projects to proceed that might not have gone ahead otherwise. I think that our competitive bid model enables a greater variety of projects, too. The Scottish Futures Trust has undertaken a lot of work, including with local authorities, on preparation of those projects and on looking at the wider pipeline.

I believe that we have acted on the advice that we have received from the committee. Our competitive bid model is the most appropriate at the moment, but I am more than happy to take on board and consider any specific feedback from the committee on the matter. Some of the projects have been big and hugely important, and we probably have the right model in place.

Rhoda Grant: I want to ask about cross-cutting work in the Government. You are responsible for the islands programmes and the implementation of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, and you are trying to level the playing field between islands and the mainland. However, in the local government budget, for example, we see that two out of our three island authorities have faced cuts since 2013-14, with an 18 per cent cut in Eilean Siar's budget. It seems to me that you are looking at getting funds in place to help the islands while other departments do not recognise the issue in any way whatsoever, and cuts in budgets are making your job harder.

Mairi Gougeon: It is the responsibility of all parts of Government and all relevant authorities to undertake island communities impact assessments when it is believed that there would be a disproportionate impact on those communities. That work is very much undertaken.

The Government is vast and I have a cross-coordination role in relation to which I am supported by the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity. We are supported by a team of islands officials who embed that work across Government and with different departments to ensure that our island communities are always taken into consideration.

I do not think that it is fair to say that my portfolio cares about islands and others do not. You have

picked a specific example, and I do not have all the figures on that, but my portfolio is not the only portfolio responsible for investing in islands or, in fact, in rural communities. I mentioned climate funding earlier. Funding for that sits with the NZET portfolio and will be transferred to the transport portfolio, which has specific projects that are set to benefit rural and island communities as well.

There are funds right across Government, in other portfolios, for undertaking and delivering. The work that is undertaken through the national islands plan is really helpful in pulling all of that together, because it is about showing other parts of Government what we are doing across Government to deliver for our island communities. The work that we are taking forward on the refresh of the national islands plan, which ensures that we have identified the most pressing challenges for island communities and that we are taking action to address them, is really important.

Rhoda Grant: Would an island communities impact assessment have been carried out on the local government budget cuts?

Mairi Gougeon: I expect island communities impact assessments to be part of the work that Government does. When there is a disproportionate impact, those impact assessments should be undertaken, much in the same way as we do BRIAs and equality impact assessments and provide fairer funding. I expect that it forms part of what portfolios are looking at.

The Convener: We are really looking for confirmation that those impact assessments were done, rather than that they should have been done.

Mairi Gougeon: I do not have them in front of me, but I expect that they have been done. I can follow that up with the committee and provide confirmation.

The Convener: That would be appreciated.

I believe that we do not have any other questions, other than that we probably need to ask, for transparency and for the record, what your favourite acronym from the portfolio is. [*Laughter.*]

Mairi Gougeon: I do not know. IFMI is the one that is closest to my mind, so I think that it is my new favourite.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We know that you are under the weather today, and it has been a bit of a mammoth session with salmon and the budget, so we appreciate your efforts and those of your officials. Thank you very much for attending.

That concludes our business for today.

Meeting closed at 12:09.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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