



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 25 June 2014

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.scottish.parliament.uk or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Wednesday 25 June 2014

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	3893
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION.....	3894
Plant Health (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 (SSI 2014/140)	3894
Specified Diseases (Notification and Slaughter) (Amendment) and Compensation (Scotland) Order 2014 (SSI 2014/151)	3894
PETITION	3895
Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)	3895

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)
*Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
*Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
*Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab)
*Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD)
*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)
*Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Eileen Stuart (Scottish Natural Heritage)
Andrew Taylor (Scottish Government)
Paul Wheelhouse (Minister for Environment and Climate Change)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee

Wednesday 25 June 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Rob Gibson): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the 20th meeting this year of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. Before we go ahead, I remind everyone to turn off their electronic equipment, apart from those who are using tablets for the purposes of the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take items 4 and 5, which involve consideration of draft letters to the Scottish Government on resource use and the circular economy and on the land reform review group's final report, in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Plant Health (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 (SSI 2014/140)

Specified Diseases (Notification and Slaughter) (Amendment) and Compensation (Scotland) Order 2014 (SSI 2014/151)

10:02

The Convener: We have two negative orders to consider under item 2. Members should note that no motion to annul either order has been lodged. I refer members to paper 1. Do members have any comments?

There being none, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations on the orders?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petition

Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)

10:03

The Convener: Under item 3, the committee will take evidence from the Minister for Environment and Climate Change on public petition PE1490, which is on the control of wild geese numbers. The petition was lodged by Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation.

I welcome the minister, Paul Wheelhouse. Good morning. I invite you to introduce your officials and make any opening remarks that you require to make.

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): Thank you, convener. I have with me Eileen Stuart, who is head of policy and advice at Scottish Natural Heritage, and Andrew Taylor from the Scottish Government, who advises me on matters such as geomangement and goose management.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the committee and describe some of the work that the Government is doing in relation to supporting protected goose populations and managing the impact of geese on crofting and agriculture, which is often felt on islands and in coastal areas.

First, I emphasise the conservation success that goose management has achieved over the years. Populations of some species have recovered from dangerously low levels. Goose management is a complex and sometimes contentious issue, which is why we seek to maintain dialogue and consensus through stakeholder groups, in particular the national goose management review group or NGMRG. The group is chaired by the Scottish Government and supported by SNH, and its members include farming, crofting, sporting and conservation interests.

I recognise that, in certain areas and at certain times, geese can cause serious agricultural damage. Serious impacts tend to be localised and found in particular areas, such as on Islay, but there is also a general level of goose impact associated with the movement of migratory species, such as in parts of Caithness.

Local goose management schemes are the principal mechanism to support geese and agriculture. The Islay scheme was the first scheme and it is by far the largest, but there are others at the Solway, Kintyre, Strathbeg and South Walls on Orkney, which are funded by SNH.

From 2010 until this year, the two schemes on the Uists and Tiree and Coll have been funded under the machair life project. It has wider objectives that relate to the preservation of traditional cereal production, which helps to support the biodiversity of other bird species. Goose management has been an important aspect of that, to prevent damage to those cereals. Those two goose control schemes continue as adaptive management trials, which I will come to shortly.

There was some discussion about whether the Scotland rural development programme could be used to help fund goose management schemes. The national goose management review group considered that, and stakeholders were pretty unanimous in feeling that the SRDP would not be a suitable vehicle to deliver that funding because of the competitive nature of the scheme, the existing budgetary pressures and the localised nature of goose impacts. I will be happy to discuss that issue further, as I know that the convener is interested in it.

Goose management continues to be funded directly via SNH, and £1.2 million per annum is directed at supporting farmers and crofters in managing geese. Goose management policy has evolved over the years and the national group has had a dual role in overseeing local schemes and advising ministers on national policy. The policy is reviewed periodically; it was most recently reviewed in 2010. For some time, goose management policy has been guided by three high-level objectives: to meet the United Kingdom's nature conservation obligations, to minimise the economic loss to farmers and to maximise the value for money of public expenditure.

In its response to the 2010 review, the Government welcomed the report, particularly the recognition that goose management schemes had been a conservation success and the recommendation that the local approach should be continued. We also recognised the challenges that existed in relation to a few vulnerable species such as Greenland white-fronted geese on Islay, the coverage of the schemes in certain areas and the issues around rising costs. In addition, we undertook to pursue an adaptive management approach in relation to geese, and I will now describe some of that work.

Over the past two years, SNH has been developing adaptive management pilots that are designed to prevent serious agricultural damage on Scottish islands from resident greylag geese. Pilots are running on Orkney, the Uists and Tiree and Coll, and a Lewis and Harris scheme is due to start this year. The development of the pilots has involved local input, and they have generally been

welcomed by local crofters and farmers. They differ in design because of local conditions.

SNH has used the powers that are available to it in legislation to license the limited sale of wild goose carcasses that have arisen from the pilots. The general prohibition on the sale of meat from wild geese was introduced for conservation reasons, and we recognise the concerns of certain stakeholders about the weakening of those controls. However, we believe that sufficient safeguards are in place to allow the sale of meat from wild geese in those cases, and the move has been a success.

In 2012, ministers announced that SNH would examine how to develop an adaptive management approach to goose management on Islay. That is a highly controversial step, and I have assured stakeholders that we would proceed with those measures only if we were certain that it could be done in a manner that was compliant with domestic and European legal obligations. The Islay project is on-going and SNH is consulting interested parties on the draft strategy. Part of that work includes consulting European Union member states on international aspects of managing migratory goose populations.

I think that we can agree that we are dealing with a complex and contentious issue and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for managing geese. We value discussion and consultation, and we seek to maintain a consensus when we can. This has been a necessarily brief description of the work that we are involved in, but I will be happy to take any questions that the committee has.

The Convener: Thank you for that, minister. I will kick off the questioning. If possible, we want to keep questions about the migratory species separate from questions about the resident goose population, although we know that the flocks get mixed. That will allow us to focus on Islay before we move on to the wider discussion about greylag geese.

Do you have a view on what would be a sustainable number of barnacle geese on Islay?

Paul Wheelhouse: A considerable amount of effort is going into studying that. We have acknowledged that, in Scotland, we have about 65,000 Greenland barnacle geese. That constitutes a high proportion of the world's population of Greenland barnacle geese, so we recognise that we have a responsibility to the international community to manage that population sensitively while, obviously, taking account of the agricultural impact that it has.

Because of the work that goes into monitoring the take of birds through lethal scaring—the bag limit, as it is called—on Islay and the particular

mechanisms to ensure that there is an accurate count of how many are killed and how many are in the resident population, we are reasonably confident that the number of barnacle geese on Islay is coming back down again. We believe that we have a total of 46,500 geese of all species on Islay in the current year, which is a reduction on the previous year. The suggestion is that there are slightly more than 40,000 barnacle geese at the moment.

The Convener: That is much higher than the number in previous decades, according to the information that we have. We are reaching a point at which we are hosting in those areas the largest number of those birds that has been seen in the time of our records. Am I correct?

Paul Wheelhouse: Yes. If it would help the committee's understanding, I can give some figures. I stress that they are seasonal averages. Throughout the whole season, the average numbers for barnacle geese have risen from a low point—for the period that I have before me—of about 33,452 in 2001-02 to 46,903 in 2012-13. There was a peak prior to that, before numbers came down slightly. We believe that the numbers are now lower than that, and are nearer 40,000. It is not possible to say exactly why they have come down in the past year. There might be something happening elsewhere in their range—in Greenland, for example. We will investigate the extent to which the activity that we have undertaken in the past 12 months has helped to disperse the population.

The Convener: The question of dispersal is important. If there is a displacement effect, other areas will be affected by barnacle geese in particular.

Paul Wheelhouse: That is true. If we remove the geese from Islay, they will potentially go to other parts of their natural range.

The Convener: We have talked about better data. Are you happy that our figures are robust? How well are we collating information when, for example, the geese are shot? How do you suggest that we could improve that data?

Paul Wheelhouse: On Islay, we are reasonably confident that the numbers are accurate. Because of the legal requirements that affect an annex 1 species, there is quite strict monitoring of the numbers that are taken. Each year, we set a bag limit, which is a limit to the number that can be lethally scared or euthanised. That is divided up between individual farmers, who have a specific allocation and a legal duty to report how many they actually take.

It is worth saying that it is not always the case that the full bag limit is taken. In previous years, the number has fallen below what has been set.

However, because of that requirement, we are able to collate the data and work out the number that have been taken that year.

Andrew Taylor can say more about the on-going monitoring of the numbers.

Andrew Taylor (Scottish Government): The counts on Islay are good, so there is good information available. I think that there is monthly counting in relation to payments under the Islay local goose management scheme.

Paul Wheelhouse: It would be fair to say that we have data for other populations of geese—greylag and other species. However, I would say that Islay represents the best information that we have, of all the populations that are under study.

The Convener: It was put to us that there could be a better collation of those figures for greylag geese, which get mixed up in the same flocks as barnacle geese. However, that tends to be less of a problem on Islay than on other islands. How much less of a problem is it? Is the greylag problem increasing on Islay as well?

10:15

Paul Wheelhouse: When I visited Islay last year, I heard anecdotal evidence that greylag numbers were still modest but were on the increase. Just to give you a sense of the dynamics, I believe that greylag geese seem to learn quite well from scaring activities. I did not observe this myself, but I was told by local farmers and SNH and Scottish Government colleagues who were with me that the geese are moving away from hanging with the barnacle geese, which are being targeted for action, towards the Greenland white-fronted geese, which are not the subject of the lethal scaring activity. I was joking with colleagues earlier, but the fact is that when you hang with the crows, you get shot with the crows, and the greylag geese are smart enough to realise that they should stick with the Greenland white-fronts.

As I have said, the numbers of greylags are modest on Islay; they are much more substantial on Orkney, where the issue became significant and where we had to take additional adaptive management action with the support of members of the national goose management review group. However, the numbers are difficult to monitor, even on Orkney, because although much of the activity is on the mainland, we believe that some greylags might have been dispersed to surrounding islands in the archipelago, and we need to improve our understanding of exactly how many have moved.

The Convener: Indeed—and we might discuss some of the issues involving greylags in a moment or two.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, minister. You have just started to outline the situation with mixed flocks but, as I understand it, the barnacles on Islay still mix with the threatened Greenland white-fronted geese. With regard to an issue highlighted by the RSPB, is any form of risk assessment being done or likely to be done on the implications of the habitats directive, which, after all, has global implications?

Paul Wheelhouse: We remain concerned about the future of the Greenland white-fronted geese on Islay. Their numbers have not been holding up well. It is impossible to say whether that is down to competition with other species for feed or whether other factors such as climate change or their grounds in Greenland or elsewhere are at play. Claudia Beamish is right to say that Greenland white-fronts mix with barnacle geese, which makes it all the more difficult to target scaring activities at the barnacles to move them off the ground.

From what I have been told by experts on this issue, there are certain types of ground that Greenland white-fronts prefer but which barnacles do not like, and if we could encourage more of that kind of habitat, it would allow us to split off the Greenland white-fronts from the barnacle geese and ensure that our adaptive management process had more impact on the barnacle numbers. In developing a dossier, we have to demonstrate to the Commission that we are treating with sensitivity the impact not only on barnacles but on the Greenland white-fronts. When the schemes were last reviewed, the Greenland white-fronts were flagged up as the major conservation concern, and it was agreed that more activity would be targeted at helping them. We are very much bearing in mind that we have to continue to monitor the situation, but I believe that Eileen Stuart wishes to comment.

Eileen Stuart (Scottish Natural Heritage): Perhaps I can give the member some reassurance. Before the schemes get up and running, we undertake as part of the design a habitats regulations assessment, which considers all species of conservation interest, including Greenland white-fronts, and allows us to analyse the management measures that we are putting in place, such as scaring and lethal scaring, and ensure that they have no adverse impacts on those birds. One such measure, for example, is that licences to shoot barnacle geese can be used only when Greenland white-fronts are not in the same field. People are therefore very aware of the need to target efforts at barnacles and of our special concerns about Greenland white-fronts.

As the minister said, we are looking at more ways of undertaking management specifically to support Greenland white-fronts and to try to take a separate approach to habitat diversification for them, to allow for more targeted management.

Claudia Beamish: On a broader issue, minister, there is a feeling among conservation groups that they have not been involved in structures for taking forward stakeholders' views on the management plan for Islay. Do you have concerns about that?

Paul Wheelhouse: I have had a number of lengthy discussions with the RSPB, and I went to Islay to visit the RSPB reserve. We have always been open to dialogue with the RSPB, which is involved in the national goose management review group, as is the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust. Conservation groups have an interest in that regard, and if other groups want to be involved they should communicate that to us. I have not been made aware that anyone feels that they are not being involved in the process.

I am aware of the RSPB's concerns about the approach, but I think that the society has been well consulted. Indeed, I invited the RSPB to make suggestions about how to manage habitat on Islay along the lines that Eileen Stuart and I have been talking about, for example by providing more sacrificial feeding areas for geese on suitable under-used or neglected land. I welcome suggestions from the RSPB.

The Convener: I was going to come on to management. At last week's meeting, Andrew Bauer, from NFU Scotland, talked about a report that is about to be published on the situation on Islay. When can we expect the report to be published, so that we can understand the implications of proposals for adaptive management?

Paul Wheelhouse: Eileen Stuart will talk about the report. There is an on-going study in that regard. In the run-up to my visit to Islay and after my visit we committed to working with local stakeholders to identify a strategy for adaptive management that would work in sympathy with our obligations under the habitats and birds directives while addressing the serious agricultural damage, which I saw for myself when I was there. Let me put the issue in perspective by saying that when I visited Mr Craig Archibald's farm I saw 2,000 to 3,000 geese feeding in one field—voraciously, I have to say. There is clear evidence of impact locally.

The study is on-going and we need to understand the reasons for the recent drop in goose numbers that I mentioned. We need to ascertain whether that is a response to something that is happening outside Scotland or an effect of

the adaptive management that is going on through legitimate lethal scaring and the authorised bag limit. The issue is finely balanced. We must be sure that the limit that we set each year is not threatening the conservation of the species.

Eileen Stuart: The Islay goose management strategy is in its second draft version. It is on our website and available for download, so I can pass on the link to the committee. The first version was circulated to all the key stakeholders, including the RSPB, the WWT and NFUS, and we have had constructive comments from a number of parties, which we tried to take on board in the second draft.

We had a meeting of the national goose management review group yesterday, and all those parties were around the table. We spent more than an hour discussing the management strategy. There have also been discussions and meetings on Islay; there was an open meeting two nights ago, and notices had been put up all around the island inviting people to come and discuss the strategy. We are seeking as wide input as we can get.

The strategy is quite a lengthy document—it runs to about 70 pages—so there is quite a lot in there. We are trying to address all the issues to do with geese and to ensure that conservation status is at the heart of the strategy, while doing what we can to find a sustainable solution that reduces the impact on farming. It is a very live and on-going piece of work.

The Convener: Do you want to come in at this point, Alex?

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): It would make sense, convener, if that is all right with you. I was going to raise this matter later, but we have got to it already.

A concern that was raised at our stakeholder meeting was that, because we are talking about migratory species, other countries are involved. What discussions have taken place with countries such as Greenland and Iceland and with the European Commission, given that other countries will be involved in the life cycle of these species?

Paul Wheelhouse: We have an obligation to consult countries such as Ireland, where there is a significant issue with migratory species such as the barnacle goose, as well as Iceland, Greenland and the Netherlands. We have written to all those Administrations, outlining our emerging approach and inviting them to give feedback. There has been informal discussion with Irish officials—but between ministers, but between officials—but we have not yet received any formal feedback from Ireland on its position and the implications.

Andrew Taylor: Minister, we have also written to the Netherlands, and we intend to write to the Republic of Ireland, Greenland and Iceland.

The Convener: I remind the officials that they can address me, if they wish, so that we can all hear the points that they are making.

Paul Wheelhouse: In case you did not pick that up, Andrew Taylor said that we have not yet written formally to the Irish although we have written to the Netherlands. We can provide the committee with further information on that.

We need to engage with those Governments because of the high share that we have of the global population of barnacle geese and because of the implications that our actions will have for the biodiversity objectives of those countries. That is the responsible thing to do before we take any steps. We will also want to speak to the Commission after having consulted our near neighbours about the implications for them, and we will need to demonstrate that we have tried everything that we can other than adaptive management to manage the problem.

Alex Fergusson: I ask for a further clarification in the hope of putting to bed the concern that was raised with us. I take it that, where possible, you will take any representations that have been made by those other countries into consideration before finally approving the plan that has been worked on.

Paul Wheelhouse: Absolutely. The intention is to get their genuine feedback, and if they have concerns about the approach we need to address those concerns. It will also help us to understand the measures that are being taken in those countries—for example, measures may be being taken in Ireland that could be useful to us. There is a fact-finding element to the process as well.

Alex Fergusson: That is very useful. Thank you.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): It seems that the behaviour of migratory species is being altered, at times, by the impacts of climate change. Has any work been done to determine how the numbers of geese that we are seeing are being impacted on by climate change? Their behaviour patterns may be changing. If so, do we have any indication whether that will lead to an increase or a decrease in their numbers?

Paul Wheelhouse: My gut feeling—it is purely a gut feeling; I do not have any empirical evidence to back this up, but I invite Eileen Stuart and Andrew Taylor to comment if they know of any such evidence—is that climate change will be having an impact. It is changing weather patterns, and the migratory patterns of geese may well be affected.

I do not know whether it is a long-term trend that will continue, but there is a suggestion that climate change has been a contributing factor to the substantial growth in the resident population of geese that stay in Orkney all year round. That is why we have targeted our action at the resident population and avoid shooting during periods when migratory geese are visiting Orkney.

The period in which we allow shooting is quite tightly defined so that we know that we are hitting only the resident population in an attempt to bring it down to something like the level that there used to be. There was a huge expansion in the population, which went from a few thousand very quickly up to 20,000, and that had a year-round impact on agricultural land. Given the importance of the beef herd in Orkney and the importance of grazing land to the viability of the farming community there, it was felt absolutely essential that we take action.

My gut feeling is that climate change is having an impact. How can we monitor that? We are developing the Government's research programme, and groups such as ClimateXChange are involved in looking at the impact of climate change on Scotland. We could also ask Scotland's Rural College and others to look at the issue. Eileen Stuart may be able to comment on the research that we are doing on the impact of climate change in this area.

10:30

Eileen Stuart: A lot of work is going on that is looking at populations and population trends. The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust works for us. It has an annual contract to keep tabs on the numbers and trends in this country and overseas. Therefore, we have very good data and we can analyse how the situation is changing in relation to climate changes. We are also undertaking more bird tagging and ringing to see whether there are any changes to movements and behaviours in the UK.

Climate change is an area of active investigation and one that we should continue to focus on.

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): You have taken me for the most part to where I was hoping that you would take me. Are we seeing trends—I think that we are—that suggest that this is a global issue? The Scottish Government has territorial responsibility, but the birds are responding to global weather patterns. Therefore, the Scottish Government and all of us must be informed by a global model of where birds will go because it might just be that, over the next 10 years, the populations will shift and shooting them now is irrelevant.

Paul Wheelhouse: We must be very mindful of the conservation status of a globally important species. However, I think that, in this case, the migration is on a regional level—it happens in the northern hemisphere rather than globally.

A problem that we have in identifying whether the issue relates to climate change or another factor is that we do not know what is happening to the geese when they are at the other end of their range up in Greenland. Huge climatic change is happening there, but the extent to which that is driving the change in population levels and migratory patterns is hard to tell.

Mr Don is absolutely right: we must work with our international partners because the issue does not just affect Scotland. We have a responsibility to a species that people in other countries value. We must be mindful of that and make sure that nothing that we do jeopardises the global future of the species. Therefore, we must tread very carefully in taking forward any adaptive management approach to make sure that it is sensitive to that issue while trying to do what we can to alleviate the problem, which is being felt at a local level in places such as Islay.

The Convener: We will move on to management methods. Is the shooting of barnacle geese on Islay compliant with the European directive on the conservation of wild birds? We have had a corrective from the RSPB about the interpretation of how the related court case that it brought was dealt with. We understand the detail of the case, so we do not need to go into that, but are you happy with the compliance issue?

Paul Wheelhouse: That is a key issue. We have talked about the detailed work that goes into understanding exactly what is happening in Islay in relation to the bag limit, how the scheme operates and how many birds are killed by lethal scaring. It is crucial that we have the monitoring data in order to back up our claims to Europe that we are not jeopardising the conservation status of the species and that we know precisely how many geese have been taken, how many are still there and the proportion of the viable population, so that we can ensure its future as a species. If, for example, it transpires that we can confirm that the numbers have fallen this year, we must look seriously at whether the limit that we have set for the current year is too high. We must be mindful of whether it is having a detrimental impact on the population.

In an ideal world, we would have a more dispersed pattern of barnacle geese. The people of Islay are lucky in many ways, because the geese are a tremendous spectacle and they attract tourism. However, from the farmers' point of view, they are unlucky because the impact of the geese hits the best quality land. We have to

help them to manage the situation but be very mindful that we need good-quality data, which is an issue that came out of the court case. Indeed, the ability to monitor, record and ensure that the bag limits are not being exceeded is absolutely crucial, so we have put a lot of effort into ensuring that that takes place, as Eileen Stuart and Andrew Taylor have explained.

The Convener: On controlling geese, other than shooting them, what methods are there? Lethal scaring has been questioned in relation to its displacement effect.

Paul Wheelhouse: It appears that non-lethal methods are effective for a short period, but the birds are intelligent and they adapt. As I explained, some species seem to be particularly adaptable. There is unfortunately only a short-term benefit from that activity—would that it were otherwise.

I saw some scaring activity being conducted when I visited Islay. When we visited one of the farms, we could see a neighbouring field where the geese were being moved on with lethal scaring. They flew for approximately half a mile, and dropped down in another field.

There is a challenge, given the relatively limited amount of very good-quality agricultural land in Islay, which is important for the livestock industry there. Unfortunately, the scaring technique just moves the geese—2,500 or 3,500 of them in one go—from one field to another, so the problem is just displaced around the island. The problem is even more complex in places such as Orkney, where the geese may be displaced from one island to another, where there may not be a similar level of scaring activity and the geese can therefore start to hammer the fields.

We must be conscious of the fact that we need to try every method that we can, short of lethal action. So far, those methods do not seem to have worked in the longer term, which is why we have challenged stakeholders to come forward with ideas for other long-term approaches that might help us.

That takes us back to Eileen Stuart's earlier point about separating different species of geese. We could perhaps help the Greenland white-fronts by giving them more of the habitat that they prefer, while taking more decisive action to manage the barnacle geese problem.

The Convener: This may be a bit left-field, but it has been suggested that cannon netting of geese before they are dispatched could be used if people are confident that they are able to separate out the different species of geese. Has that been tried?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will bring in Andrew Taylor on that one.

Andrew Taylor: Cannon netting is done under licence, usually to capture birds and ring them before releasing them. If it was done in the context of controlling geese, they would need to be dispatched with some compliant method—and it would need to be done under licence.

Graeme Dey: From speaking previously to the stakeholders that are represented here today, and from conversations that strayed on to the issue at the Royal Highland Show, which I think most of us attended, I think that it is generally recognised that geese are quite hard to shoot. What training, if any, is offered to ensure that any shooting that takes place is effective? What training is offered to the farming community in a general sense for goose control?

Paul Wheelhouse: It is an important issue, and we have encountered difficulties in Orkney—as I believe committee members are aware—with the use of non-lead shot that was of insufficient weight to take down a goose and avoid injuring it in such a way that allowed it to live on. Obviously there are welfare implications from not killing the goose outright.

There is a bit of a challenge in that respect, and I know that the RSPB is concerned about the use of lead shot. We are working closely with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation to support the use of non-lead alternatives, such as bismuth—I am not a shooting expert myself, but I believe that that is being trialled as an option.

We are taking advice, and BASC is involved in training people and advising them on how to target geese. Andrew Taylor may have some further information that might be helpful.

Andrew Taylor: Some shooting is done by employed marksmen, who are professional and know what they are doing. Some of the schemes use volunteer shooters with shotguns; they tend to be keen shooters anyway. As we said, we have held workshops with BASC in some of the island areas to support that work.

The Convener: Jim Hume has a question on netting.

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I asked last week whether netting was a possibility, and we were told by some of the witnesses that it was illegal. Can you clarify the situation in that respect? Is it legal or illegal, or is it legal under special circumstances?

Andrew Taylor: I understand that netting would be illegal unless it was done under licence. It is used largely to capture birds to ring them and then release them.

Jim Hume: You mentioned dispatching them, as well.

Andrew Taylor: It has to be done in the context of control. Having caught them, you would then need to dispatch them in some way.

Jim Hume: So licences are being issued at the moment for netting—not just for ringing, but for dispatching the birds.

Andrew Taylor: That is not done in this country. I believe that they have done it in the Netherlands.

Jim Hume: Is it a potential option?

Andrew Taylor: I understand that it is. I think that they gas them in the Netherlands.

Paul Wheelhouse: We do not gas geese in Scotland.

Graeme Dey: On a perhaps more humane note, one of the topics that we have discussed is the possibility of introducing contraceptive into feed, which is a tactic that has been used to deal with pigeons in Venice. It was suggested to us that we would not want to go down that road, but—straying away from Islay, temporarily—would it be an option on Orkney, where there is a huge concentration of a particular species?

Paul Wheelhouse: I understand the potential value of that approach, but the problem is that it can be indiscriminate, so other species with high conservation value could be affected. That might be another type of goose—such as Greenland white-fronted geese, perhaps on other islands—or another bird with a high conservation value altogether. There would be a risk that we would damage our other conservation objectives.

Although I understand the potential effectiveness of the measure, we would be concerned that it could have damaging effects on other species. If we did it on Islay, the main concern would be that we could cause a serious problem for the already threatened Greenland white-fronted goose population. I accept the principle, but it would be difficult to—

Graeme Dey: I fully accept that argument in relation to Islay, but I wonder whether it would be a viable option in Orkney, given the concentration of one species there.

Paul Wheelhouse: I invite Eileen Stuart to comment on whether there are those risks in Orkney.

Eileen Stuart: It is a possible long-term option. At the moment we are not aware of any work on that area, and as the minister said there are issues with most of these approaches. How we would administer them safely and humanely is as much of an issue as anything else. We would want to avoid the indiscriminate impacts of developing the contraception approach. I do not think that it is a short-term measure that would be useful to us.

Claudia Beamish: I will ask about lead shot, which you highlighted in relation to the weight of shot required to be fatal. I understand that there are new recommendations from the Food Standards Agency on the toxicity of lead shot. If I am right, at the moment it is illegal to use lead shot on wetlands but not on terrestrial ground. What are the implications of the new recommendations?

There has also been advice from the FSA on the dangers of eating too much game that has been shot with lead shot. Can you highlight any Scottish Government evidence on that issue? Is a view being formulated on it?

Paul Wheelhouse: I confirm, for the record, that lead shot is not being used over wetlands. That is one of the training issues that have been taken forward.

Clearly, we would need to take account of any health concerns for the scheme, and the resale of carcasses would be an issue in that regard. I will ask Andrew Taylor to comment on the detail of what we are doing to manage that issue at the local level.

Andrew Taylor: In Orkney, no lead shot is being supplied through the scheme and the shooting does not take place over wetlands. It takes place over stubble, so there is no issue of shooting over wetlands. I understand that, a couple of years ago, the FSA issued precautionary advice for pregnant women and young children about excess consumption of lead shot game. The scheme will take account of any labelling requirements in the marketing of wild goose meat.

10:45

Claudia Beamish: I understand from the evidence that we have been given that the FSA's new advice about eating less game that has been shot with lead shot is for consumers more broadly rather than just the two groups that you identify. Is the Scottish Government addressing that issue?

Paul Wheelhouse: If it would be helpful, we will consider the advice that has been issued and come back to the committee with any thoughts on whether it has implications for the existing scheme.

Andrew Taylor: The UK lead ammunition group is looking at the issue in detail. I understand that it is due to report in a couple of months.

The Convener: We look forward to getting that. Apart from anything else, lead shot breaks your teeth.

We will move on to markets for geese through activities such as watching and shooting.

Jim Hume: I have two or three lines of questioning on that. We have heard about goose shooting on Orkney and in other areas. People are looking for different markets. There is perhaps a clash between sporting shooting and professional controllers. Is there anything in the licensing arrangements that could help to address that?

Paul Wheelhouse: If I may, convener, I will defer to Andrew Taylor on that level of detail.

Andrew Taylor: Clearly, sport shooting makes a contribution to controlling geese and has benefits for the local economy through tourism. Sport shooting takes place in the open season, whereas licences are for the close season.

Jim Hume: Are you suggesting that, because the licences are for the close season, the controllers are not able to shoot during the sporting season?

Andrew Taylor: Yes, although, for example, in Orkney, the scheme goes into September and so overlaps to an extent with the sport shooting season. Attaining the target take in Orkney relies on the efforts through the adaptive management pilot and the sporting take, which is an important part. It has to be taken into account through the bag returns, which count towards the target take.

Eileen Stuart: I reassure the committee that the local pilots are working closely with the sporting shooting groups in the various areas. As far as possible, the adaptive management work tries to add to and support the sporting activity. It would be great if the sport shooting could carry out the control and no extra effort was required.

We do not want to displace the sporting activity—we are trying to focus the additional effort. That is particularly the case on Orkney where, in the early part of the season under licence, during July and August, no sport shooting is allowed, but that is when the crop damage is suffered. The adaptive management work is focusing on early in the year to try to reduce the impact, while the sport shooting happens later in the year. The two act in tandem. The local groups ensure that all the numbers and data are collected from all the parties so that we have a good overall picture and can monitor the situation. The two activities dovetail well, and we are conscious of the need not to impact on sporting activity.

The Convener: Do you have another question on that, Mr Hume?

Jim Hume: No.

The Convener: Right. A number of members want to come in on the issue.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I have a follow-on from Jim Hume's point about the conflict between sport

shooting and shooting for other purposes, and the sale of the geese to the public. We have heard from witnesses that estates that do primarily sport shooting can pose a problem. A crofter has a right to shoot a deer that is eating their crops, but they have no right to shoot a goose, because geese belong to the estate. They would need permission to shoot, because of the sporting rights over geese. On community-owned estates, such as Stòras Uibhist, it is much easier to get an agreement to allow crofters to deal with geese on their land. Will you comment on that conflict?

Paul Wheelhouse: I am aware that a number of aspects could relate to land tenure. An example comes from wildlife tourism. The agricultural holdings review is seeking to deal with the situation, but there is little incentive for a tenant to invest in a bunkhouse or other accommodation to exploit the market opportunity if they will not get back the value of their investment. Some legal barriers exist.

As for sporting activity, I can see that the landowner's consent would be needed to shoot, if that was not part of the existing tenancy rights. To manage a number of species conflicts—involving not just geese but other species—we must ensure that all those who could be negatively affected can also see the positive value of the species and maximise the opportunity.

If a tenant farmer or crofter suffers agricultural damage and sees no gain for themselves, such as generating a sporting income—I stress that I am talking about a quarry species—that limits their opportunity to adjust to the situation and say, “I can live with nature having delivered a large goose population to my area, because I am getting something back from that.” That is a challenge. If the committee has evidence on that, I am happy to look at it.

Alex Fergusson: I am interested in what Eileen Stuart said about the sporting sector's involvement. When we had the round-table session last week, I asked Dr Walton of RSPB Scotland whether he had

“any suggestions on how we could increase the quality of the scientific evidence”

that is available. He said:

“I apologise for being fairly strong on that point ... a lot of sport hunting of greylags in Orkney goes on, but the gathering of data on hunting bags is exceedingly poor in Scotland compared with other ... countries ... We have no idea how many geese are shot by people coming from places such as Italy on sport-hunting visits.”—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee*, 18 June 2014; c 3868.]

I do not argue with the fact that proper and robust science needs to be behind any scheme—adaptive or otherwise. If we are to have that, do

we need to address the point that Dr Walton made?

Paul Wheelhouse: I understand the point that is being made. I agree that having more information on population levels, the amount of sporting activity that is undertaken and reductions in population levels will help to inform policy by the Government and SNH. Eileen Stuart will comment on the detail.

Eileen Stuart: Paul Walton is right that bag returns for all sport shooting are not mandatory, which means that we do not have global data on shooting effort. That makes the picture more difficult and complex to unravel.

The local pilots that are being operated in the island groups are distinct, because they involve a relatively small number of people, who are all contributing and providing data. The data that they are providing is highly consistent with our population viability models. We can see what we expect a population to do and we can monitor what different levels of take would do. That all suggests that we are getting good data from voluntary sport shooting returns and the adaptive management pilot. We took forward the pilots in island situations because we have reasonably coherent groups of people who will work together. Rolling out such things nationally is far more difficult.

Alex Fergusson: I understand. Thank you for that clarification.

Nigel Don: Eileen Stuart said that there was some management shooting ahead of the season. Could we adapt the season so that we do not have to pay people to do what they would otherwise pay for the privilege of doing?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will let Eileen Stuart talk about the direct point.

The situation in Orkney seems to be somewhat different from that in, for example, Islay. As Andrew Taylor said, Orkney already has an established community of people who shoot for sport, so a considerable number of people are willing to support the roll-out of the adaptive management pilot, which means that we can also reduce the cost of the management pilot. Obviously, the resale of carcasses helps in that respect.

There is therefore more than one model working in Scotland. We have to take account of the seasons and other circumstances, but the deployment can be quite different on a small island where a relatively small number of farmers might be getting hit very hard but there is no sporting community there to support them. We then have to bring in BASC shooters and

specialist marksmen to help out. Orkney is quite different.

Eileen Stuart will comment on the length of the season.

Eileen Stuart: What Nigel Don brought up has been proposed and there has been some preliminary discussion of it at the national group level. It is worthy of further consideration. Control through licensing allows us to be quite prescriptive about numbers and where and what is taken. If the issue would be better dealt with by changing licences, that can be reviewed.

The Convener: Nigel Don is next. Sorry, it is Claudia Beamish. I need to keep up.

Claudia Beamish: On hunting bag data, is there any prospect of the Scottish Government looking at it more generally and building on the pilots beyond the islands? I appreciate Eileen Stuart's point about the islands being easier to monitor, but I wondered whether anything more general is being mooted?

Andrew Taylor: We have carried out some work on developing a voluntary system for all huntable birds in Scotland. We have worked with BASC and the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust to build on their current game bag survey systems. We hope to develop that work.

Jim Hume: I have a final point on the market for geese. We heard in evidence that the Government has imposed restrictions on the sale of geese outwith communities, especially outwith the islands. It seems to be a bit odd not to allow geese to be sold on the mainland. Why are those restrictions there? Will the Government consider looking at that restriction again and allow the sale of shot geese across Scotland or even further afield?

Paul Wheelhouse: I invite either Eileen Stuart or Andrew Taylor to correct me if I am wrong about this, but I believe that, in the past, the sport shooting community, BASC and the conservation groups such as RSPB and WWT came to a consensus that, for conservation reasons, there needed to be a ban on the commercial sale of species. There was a concern that the resource had been overexploited in the past and that we had reached a point at which some species were at very low levels and in danger of facing a serious challenge to their viability in Scotland. The current ban was imposed as a conservation measure to remove the moral hazard of commercial exploitation of goose species for shooting.

Not having that ban might also have meant a reduction in the population that is needed for sport shooting. It is a bit like the challenge that we face with salmon conservation: if the numbers get down to a certain level, you start to put at risk the

viability of the sporting activity. SNH has used its powers to license the limited sale of wild goose carcasses arising from the trials on Orkney and the Uists. Only local sale is permitted for the limited period of the trial to avoid the possibility of other geese being illegally sold.

11:00

There would be an issue if you were to try to develop a market more generally and provide an employment opportunity in the islands. I can understand the desire to do that in fragile economies where people are looking for new opportunities. However, there would be a challenge, because if the geese were being marketed to the mainland, there might be sufficient demand, but you would not be able to guarantee a supply. There would be a risk that, in order to maintain a guaranteed level of supply to fulfil contracts, you would have to push numbers harder than they need to be pushed. There is a risk in scaling up the activity and making it a commercial operation in the truest sense.

The desire behind the introduction of the scheme was to avoid unnecessary waste. It is sad that we have to have lethal activity in relation to geese, which are a wonderful species. There was a desire to avoid carcasses going to landfill and being utterly wasted, so we explored with the European Commission whether we would be able to take this approach. If we extend, or offer to extend, the process to other areas where adaptive management is being brought in—on Lewis and Harris or elsewhere—we will need to seek permission from the Commission to do so. We are able to do this on the understanding that it is on a limited basis and is not a truly commercial operation but is just for local sale. We must be very careful to bear that in mind in all cases.

Jim Hume: Are we perhaps past the stage at which the geese are being overexploited? Has the population got to a stage at which it is unsustainable? You mentioned that there would not be a supply all year round. However, many other food substances are seasonal. People would not expect to have geese, strawberries or whatever else all year round.

Paul Wheelhouse: That is true, but this is a slightly different situation. If we do this properly through the adaptive management process and monitor the level of the bag limit that is being taken and the impact on the viability of the species each year, there might come a time when we have to say, "Sorry, you cannot shoot any this year." We have to face up to the fact that we could create an industry and then suddenly have to say to the people involved, "Sorry, you are not allowed to kill any this year." To pick up the point that Mr Don made about international obligations and having to

liaise with our partners on the conservation health of the species, the situation could arise in which we had to put people into redundancy because we could no longer exploit that commercial opportunity.

Jim Hume: We could be giving people job opportunities if we allowed the sale of shot geese on the mainland.

Paul Wheelhouse: That is true, but it might be somewhat irresponsible. As we have said, this year there has been a substantial reduction in barnacle goose numbers. Okay, that is a different species and it is not the one that we are talking about in Orkney, but there could come a time when there is a substantial reduction in greylag numbers, perhaps—as Mr Dey said—because of climate change, or due to other factors in other parts of the range. In that case, SNH or the Scottish Government would in effect be saying, “Sorry, you’re out of a job.”

We have to be very careful about this. The primary purpose of allowing the sale of carcasses was to avoid the unnecessary waste of a valuable food resource. We are, unfortunately, having to take this action to reduce numbers in Orkney and elsewhere and we want to do it in a way that is not wasteful. It is a real shame if we shoot the geese and the carcasses go to waste when they could be used for local food. That was the desire; it was not our intention to create a new industry. I appreciate that if we had certainty about numbers and managed that over time, we could build up an industry, but I believe that we are not in that position at this stage.

Jim Hume: Do we have figures or percentages for the number of geese that are shot and go into the food chain and the number that go to landfill?

Paul Wheelhouse: I am not familiar with that level of detail. If I may, I will ask Eileen Stuart to comment, convenor.

Eileen Stuart: At the moment, the numbers involved have been relatively small. Something like 1,000 geese from Orkney have gone into the food chain. I do not have up-to-date figures from the Uists, but it is currently a relatively small-scale activity, so it was felt that it was probably more appropriate for this to be a local industry. To some extent, some of the stakeholders said that they wanted this to be a local community initiative to support local jobs and to give them another asset on the island.

One of the other challenges would be that, if we opened the initiative up more widely, it would be very difficult to distinguish between a greylag goose breast and a Greenland white-fronted goose breast. One of the risks that we want to avoid is the wrong sorts of geese ending up in the food chain. We also need to be aware of that risk.

Jim Hume: You say that 1,000 of the Orkney geese end up in the food chain. I presume that that is 1,000 per year. Do we know how many altogether are shot?

Eileen Stuart: In Orkney, it is around 5,000. I think that, at the moment, the number is building up because it is a new initiative, so people have only just become licensed. We expect it to grow a little bit, but it will never be a mainstream activity.

Paul Wheelhouse: I will make a purely anecdotal comment. I was recently in Orkney for the islands ministerial working group and was keen to explore whether goose burgers, which are now being produced, are on the market. It was difficult to find them, so I think that it is still an emerging activity, as Eileen Stuart said. Goose burgers do not appear in local restaurants in great numbers or as a local resource. There might be an opportunity to make something of them while the situation lasts and market them to local tourists as a unique product in Scotland.

Jim Hume: I am sure that there will be.

Dave Thompson: Minister, will you elaborate a little bit? I am slightly confused about why we would restrict the sale of goose burgers to Orkney. Indeed, we could have goose pâté as well. That would keep. Once we get it into a jar, it does not have a short shelf life.

Surely the controls would be over those who are licensed to shoot the geese and those who could be licensed to process them. I do not see how restricting the market to Orkney or Uist affects the numbers of geese that would be shot. Is it not enough to control the shooting and processing? That would allow the processors and producers to build their markets a bit more widely.

There are lots of greylag geese. That might change in the future but, if we monitor the situation closely, we will see the change beginning to happen and be able to tweak the licence conditions so that, instead of someone being able to shoot 1,000 a year, they might be able to shoot only 500. We could deal with the matter through licensing. I would be really keen to create jobs on Uist, for instance. Local folk could set up a processing business doing burgers or something like pâté, which has a longer life.

Will you comment on that?

Paul Wheelhouse: I sympathise with the points that Mr Thompson has made. As the committee will appreciate, we must work carefully with our stakeholders on the matter and take them only as far and as quickly as we can. A number of points were made earlier about understanding how many geese are being shot and what the impact is on the population level. The backdrop is that we must be clear about what is happening on the ground in

the adaptive management process and about how many geese are being taken; we must give confidence to stakeholders and the Commission that we are managing the situation effectively, that they can trust the data that they see and that there is no risk to the conservation health of the species.

It might be that, in time, the stability of the population will be such that we know exactly how to implement a regular adaptive management pattern. That might give a more favourable climate for the employer to establish a business. All we are saying is that, at the moment, we are working from one year to the next on population numbers and there is a risk that we might have to draw a line and say that no shooting activity at all can take place in a certain year because some calamity, perhaps weather related, has devastated the flock elsewhere or in Scotland and we have to be mindful of that. We would then have to do everything possible to help the geese to boost their breeding numbers to sustain their future. We might have to put things into reverse in some respects.

I am conscious of that. The conservation issue underpins all the concerns that we have about the need to tread carefully. We are exploring the issue for the first time in some years and we need to be careful about how we progress. However, I understand the point that has been made.

If long-term sustainable jobs could be generated without risking the conservation status of the species, that would be a useful outcome. In respect of sustaining the cost of shooting and undertaking the control work, allowing the sale of the carcasses allows those who help to support the process to get something back. That would help to recycle money back into the management process, but we have to be very careful about how we tread.

For the reasons that Eileen Stuart gave, keeping the market tight at this stage was felt to be a means by which we could manage and understand exactly what was happening and show almost an audit trail of what has gone on with the sale of the carcasses and what they have been used for. I have in mind that there would potentially be a risk of not being able to sustain the level of activity that is needed to support a bigger contract under which there would perhaps be selling to thousands of customers on the mainland. At the moment, we are talking about 1,000 geese, which would hardly scratch the surface of potential demand.

Dave Thompson: I have a brief follow-up point.

We heard a bit of evidence that some crofters are thinking about stopping work on their crofts because the geese are decimating them. If they stop working their crofts, the stuff that the geese

eat will disappear, the geese will not have food and they will die. It sounds as if we need to do more and get more evidence. If people stop working their crofts, there could be repercussions. There will not be food for the geese, so there will be a problem. I would not want the issue to drag out too long.

Paul Wheelhouse: Absolutely. We are absolutely aware of the impact on farmers and crofters.

I make a plea through the committee. I stress that we have had an observation that the Scottish Crofting Federation has attended national goose management review group meetings only twice in the past four years, I think. Indeed, there was a meeting yesterday, which it was unable to attend. We need better engagement.

The Convener: Do you encourage videoconferencing?

Paul Wheelhouse: We have offered that. Indeed, it can dial in to the meetings, but we do not have regular engagement, which I strongly encourage. There is great regret that there has not been that degree of involvement in the national goose management review group by the federation in the way that NFUS, BASC, Scottish Land & Estates, the RSPB and others are very actively involved.

The Convener: All those other bodies live close to Edinburgh. We are talking about real difficulties for people who require to be at such meetings. I make a plea that we find a way to enable that.

Paul Wheelhouse: Videoconferencing has been offered, convener. I offered it to the Scottish Crofting Federation for that reason, but I understand that the individuals involved live quite close to Edinburgh. Therefore, there is not necessarily a barrier to people attending meetings in Edinburgh.

I have written to the Scottish Crofting Federation in the past to ask it to participate in those meetings. Assuming that that can happen, we will get a better understanding of the implications. I want to understand as well as I can how we can help crofters. It is clear that the pilots are designed to help in some of the particularly strong crofting areas, but obviously, if there are other areas that we are not covering in the pilots, I invite the committee and members who have a close interest in crofting, such as Mr Thompson, to let me know, and we can take that on board.

The Convener: Thank you. We move on to other Government actions, on which Cara Hilton wants to lead.

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): Good morning, minister and panel.

A key issue that was discussed in the stakeholder round-table discussion last week, which has already been touched on, was the balance between conserving geese populations and the right of crofters to work their crofts. How can the Government help to strike that delicate balance, especially given that the spending constraints for the goose management schemes are more limited and, indeed, in some cases, spending has been cut quite significantly?

Paul Wheelhouse: It is very important, as Mr Thompson highlighted, that we work closely with crofters. I appreciate that many crofters struggle. Those who are trying to make a living from full-time crofting struggle as it is, and it is clear that many others do not generate sufficient income from crofting to make a living, so they have to work in other areas, as well. They may also be constrained in the time that they can spend on managing issues such as geese that present themselves on their croft. The issue is clearly important.

11:15

At the outset, I touched on the fact that the thinking at the moment is that the SRDP is not necessarily the right vehicle to deliver additional support, but I am keen to explore the extent to which we can help. There is some funding available through the SRDP for co-operative working, for example. Earlier, I had a discussion about exploring that idea. I apologise to the committee for not having done much detailed thinking on the matter, but I think that it might be possible for crofters to collaborate at a local level to manage a problem that presents at an area level, perhaps by finding land that could be used on a sacrificial basis to feed the geese effectively and take pressure off the remaining grazing land or by some other method. We must try to encourage them to collaborate in that regard. We will investigate whether there are other parts of the SRDP that can support the efforts.

It is true that we had a review that suggested that we should reduce activity in certain areas and focus on Greenland white-fronted geese, because their conservation status is much weaker.

In the course of the discussions and engagement with stakeholders on Islay, we have increased the budget almost back to where it was previously—in 2013-14, they got £910,000, and we are still to have discussions with them about what we do in the current financial year. We have responded and, where there has been evidence of pressure, the budget has gone back up. The spend per goose is almost at a record level; I believe that it is back up to £19.50 per goose on the island—by which I mean not the ones that we

are shooting, but the 46,500 geese on Islay. We are spending significant sums of money.

The petition says that funding has been cut or stopped, but that is not true. There is an issue with the machair life project. Its focus has changed, so we are now providing direct funding for adaptive management through Scottish Natural Heritage rather than through machair life. The budget is slightly higher, but it is not a like-for-like comparison, as SNH is paying for work that goes slightly beyond what was in the machair life project.

There is still funding there. We take the issue seriously. The budget is £1.2 million, which is not insignificant at a time of budgetary pressure. We are trying to respond where there is clear evidence of significant damage, as there was in Islay.

It is arguable that continuing to fund in the way that we are doing is not necessarily a sustainable solution in itself, so we need to find a way of helping the crofters and farmers to help themselves. We need to provide them with support that does not grow the problem—we are currently feeding grass to feed geese, as more geese are being attracted to those well-fertilised and seeded fields.

Cara Hilton: On the adaptive management schemes, are there targets in place to reduce the goose numbers? If so, how are they determined, monitored and assessed?

Paul Wheelhouse: In Orkney, because the greylag is a quarry species, we set a bag limit of 5,000 in order to reduce the resident population, over a period of time, to what it used to be, which was about 3,000 or 4,000. The population had reached 20,000 and that figure was rising, and the growing migratory population, which I discussed with Mr Dey earlier, was compounding the problem. We set that specific bag limit in consultation with stakeholders. It is intended to reduce the number of resident geese without affecting the migratory population.

On barnacle geese, local farmers on Islay have expressed the view that a figure of less than 30,000 would be sustainable. We have to do a lot of work to establish what a truly sustainable population of barnacle geese on Islay would be, so that figure is yet to be identified.

Eileen Stuart: All the pilots have target populations that they are aiming for. Those targets were developed on the basis of scientific data about what a sustainable population would be. We have considered the amount of improved grass in those areas and what could be supported without there being an undue impact on agricultural activities. Following that, there was a process of negotiation with local stakeholders to get a final agreed target. Each year, an annual bag is

agreed. We are working towards those targets and monitoring the situation to ensure that progress is being made. For all the pilots to date, we have not managed to achieve the shooting levels that we set. One of the biggest challenges is getting sufficient activity to maintain the downward trend, but we are working with local stakeholders to develop those models and schemes.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I want to pick up on the minister's comments about the machair life project, which we discussed last week. It clearly deals with the impact of excessive greylags on crops on the machair. The RSPB said that it had been pressing for the project to continue but that funding had not been found, and Paul Walton of the RSPB said that SNH had offered to provide £40,000 towards funding a project to manage geese and conserve traditional crop varieties, but that an additional £40,000 was required, which is why the project has not gone forward.

The minister mentioned other action that has been taken to replace the machair life project. Can you expand on that and tell us what other action is being taken? Will it be as successful as the machair life project, which seemed to be working?

Paul Wheelhouse: I recognise the valuable work that has been done through the machair life project. The habitat there is outstanding and the project's impact on biodiversity has been first class, promoting the welfare not only of birds but of invertebrates including pollinators such as bees, and that is fantastic.

The funding that we are providing in 2014-15 for the Uists is £45,400, which is higher than the funding of just under £40,000 that was provided through machair life. Mr MacDonald is right to point out that the measures are funded on a slightly different basis, as I also pointed out to Cara Hilton. It is about adaptive management, so it is specifically about managing the difficulties that we have with geese, rather than a wider project looking at the habitat, as was the case with machair life.

The original machair life project involved the EU, the RSPB, SNH and local authorities. It was to promote biodiversity of ground-nesting birds, so it had a different focus. Goose management formed part of the project and included goose scaring for the purposes of protecting traditional cereal crops, which in turn provided habitat for birds such as the corn bunting, with which we have had great success. The goose management element on the Uists is now being carried out through the adaptive management trial.

Since 2011, SNH has funded additional advisory support to enable crofters to access rural priorities options through the SRDP to provide funding in

support of traditional machair cultivation, and that could continue under SRDP agri-environment programmes. We need to look at the details to see what could be delivered on a similar basis to support traditional cereal production, which helps with the habitat for corn bunting and other ground-nesting birds. The greening measures that the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment has announced in the common agricultural policy will apply equally in crofting and non-crofting areas, so there are a number of different tools available.

I acknowledge the point that the RSPB made about the quantum of funding, but we are not saying that the adaptive management budget is the only money that will be spent in those areas. It is specifically targeted at goose management, but there are other funding pots, through the SRDP and through the equivalent of rural priorities funding, that can support the traditional aspects of what crofters do.

At the Royal Highland Show, I discussed with Patrick Krause and Derek Flyn what more I would like to do to celebrate the high nature value of farming aspects of crofting. I would like to build on that through the SRDP and other measures to support crofters in what they are doing, to achieve the desired impacts that the RSPB wants and to protect the machair itself. It is something that we need to evolve on, but I would welcome any views from Mr MacDonald or other members.

Angus MacDonald: Is there any prospect that you will go back to the machair life project in future years if the new systems do not quite get the hoped-for results?

Paul Wheelhouse: Let me put it this way: I would be very sorry were we to see a deterioration in the quality of that absolutely superb habitat. I give an assurance that I will keep an eye on the machair's prospects and that I will work with colleagues in the agricultural team to develop the SRDP, which helps to support such schemes.

We must focus on the outcome that we want and whether machair life is the right type of project to achieve that. If that is the case, I am sympathetic. However, in relation to adaptive management, we need to protect the livelihoods of the crofters and the farmers from serious agricultural damage by geese. At the same time, we have our biodiversity duties and targets for 2020 and we need to work with stakeholders such as crofters to protect the biodiversity that we have and enhance it if we can. I give an undertaking to do that.

Eileen Stuart may want to comment on what else we can do to support the projects.

Eileen Stuart: It is important to recognise that the machair life project, although very good, was

very broad based. It had the support of European funding, so it was able to undertake a variety of work. The purpose of European life projects is to trial new approaches to develop innovation and so on.

The adaptive management pilot is an evolution. We will take a lot of the successes and mechanisms that we used in the machair life project but evolve them to make them sustainable in the long term. An approach under the machair life project on geese was non-lethal scaring. Geese move around the crofting areas and, as the numbers get larger, the task of scaring them away gets harder and harder. The adaptive management approach targets geese reduction, so that the resulting population is easier to manage. Therefore, crofters will effectively be able to start taking control of the situation themselves and there will be a smaller problem to deal with at the end of the process.

We are in a process of transition to a new approach and we hope that, at the end of the adaptive management pilot, we will have a much more manageable problem that we can deal with in the longer term without the same level of funding support.

We have not stopped the machair life project; rather, we have evolved it and many of the activities are maintained through this coming period. We review the position each year and we will be able to amend the activities should problems emerge.

Angus MacDonald: I want to pick up on the point about the increasing numbers of geese on Uist. That is creating the overspill that is moving on to Lewis and Harris. The minister mentioned that work is starting there this year. Is there a timescale for that work?

Paul Wheelhouse: Tisee is another place that is affected and we are looking to have the pilot in place in August and then to extend that later on in the year. I believe that the timeframe for Lewis and Harris is slightly later than that, although I invite Andrew Taylor to confirm that.

Andrew Taylor: It is August, minister.

Paul Wheelhouse: It is August as well.

We hope to start the adaptive management pilot then. Although the geese population figures on Uist are not as solid and we want to firm them up, we believe there to be around 7,000 resident greylag geese, so the numbers are becoming significant.

Angus MacDonald: On Uist?

Paul Wheelhouse: Yes, and Benbecula.

The Convener: Graeme Dey has a follow-up question on Government action.

Graeme Dey: I want to come at the issue from a slightly different direction. We have talked about the conservation of species, protecting farm incomes and biodiversity. However, it strikes me that, if there are tens of thousands of geese doing their business, as it were, on farmland, that must have the potential to adversely impact on the natural environment, such as the pollution of watercourses, and on other species. It was mentioned that there have been impacts on ewes. What information is available in that regard? Is that as much a reason to take action as the fact that the geese are damaging crops and impacting on farm and crofting income and food production?

11:30

Paul Wheelhouse: There are two aspects that I should highlight. First, I will briefly mention the impact on other species, which is something that should be noted. For example, I saw on Islay clear evidence of the destruction of corncrake corridors—geese had got in behind fences and had stripped the grass completely bare—and we need to factor in the impact on other local conservation priorities.

A second and significant issue is the impact on health and the wider environment of the geese doing their business, as you have politely put it. It is not unknown for salmonella to be transmitted from geese to sheep; it is not thought to be common, and geese are not generally regarded as a reservoir of infection, but it is possible that such a transmission could happen.

As I said, we are aware of other impacts on biodiversity. Geese can be a source of infection, and obviously excrement of any kind can impact on water quality. That has not necessarily been substantiated in Scotland but, if evidence of a localised impact emerged, we would clearly take it into account. I know that institutions such as the Moredun Research Institute, for example, are looking at the impact of livestock, particularly deer, cattle and sheep, on water quality, but I do not believe that geese have been considered in that respect. The very concentrated numbers of geese in places such as Islay, the Uists or Orkney could be an additional exacerbating factor in water quality problems, and we certainly need to keep an eye on that. We do not have a wealth of evidence in this area, but, as I said, it is not unknown for salmonella to be transmitted to sheep.

The Convener: Thank you, minister.

We will happily use the evidence that you have given us to put the issue in perspective, and we will, of course, write to you once we have reflected on what has been said. It seems to me that, as far as the science is concerned, we are getting a

clearer idea about numbers and distribution, but as far as the response to the quarry species is concerned, are we not talking about a seasonal cottage industry here? After all, we are talking not about major numbers, but about the marketing of a small number of goose burgers and about small populations that could not possibly eat that number of goose burgers if they were making a dietary choice.

Minister, you might want to think about this in terms of the total allowable catch approach that we have in fishing, as it would allow local people to know through your up-to-date knowledge how many geese could be processed the following season. The small abattoirs that deal with, say, turkeys—as in the case of one that I know near Ullapool—and other such abattoirs in Harris and other places might well be able to cope with those numbers. Without wishing to disparage your remarks about creating an industry and subsequently having to make people redundant, I think that people in those areas are used to seasonal, small, cottage industries. If you are thinking about ways forward, I hope that you will ensure that such an approach is seen as something that could help crofting income.

We want everyone to collaborate on this, including the Scottish Crofting Federation. Your comments on that point have certainly been noted, minister—and thank you very much. Quite a number of issues have been raised, and those that have been raised in the petition are specific to crofting areas, but do you think that having different situations in the different affected localities might lead to the creation of a national plan that sets out some differentiated way forward?

Paul Wheelhouse: Although there might be local extenuating circumstances and local conditions that require schemes to be tweaked at local level to make them appropriate, we need a consistent approach, where that is appropriate, and to ensure that on a like-for-like basis and where circumstances are similar we are fair and try to apply some consistency. Obviously that will help to demonstrate to the Commission that we are dealing with things in a consistent, clear and transparent way.

I also point out that in some locations it might be impossible for even a cottage industry to develop because of a lack of available skills or facilities. I know that there have been suggestions that the additional product—if I can call it that—in Orkney and other places could be mopped up by using it for fish feed or through other such opportunities. However, we need to bear in mind certain technical issues as a result of the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (Scotland) Regulations 2010, and the implications of

processing animal proteins and introducing them into the food chain. Moreover, there are certain prohibitions on the use of poultry products, but because geese are wild birds rather than poultry, some difference in interpretation might apply. However, even if there were no such prohibition on using poultry products in such a way, the protein would still have to be processed in an authorised feed plant. As a result, some investment and scaling-up will be required to address such technical issues.

The issue is not as straightforward as it might seem, but I take on board your point that we need to be mindful of the opportunities that might arise for a small-scale local industry. That said, we have to be careful that we bring our stakeholders with us; after all, they have been supportive of our approach to date by, for example, allowing the sale of carcasses. We need to be careful that we do not push them too far or make them go faster than they are willing to go.

The Convener: Minister, I thank you and your officials very much for your evidence in what has been an illuminating session. It will give us some food for thought and put at the forefront of our minds the decision about how we respond to and progress the petition.

As agreed earlier, we will move into private session to consider letters on resource use and the circular economy and on the land reform review group's final report.

I note that this is the committee's final meeting before the summer recess and that we are due back on 6 August. With that in mind, I thank everyone who has taken part in and organised this year's meetings, the ministerial teams, the witnesses and so on. It is a pleasure to be able to say that your contributions are valued and have helped to drive the committee's work forward.

11:37

Meeting continued in private until 12:20.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland.

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For details of documents available to
order in hard copy format, please contact:
APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78457-741-4

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78457-756-8