

Report by Richard Cooke, Chair, Scottish Venison at AGM

Monday 16 October 2023

We have met once as a committee since the end of our financial year on 31 March so I don't really want to spend time looking back, again, at 2022/23 except to say that that was of course the year when we experienced a breakdown in the system from producer to processor in October and this, coupled with the call to cull an additional 50,000 deer per annum, was the catalyst in wanting to gain a better understanding of processing infrastructure and capacity resulting in the JF Consulting report.

Many of you will have contributed to that and will now have seen its final draft. It was commissioned for us by SAOS and paid for by the Scottish Government and has given us a valuable insight into how our sector operates, its shortcomings, and where John sees that there are more opportunities in the light of the 40 or so interviews that he undertook and on which his report is based.

This report is now with Government and the broader sector will hear more about it at our venison summit on 20 November.

You will of course be aware of a number of other projects that are underway, which have been reported on previously, and which are again on our Executive Committee agenda for the day for brief updates, so I won't cover them in detail here.

It's fair to say that this organisation and what it does continues to show that for a small representative body with limited funds we continue to make progress. Indeed, in the last few months we have engaged much more closely with the Venison Working Group in England and the rest of the UK, and with BQWV, and this really shows how far we have come. I commend their work and there are many areas where we can work together and grow together whilst we retain our Scottish identity.

On the political front we have been in close touch with officials working for two Government departments, food and the environment, and have met with the Minister Lorna Slater twice in recent months. More on that later.

Dick has also met with Ian Baxter, successor to John Davidson as Chief Executive of Scotland Food and Drink. I understand that was a good meeting and Ian is keen that his organisation helps venison to continue on its upward trajectory. Scotland Food and Drink has been a valuable source of funding for us in the past and it has always been helpful to have friends at the top of it. It is good that that relationship looks set to continue. Ian stressed the importance of provenance for us and understands that 'Scottish' both in terms of product and the SQWV scheme are significant assets in terms of UK and international markets and encouraged us not to swerve from that.

Our conversations with Lorna Slater and her officials have been centred on giving her and them a better understanding of how our sector operates and latterly how it might be supported given that the additional cull of 50,000 deer falls on the producers to deliver at a loss, referencing numbers produced by BASC for John Forteith's report. We have therefore pitched the idea of a venison subsidy to Government and those discussions are ongoing in the light of very few other ideas coming forward on incentives. We have been told on a couple of occasions that such a scheme would fall foul of the internal markets act but the Cairngorms National Park Authority seems keen to press ahead with a pilot regardless of that.

Our discussions are at an early stage, but we think such a scheme would ensure that at least producers are breaking even on the cull that they take. It goes without saying that time is of the essence in pulling this together and we are keen to make swift progress.

Whilst not falling into the financial year under review either, but well worth reporting at this stage, Trees for Life has been building a head of steam and enthusiasm on the venison front and organised a road trip to Winston Churchill and Strone Estate in September. Some 15 of us from across the venison and land management sectors spent two days fact-finding and brainstorming on venison. This was an extremely valuable initiative and some of you were present. Whilst some of the outcomes and actions from that trip inevitably duplicate where we are and what we are already doing – and feature in the refreshed strategy - we are keen that the group that came together for that trip continues and we will be co-opting at least two of its members to our board with your approval. An outcome will also be the setting up of a number of work sub-groups to fit with our proposed restructuring that we will put on the screen shortly.

Finally, the plan is that the current levy will continue to run for stags and hinds for this financial year to end March 2024 to cover our core funding. We will be fine-tuning our proposal for ADMG following the discussion at our last meeting and hopefully move to that new model from 1 April next year.

Dick will cover off many of the other items as we work through the agenda for the morning but that concludes my report. We now have the financial report in brief, since this was previously circulated at our June meeting.

New structure

Scottish Venison

