

Note of the meeting between 'G6' and Scottish Environment Minister
9 January 2012: St Andrews House, 10-12

Present:

Stuart Stevenson Minister, Keith Connal & Gareth Heavisides, Natural Resources Division, SG

Stuart Housden RSPB, Kate Mavor NTS, Simon Milne SWT, Richard Dixon WWFS, Deborah Long LINK

1. SRDP matters

a. Plans for supporting high nature value farming, including in remote and peripheral areas of Scotland, in light of agri-environment cuts

NGO concerns were outlined at cuts in budget with implications on designated site condition and potential for condition to decline without continued support for management. Demand is currently capped by the available budget while the real demand continues to be stimulated. Concern that Scotland is managing the SRDP budget rather than reality.

Furthermore, Less Favoured Area (LFA) has conditions that do not necessarily help biodiversity or landscape because the link between payment requirements and actions on the ground can be poor. There is a difference in opinion between NGOs and NFUS on how LFA funding should be spent. LFA payment is critical to High Nature Value (HNV). NGOs would like to see conditions attached to LFA to help the environment. Need to lever in benefits on the environment. Also useful to promote environmental benefits within Scotland and a move away from productivity support.

Minister stressed that SG have maintained support for LFA support in the budget, which covers 85% of land in Scotland. They have slightly increased its budget for the identified demand, although SG is unlikely to find more. HNV lies mostly within the LFA and therefore we will see no decline in support for HNV.

SNP believe that if Scotland were independent, Scotland would get more money. Stewart Stevenson (SS) acknowledged that the LFA amount is likely to decline and the UK position is unlikely to be helpful in this regard. Scotland is more likely to be aligned with others in the EU, rather than with the UK position.

Action: SS asked G6 to identify things that SG could do, within the context of necessary trade-offs, ie everything cannot be funded.

Govt wants to come out of CAP with a budget – expectation is this could take 3 -4 years. During CAP negotiations, likely to see reluctance to change procedures because of the historical basis of subsidies. Example of climate change farms was used to show, at a small scale, how energy consumption on farms could be tackled.

Action: LINK organisations were invited to share good practice on this with the Govt.

b. Measures to combat outbreaks of plant disease resulting from global trade and climate change

Introduction from NTS to the issue, acknowledging that action on Phytophthora was happening although much of it uncoordinated. Asked for more strategic approach, led by SG, so that efforts were coordinated and likely to be more successful in tackling spread of this fungus.

Minister agreed that more could be done to monitor and require owners to act. Also agreed more could be done to ensure strategic requirements to act are in place. This could include monitoring, improved communications and tackling pathways. However he stressed that there is no money to support action on the ground. That will be up to the land owners.

Asked what the implications of the FC review in Wales might have on the necessary cross border action required, the Minister said that SG were seeking to ensure that central services at FC remained in Edinburgh, whatever future forestry structures become. The England review is seen as an attempt to keep FC out of the policy agenda until the issue has been forced by Wales and Scotland. There is active engagement in discussions on FC structures. The issue is the divergence of policy, but on this issue, can't see it happening. Officials are working on this across the UK.

2. Climate change: feedback from Durban

a. General

Durban:

Asked for his impressions on Durban, Minister said it was well organised; that Chris Hulme was an asset, being genuinely committed to the issues and with his experience in EU is an effective worker in this situation. Caroline Spelman also there though level of commitment less clear. Greg Barker also there. Corrie Grunland, EU Commissioner, "played a blinder". The EU position was a good one, with the Danish govt being particularly helpful. China is likely to be a major player in 3 years time because of their increasing control over climate change technology. US were in a very uncomfortable position which is unlikely to change.

Rio:

G6 stressed it would send a very good message if Scotland were to be represented at Rio at Ministerial level, even at First Minister level. Caroline Spelman is expected to lead the UK delegation. Scotland has not yet decided who will go and from what level, although a decision is needed by end January. SG need to work out how to work as part of the UK delegation to make things work better for Scotland than happened in Durban. SG needs to work answer the question "what difference could Scottish ministerial representation make?" Climate justice will be a central message along with renewable energy. Still need to work out which minister though. The Govt Climate Group may be active at Rio. Given that the agenda will cover a wider a range of sustainable development issues than Durban, G6 thought there would be some great opportunities for SG.

Action: once SG have decided who will go, G6 offered to provide some ideas on issues for Scottish representation.

b. Peatland issues

Given the need for international agreement on peatlands in carbon accounting, progress at Durban on peatlands was not clear. It had not been central to discussions, although a paper has since come out, which is available on the COP website. SG officials are currently working on what the discussions meant. At a UK level, the issue is not a mainstream one. The UK delegation was small, hence a low level of effort was put into the peatland discussions. However, 5 countries in the EU were interested, if the Minister's memory served: Estonia, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania. If peatlands were included in carbon accounts, this makes life very difficult for countries without peatland to help them meet their carbon targets. Minister is asking his officials to investigate getting together with other EU countries to discuss a way forward. Progress is heading in the right direction but is glacial. SG sees peatlands as a very significant opportunity for

Scotland and they are keen to build on it. G6 suggested that it would be useful if Scotland started to post voluntary reports to the EU on the impact of re-wetting peatlands as part of the proposals in the Durban paper (above).

G6 noted that the Govt Committee on Climate Change report was due shortly. As was the RPP review. The hope was expressed that SG will use this chance to enable easier measurement of progress towards the targets. RPP needs to deliver transparency for the climate act and G6 were looking forward to RPP 2 to achieve this.

3. Habitats Regulations

a. UK Government review: ramifications for Scotland, Scottish Government thoughts and NGO views

G6 hoped that SG would not be following Westminster's lead in relation to their review. The Minister said that SG would use the research in England to see what it could say but would not be following the same philosophical road of Westminster govt. He used the example of the translocation of 40 wood ant nests as an example of working with developers to ensure that multiple objectives were successfully achieved. It is clear, in his view, that some developments would have to be stopped where the environmental impact was not preventable. However, SG wants to see development benefitting environment, while recognising that sometimes development will need to be prevented.

Action: it would be useful to receive (keep SG informed of) cases of where environmental regulations have impacted adversely on the environment.

Ministers have been reviewing cases in SEPA and SNH in finding the right balance between development and the environment. There are examples where officials have not worked as well with developers but there is generally positive working between govt agencies and developers. It is notably better than in England. Minister agreed that this illustrates the benefits of not limiting discussions on a restricted site-based approach but in looking more widely, beyond the site, for better development approaches. Shift responses are seen to be helpful. SG is considering targeting EIA resources to proposals that may be adverse rather than where EIAs are expected to be positive. G6 noted the ongoing loss of experience from planning departments within local authorities and used the example of Jim MacKinnon's team in being helpful in addressing difficulties in planning system. Helping to exchange best practice is a good role for SG.

4. Marine

a. NGO reaction to Aquaculture and Fisheries Consultation

NGOs have welcomed the current consultation. One aspect that is of concern but not addressed is the locational aspect of fish farms. The Minister said that there was a degree of locational advice currently along the west coast and that they were expecting fish farming to move further off shore. If this is to happen, we need to understand the environmental impacts. SG is committed to continuing to expand the industry because of the economic value and because they believe it is more sustainable than taking fish from the wild. Discussions on fish food resulted, with the Minister stating he believed that technological advances are allowing better / more efficient balance between inputs and outputs in terms of kilos to be achieved.

Stuart queried the inclusion of commercially damaging native species in the consultations and the Minister said he would check the wording on this. There is an SAC proposed for seals off of Barra.

b. Progress with MPAs

While NGOS are frustrated by the timescale in getting ecologically coherent network in place, we understand the reasons for it. There is concern about any future slippage however beyond 2013. There is also concern that some proposed MPA sites have been rejected before ecological assessments have been completed and questions as to why this has happened. It is encouraging to see more survey work on marine renewables and designations for mobile species, eg harbour porpoises. However there will be a need to be careful in Scottish waters with the likelihood of these designated areas overlapping with marine renewables. NGOs would like to see more effort being put into communications and working with all stakeholders to ensure the buffers are not hit on these issues. There is a need to think about on the ground reasons and finding evidence and solutions for compromise.

Notes taken by Deborah Long, in the LINK seat at these discussions
13 January 2012