

Deer - Natural Environment Bill

Parliamentary Briefing

Key points:

- There are now over 1 million deer in Scotland according to official Scottish Government data representing a doubling of the population in the past 20 years. This unnaturally high number of deer is damaging our environment and biodiversity by degrading peatlands and suppressing natural tree regeneration.
- Proposals to reform and modernise deer management in Scotland as part of the Natural Environment Bill are vital to help address the climate and nature emergency.

Scottish Environment LINK welcomes the Scottish Government's proposals for modernising deer management as part of the forthcoming Natural Environment Bill. These proposals, which build on the recommendations of the independent Deer Working Group (DWG) Report, aim to address the urgent need to manage deer populations to tackle Scotland's climate and nature emergency. LINK views the Bill as a critical opportunity to finally make significant progress in managing deer populations sustainably, improving woodland regeneration, and supporting biodiversity.

Over the past 80 years there have been 7 Government enquiries into how to manage deer populations better in Scotland. All have concluded deer numbers must be reduced substantially. The Bill is an opportunity to finally make significant progress:

1. LINK supports the full implementation of the independent DWG Report recommendations accepted by the Scottish Government and intended to modernise deer management in Scotland.
2. We strongly support the proposed Deer Management sections 6ZA and 6ZB control orders based on environmental enhancement alongside existing prevention of damage controls and as an essential use of public resources. New provisions should also be made for when NatureScot **must** intervene (and quickly) to protect public interests.
3. We call for redirection of a much greater share of public money from the Forestry Grant Scheme to be redirected from planting and fencing into active deer management, to enable natural regeneration of native woods and trees.
4. We support calls to simplify the processing, selling and marketing of local venison to local communities as a healthy and natural meat product, as well as to encourage community hunting.
5. We need a national and effective system of data analysis and data presentation to inform sustainable deer management.

Scotland's current approach to deer management is largely voluntary. Most other similar countries have regulated approaches and use deer management to deliver woodland regeneration rather than costly planting and deer fencing.

The Scottish Biodiversity Strategy states that as an absolute minimum deer populations need to be reduced to under 2 per km² in priority woodland habitats, 5-8 per km² in the Cairngorms National Park and 10 per km² across the rest of Scotland and to prevent incursions into priority habitats. In most places deer densities of under 5 per km² are necessary.

New NatureScot powers need to be made workable and used more frequently as previous intervention powers for NatureScot have been ineffective. Provision should be made to set deer density targets.

What should the Natural Environment Bill do for deer management?

We encourage the Scottish Parliament to implement recommendation 75 of the independent DWG Report, namely that "The ECCLR Committee should consider holding a short enquiry into the use of section 7 Control Agreements under the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 in the Caenlochan area". £3m was spent on these control agreements between 2006-18. This exercise should better inform much needed reform of NatureScot powers.

We also firmly support recommendation 97 of the Deer Working Group Report which would allow NatureScot to implement a cull approval system for Scotland, and thereby help reinforce public expectations around deer populations and densities.

LINK welcomes the removal of male deer seasons. For female deer seasons, LINK supports NatureScot's evidence-based approach that concluded the seasons should be aligned across all species from the 31st of March to the 30th of September. There is no obligation to cull deer outside of the outdated seasons set by sporting interests. Reforming the close seasons allows other stalkers the flexibility to carry out their jobs more effectively.

We support reforms that will incentivise deer management, provision of deer management infrastructure, and to remove barriers to local venison production and marketing. Public procurement of venison for schools and hospitals should be taken forward.

The LINK Deer Group includes all the main landowning eNGOs in Scotland such as RSPB Scotland, John Muir Trust, Scottish Wildlife Trust, National Trust for Scotland, Woodland Trust Scotland, Trees for Life and Nature Foundation. We are all involved with sustainable deer management to high welfare standards on our land.

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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