



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 24 June 2015

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CONTENTS

	Col.
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	1
Financial Assistance for Environmental Purposes (Scotland) Order 2015 (SSI 2015/210)	1
Environmental Liability (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/214)	1
Water Environment (River Basin Management Planning etc) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/211)	1
Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/215).....	1
PETITION	3
Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)	3

RURAL AFFAIRS, CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
24th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab)

*Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

*Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

*Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee

Wednesday 24 June 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:06]

Subordinate Legislation

Financial Assistance for Environmental Purposes (Scotland) Order 2015 (SSI 2015/210)

Environmental Liability (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/214)

Water Environment (River Basin Management Planning etc) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/211)

Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/215)

The Convener (Rob Gibson): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the 24th meeting in 2015 of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I remind members to switch off mobile phones as they can interfere with the broadcasting system, but I note that committee members might be using tablets for committee business.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of subordinate legislation. Of the four negative instruments listed on the agenda, only the fourth—the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/215)—has been drawn to Parliament's attention by the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee on the grounds that it breached the 28-day rule.

Does any member wish to comment on any of these pieces of secondary legislation?

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I have a comment on the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments etc) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/215), regulation 6 of which removes references to specific species of grass that are required when a farmer chooses to undersow a crop. The amended regulations are therefore nothing other than a recognition of the matter that

NFU Scotland raised with the committee and which we raised with the Government. I am pleased to see that that has had an impact and that common sense has prevailed.

The Convener: That is very good.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I was interested to note that an equality impact assessment had been carried out on the regulations, but there is no information about its results in the committee briefing. It would be useful to have that. Given that there is no reference to any impacts, I have to assume that there are none, but I would like clarification on that.

The Convener: We will get clarification from the minister on that.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Although the Environmental Liability (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2015 (SSI 2015/214) are probably uncontroversial, they are nevertheless quite an important piece of work, as they are all about keeping our seas clean. I welcome the fact that they are in front of us, because they step up the previous requirements. When things go wrong in the seas, it is devastating to wildlife and fishing in the affected area, so it is good to see these regulations.

The Convener: Indeed.

As agreed, we will seek some information on one of the instruments. If members have no further comments, does the committee agree that it wishes to make no recommendations in relation to the instruments?

Members indicated agreement.

Petition

Control of Wild Geese (PE1490)

10:09

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of petition PE1490, by Patrick Krause, on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation, on control of wild geese numbers. I refer members to the paper on the petition and invite comments.

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Although the petition raises—and has raised for the past two years now—some very important points, I regret to say that those points have not been answered fully. The problem lies in a point that Patrick Krause makes very well when he quotes the committee's previous position. In his response to the minister's letter to the committee, both of which can be found in the committee papers, Mr Krause says:

"Dr McLeod makes a general point, a reiteration of something her predecessor also said, that 'National goose management policy is informed by the 2010 management review'. RACCE have on a number of occasions asked for a current review of the situation. We have also brought this up several times".

That is the key point. The policy is operating on the basis of a review that was undertaken in 2010 of a policy that was set a long time before that.

The policy was put in place to cope with a very serious problem that I know from Islay and also, increasingly, from Kintyre, Gigha and Lismore—it is spreading across from the west coast. It was funded in order to resolve that problem, or at least to keep it in check, but it is no longer funded in that way, because the money is not available. However, the policy objectives have not changed, which leaves us in an impossible situation.

There needs to be a review, and it needs to start with two questions. First, what do we need to do to ensure that the numbers of geese are kept in check, so that crofting and farming, which in some places are being severely hindered, can take place unhindered? Secondly, how can we pay for that? Where are the resources and how can they be applied? Additionally, there is a European dimension that needs to be considered.

I have no doubt that the petition should be kept open. The committee should go back to the Scottish Government and say that we think that the nub of the matter is the operation of a policy that has not been reviewed since 2010; a substantial change in financial and other circumstances; and what might be a change in the nature of the problem. In those circumstances, there is a need for a new, independent review, and a need for that to happen quickly. The problem

recurs annually and each year my constituents feel more and more strongly about it, as do people in Uist, Orkney and elsewhere. The problem is growing, not diminishing.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I concur with Michael Russell. At the end of his comments, he mentioned Orkney. When we as a committee visited that area fairly recently, we were all struck by the evidence that we heard about the numbers of resident geese, their impact on the community, the fact that the opportunity to sell the meat after shooting the geese is proving to be quite limited and the news that the RSPB has withdrawn from the local stakeholders group. I therefore agree absolutely with Mr Russell.

Sarah Boyack: I agree with the comments that have been made. The funding of goose management is important, as is the idea of monitoring what has happened over the last five years so that we know what the current baseline is. What projects are needed and what are the funding options? The impact on habitat management, particularly with regard to the machair on Uist, is also part of this agenda.

Claudia Beamish: I concur with the view that, for the reasons that Mike Russell has put forward, there should be a review. For the record and for the purposes of any review, I would like clarification that, although it might seem obvious, a distinction will be made between protected and quarry species, because such an assessment will be important in determining the way forward.

I am disappointed that there has been no response from other countries to the Scottish Government's written requests about their approaches, and I would like the Scottish Government to pursue the matter, because models of adapted management might well exist elsewhere. The response to such questions could be quite short, and I would also like the committee to pursue that.

Like my colleagues Graeme Dey and Jim Hume, I had discussions when we were in Orkney, and one point that was made was about local farmers' limited capacity to tackle the matter. Given the other demands on their time—for example, running their farms and dealing with the other things for which they have responsibility—they could not deal with the quarry species by shooting them, even where they were able to do so. Another issue that I would like to be considered was that they did not have the necessary equipment, such as guns, or the training.

Given all that, I am keen to keep the petition open.

10:15

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): I agree with all the comments that have been made. I am still concerned that not enough is being done to address what is becoming an increasingly significant problem, particularly in the outer Hebrides—not just in the Uists, but also in Lewis and Harris.

Although I take on board the point in the minister's response that this is not just a problem for the Government, I note the Scottish Crofting Federation's valid point that there cannot be a reliance just on land managers to manage the increase, especially when crofters' livelihoods are being threatened. The whole situation reminds me of a comment that I saw about a year and a half ago in the *West Highland Free Press* from a crofter who said that it used to be the greylag geese that were endangered, but now it is the crofters. The SCF also makes the salient point that, given that the situation has got considerably worse in recent years, the Government should not, as Michael Russell has pointed out, be relying on five-year-old data and recommendations. Moreover, although I note the minister's statement that there will be an in-house review—or, I should say, a review led by Scottish Natural Heritage—I have to say that I have a lot of sympathy with the SCF's calls for an independent review to be carried out.

Given that, as Claudia Beamish has said, the Government has failed to get a response from the Netherlands and Norway to its questions about their management systems, would it be within the committee's remit to try to get a response from the various Governments or agriculture departments in those countries? We might be more successful than the Government has been.

The Convener: We will consider that at the end, after we have heard everyone's comments.

Alex Fergusson: I endorse the approach that has been suggested by Michael Russell and which other members have agreed to. The situation also exists on the Solway, so it is a national issue.

I must also underline the calls for urgency, because there are people who are going to pull out of the scheme. Once that starts to happen, the scheme will start to lose a great deal of the credibility that it has. The problem seems to be one of success, because, on the Solway at least, goose numbers have increased remarkably since the scheme began.

Finally, I endorse the call for an independent review. I do not think that an in-house review will be satisfactory in this instance. Any review that is undertaken—and it must be undertaken urgently—must be independent.

Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): I concur with more or less everything that has been said. The Scottish Government should explore the views in the European Parliament and the European Commission about the situation and the need for action. I echo what Claudia Beamish said, and what we heard in Orkney, about the fact that shooting does not really seem to be changing much in the way of numbers. We need to look at other options.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I thought that the visit to Orkney was illuminating, especially with regard to the number of geese that now find it a lovely place to stay, and the fact that the resident population, which did not exist before, is now increasing massively. I very much support the comments that have been put on the table.

Patrick Krause makes a good point about the cost of shooting. It involves the crofters' time and having to buy cartridges, which are not cheap; indeed, it is quite an expensive business. Even if there were a quarry species and even if crofters were allowed to shoot them, that does not mean that they would be able to do so. The review should seriously consider all methods of reducing the numbers, including dealing with eggs, which would address the problem at an early stage.

The Convener: Thank you for that. There is wide-ranging agreement that we should seek an urgent independent review on what is a national matter. Given the European dimension, we need to get evidence from other places with management schemes, and we should see how the EU would view a derogation. We should also find out what else we could have in our armoury in order to take action, although I am not quite sure how we would do that.

Angus MacDonald also made the point about getting information from other countries, but I think that the independent review, which should be set up speedily, should do that. It has been suggested that Scotland's Rural College might have contacts in other countries with which it could carry out preliminary work, and we could ask it to do that, if possible. We need to make it clear that the upshot is that the money, however limited it is, must follow the policy, not the other way round. The policy must be made clear in light of the conditions that we face.

The best thing that we could seek at this time is a wide-ranging review that is done quickly, and we must ask the minister to move on the matter. Therefore, I suggest that we keep the petition open, let the petitioner know what has been discussed and write to the minister, asking for a response as soon as possible, not when we come back in September. Are members agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Before I mention details of future meetings, Mike Russell has an update on milk.

Michael Russell: I want members to note that in the light of the committee's milk inquiry and the evidence that it received from Mike Gallagher four weeks ago, First Milk announced two things yesterday. First, the chair has decided to leave, and the board is seeking a new one. Secondly, and much more important, the A price of milk is to drop by 1p. When that happens next week, that will get us close to—if not at—the intervention price that we discussed with the European commissioner. I find it most regrettable and worrying that that drop will create the circumstances in which the transport concession on Gigha and Bute will be wiped out, and that the advantage that might have accrued—or at least the lack of disadvantage that might have accrued—to Bute has lasted for less than four weeks.

Many people who know the industry far better than I do are incredibly worried about its viability in Kintyre and Bute. Today, I will be writing to the rural affairs minister, and I hope that the committee will consider expressing its concern at the continuing situation and that First Milk is continuing to drive down a price that is substantially below the production price. That will affect people outwith my constituency, including those in Alex Fergusson's constituency.

The Convener: Indeed. We can discuss that issue during the private discussion on our work programme. However, we note that you will be writing to the minister, and we look forward to seeing the results of that. Thank you for raising the issue.

The committee's next meeting will be on 2 September, when we will hear from the Scottish Government bill team on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. As agreed at a previous meeting, the committee will now move into private session to consider its work programme.

10:23

Meeting continued in private until 11:20.

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