

# Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

**29<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday, 9 November**

## **Petition PE1490: Control of wild goose numbers**

<b>Petitioner</b>	Patrick Krause on behalf of the Scottish Crofting Federation
<b>Petition summary</b>	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to address the problems created by increasing populations of wild geese in the crofting areas as a matter of priority; reassess its decision to stop funding existing goose management programmes, and assign additional resources to Crop Protection and Adaptive Management programmes to ensure this threat to the future of crofting is averted.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1490">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1490</a>
<b>SPICe briefing</b>	<a href="http://archive2021.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Petitions%20briefings%20S4/PB13-1490.pdf">http://archive2021.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefingsAndFactsheets/Petitions%20briefings%20S4/PB13-1490.pdf</a> (Provided by SPICe for consideration by the Session 4 Public Petitions Committee)

### **Introduction**

1. This paper supports the Committee's evidence session on petition PE1490, which was referred to the Committee following previous consideration by the Public Petitions Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee in Session 4 and the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee in Session 5.

### **Background**

2. Although wild geese have long formed an important part of Scotland's natural landscape, the growing population can cause significant losses to farmers and crofters.
3. Scotland has had a [national goose policy](#) since 2000. A number of local goose management schemes and pilots operate across Scotland within the [national goose policy framework](#). These aim to minimise agricultural losses whilst ensuring that Scotland fulfils its international nature conservation objectives.
4. NatureScot provides funding and administrative support to the schemes and pilots. Each initiative has been developed by a local goose management group, which is chaired by the Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspections Directorate.

## Managing Greylag Geese

5. In recent years the number of resident greylag geese has increased significantly in particular locations; on Orkney from the estimated population of 1,500 birds in 2001, 21,367 birds in 2012 to 26,500 birds in 2021. This increase in the population of resident greylag geese can cause agricultural damage to barley crops and improved pasture, from cropping (being eaten) and trampling.
6. NatureScot established four adaptive management pilot projects in 2012 (in Orkney, Uist, Tiree & Coll and Lewis and Harris) to test whether local populations of resident greylag geese could be managed effectively to reduce their impacts on agricultural activity, whilst retaining their conservation interest.
7. Following recent discussions with representatives of farming and crofting communities, additional funding (£50,000) has been made available by the Scottish Government for the current financial year and next.
8. The additional funding was announced by Environment and Land Reform Minister Mairi McAllan in [February 2022](#).
9. When the Minister announced the additional funding, she stated—
 

“I have listened to the concerns of farmers and crofters on Orkney, Lewis and Harris, Uist, Tiree and Coll about the difficulties they have had in controlling resident greylag populations. I understand how serious the impacts can be for crofting communities, and for the unique machair habitat and biodiversity that their traditional form of agriculture supports. That’s why we are contributing up to £50,000 towards resident greylag goose control on these islands over the next two years to mitigate the impact on agriculture and support unique and important habitats. This is part of our wider approach to delivering more resilient and sustainable farming systems.”
10. According to the Scottish Government, NatureScot will continue to work with stakeholders to balance the conservation of geese with reducing and preventing agricultural damage.
11. NatureScot will carry out a 5-yearly review of goose policy in 2022. This will look at, among other things, the balance between funding for management of high conservation value geese such as barnacles against the much smaller sums available for greylag goose control.

## RAINE Committee consideration

12. The Committee considered the petition at its meeting on [27 April](#) when it took evidence from the petitioner, Patrick Krause from the Scottish Crofting Federation (SCF).
13. The Committee agreed to keep the petition open and to [write to both the Scottish Government and NatureScot](#) to ask for an update on goose management projects and to request details of the timetable and likely scope of the 5-year review of goose policy which is scheduled to take place in 2022.

14. The [response provided by NatureScot](#), confirms the agency currently runs six goose management schemes for wintering geese in Islay, Solway, Kintyre, Tiree & Coll, Uist and South Walls. According to the response, these schemes help land managers to support populations of wintering geese associated with neighbouring Special Protection Areas. The current schemes end in 2023. NatureScot also administers, on behalf of Scottish Government, funding for greylag goose management in the areas that have participated in adaptive management pilots since 2012. As mentioned above, this is in place for 2022 and 2023.
15. With regards to the review, NatureScot's response states that the Commissioning Statement for the Goose Policy Review will be submitted to the Minister for approval shortly and they expect the work will be completed before the end of the year.
16. In evidence with the petitioner, the Committee also heard about the potential impact of geese numbers on [the biodiversity of the machair](#). In its letter to NatureScot, the Committee also asked what consideration has been given to undertaking an assessment of the impact of geese numbers on biodiversity in order to inform both geese management and biodiversity policy.
17. NatureScot did not go into detail on the impact of geese numbers on biodiversity, but noted that cropping is critical to the management of the machair and that high geese densities may have an impact. In its response, NatureScot did confirm that the adaptive series management pilots were developed in response to concerns raised by crofters and farmers and focuses management to reduce goose numbers and the associated agricultural impacts. The response goes on to note that the pilots reduce the goose numbers in all but Orkney, where increases in numbers were contained and the Scottish Government have, therefore, provided an additional two years of funding to support a further reduction cull.
18. The response also notes that, over the past two years, shooting effort has been reduced due to Covid restrictions and greylag numbers have increased again, so it has not been possible to measure the impacts of reduced goose numbers on either agriculture or biodiversity.
19. Following the evidence session on 27 April 2022, the SCF [wrote](#) to the Committee in relation to agricultural and environmental damage being caused by geese and in response to the letter from NatureScot. The SCF's response raises a number of points which are summarised below.

## **Goose management projects**

20. The SCF highlight the additional Scottish Government funding of £50,000 to support the continuation of funding Local Goose Management Groups who facilitate control of resident greylag geese in the former Adaptive Management Pilot areas of Tiree & Coll, Uist, Lewis & Harris, and Orkney.
21. While this intervention is appreciated by the SCF, it highlights that, when the amount is broken down by location and citing the £6,000 allocated to Uist, they

contend that additional funds “will barely keep numbers of geese static let alone reduce to a sustainable population”.

22. In its response, SCF point out that the population of resident greylag geese “has increased significantly since the adaptive pilot programmes came to an end some years ago”. The SCF cite, by way of example, the situation on Uist, stating that –

“during the Pilot numbers were reduced briefly to the upper range of the target of from between 3800 and 4200 birds. The count carried out in September 2021 recorded around 8000 greylag geese. The adaptive management scheme on Uist at one time had a budget of £40,000 per year. This was reduced on a diminishing scale to £5,000 per year, then it was cut to zero. Crofters have agreed they can live with about 2500 birds with rises to above that on an occasional basis.”

### **Machair cropping on Uist**

23. The SCF’s response discusses the role machair cropping plays in terms of biodiversity and the need to protect this “complex and unique ecosystem”. The SCF’s response explains how winter feed is widely cultivated on the machairs and crops grown have traditionally been a mix of small black oats, bere barley and rye suitable for the low nutrient sandy soils and is unique to these islands. The response highlights that these crops are old varieties and are not commercially available on the mainland and therefore islands have always had to be self-reliant for seed.

### **Damage caused by geese**

24. The SCF’s response outlines the impact of damage caused by geese, including—

- grazing grass, especially new grass meant for livestock;
- eating silage spread on the ground and in feed rings;
- soiling grassland and arable ground in some cases poisoning land intended for cultivation;
- eating newly sown cereal shoots; and
- eating and destroying standing crops making harvesting of indigenous seed considerably less productive or entirely impossible.

### **Scottish Government funding**

25. The SCF’s response provides a breakdown of the costs associated for reducing geese numbers on Uist—

“The Uist Local Goose Management Group pays £8 per evidenced greylag goose shot and the £6,000 funding for this and next year will account for 750 birds each year. Storas Uibhist, the community landowner of South Uist and parts of Benbecula shoots around 1500 geese per year between their bounty scheme and those shot by their keepers. They allocate £10,000 per year agreed by their Board on a year-to-year basis.

26. The SCF’s response includes a statement made by the Chief Executive of Storas Uibhist provided the following statement—

“As you will be aware, the numbers of geese, in particular greylags, are having an increasingly significant impact on crofting activities across the South Uist Estate. Stòras Uibhist have committed significant staff time and resource to address the problem and in addition, we are actively supporting townships efforts with financial support for shooting and scaring. However, a community-owned estate like ours cannot realistically address the problem on our own. Currently we are spending many thousands of pounds each year to simply stand still, not improve the problem. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the goose population represents a genuinely existential threat to our crofting community. Whilst the £6,000 of support for goose management from NatureScot is welcome, it represents only a drop in the ocean and we would call on the government to urgently review the problem and dramatically increase funding so a permanent solution, rather than simply a sticking plaster one, can be found to this problem.”

27. The SCF’s response does acknowledge that funding allocated to the other former adaptive management pilot areas may prove to be more effective but also highlights that funding is only allocated for this and next year and questions what will happen once these schemes come to an end.

### **What should be the next steps?**

28. The SCF’s response outlines what it considers the Scottish Government’s next steps should be, including—

- more needs to be done, particularly in terms of significantly reducing population size.
- Novel methods such as corralling being trialled in Orkney could be developed for use in other areas, although it is recognised there are certain sensitivities to be overcome.
- Continuation of funding sufficient to allow this to happen, and funding on a realistic and permanent basis rather than piecemeal year to year.
- Serious recognition from the Government and NatureScot that it is crofters who maintain the fragile environment through traditional machair cropping presently being endangered by ever-increasing numbers of greylag geese.

29. In the SCF’s view, the five-yearly review into goose management in Scotland will examine what has and has not been successful and will make recommendations for the future. The SCF is concerned that –

“by the time the review gathers evidence and reports to Ministers, the former adaptive management pilot areas will be left in limbo as the second year of funding pays for the Spring 2023 cull which is fast approaching.”

30. The SCF contend that if funding for controlling geese were to stop, it would have profound impact. In the SCF’s view, “this would not only be in terms of degradation of the unique environment created and maintained by machair cropping, but also on the economic and mental wellbeing of individual crofters.

31. On 31 October 2022, the SCF wrote again to the Committee. The letter is provided in **Annexe A**. The letter explains that, since its previous submission, NatureScot – together with the Rural Payments and Inspections Division (RPID) – has undertaken a consultation questionnaire for the first stage of the National

Goose Policy Review which included specific questions on the management of greylag geese. In response to this questionnaire, the SCF has stated that—

“We are hopeful the review will help develop policy and methods that provides effective reductions in greylag goose populations in the former Adaptive Management Pilot areas. But such an approach must recognise the damage geese cause, in many cases, to High Nature Value and the world-renowned biodiversity which crofting and farming agriculture provides. Financial support has to be more equitable, for example, the Islay Goose Management Scheme has a budget of around £1m per year whereas Uist receives zero amount directly from NatureScot.”

### **For decision**

**32. The Committee is invited to consider its next steps. The Committee may, for example, wish to await publication of the five-yearly review into goose management in Scotland and take further evidence at this point.**

**Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee clerks  
November 2022**

## **Response from the Scottish Crofting Federation**

Dear Mr Carson

Petition PE1490: Control of wild goose numbers

In response to the email dated 22 September 2022 from the Assistant Clerk to the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee, we would like to make the following comments in addition to our response to the Committee on 20 June 2022.

As you are aware, Mairi McAllan MSP, Minister for Environment and Land Reform, provided Scottish Government funding of £50,000 for the current and next year to the former Adaptive Management Pilot areas for control of greylag geese. Taking the islands of Uist as an example, the allocated amount of £6,000 has been used by the Local Goose Management Group to shoot 750 geese during the Spring cull. It is anticipated this will again occur in Spring 2023 but no funding is in place thereafter. Storas Uibhist, the community landowner of South Uist and parts of Benbecula, has also provided financial support for shooting as their Chief Executive detailed in our previous response.

The most recent count of greylag geese undertaken during September has found some 7,050 geese, a reduction from the 2021 count of almost 8,000 birds. Although the 2022 count was carried out in poor weather conditions (wind and rain which tends to depress numbers of geese found) this represents a downward direction of travel which is desirable. On analysis of where geese were found there seems to have been reductions in numbers on the land owned by Storas Uibhist that may demonstrate the larger amount of money they spend has had better results than farther north where numbers remained static.

Since our previous response NatureScot together with RPID has undertaken a consultation questionnaire for the first stage of the National Goose Policy Review which included specific questions on the management of greylag geese. We are hopeful the review will help develop policy and methods that provides effective reductions in greylag goose populations in the former Adaptive Management Pilot areas. But such an approach must recognise the damage geese cause, in many cases, to High Nature Value and the world-renowned biodiversity which crofting and farming agriculture provides. Financial support has to be more equitable, for example, the Islay Goose Management Scheme has a budget of around £1m per year whereas Uist receives zero amount directly from NatureScot.

Yours sincerely

Patrick Krause  
Chief Executive