NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency

**NatureScot**

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**INFORMATION PAPER**

# Update on sub-groups

## Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on the work of its sub-groups.

## Action

1. **The Committee is asked to note the update.**

## Preparation of the paper

1. The paper was written by Sarah Hutcheon and is sponsored by Eileen Stuart.

## Background

1. Committee sub-groups review our work and provide advice from Committee and Expert Panel members on novel, contentious or complex matters. The sub-groups contain at least two Committee members (one of whom chairs the sub-group), two Expert Panel members, and additional expertise as required. A staff member provides the secretariat. Depending on the Terms of Reference, the sub-groups report to the Board, to the Committee, or to members of the Senior Leadership Team.
2. This paper provides an update on existing sub-groups. **Annex A** provides a tracker of all current sub groups.

## Key sub-group updates

**Muirburn**

1. The group was set up to support staff on science matters in connection with the [Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/1/) relating to [muirburn](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/) issues. A paper on the work of the group was taken to the October meeting of the NatureScot Board. The Board noted the significance of the topic and that the report provided a helpful synthesis of the evidence and proposals for taking a risk-based approach to managing muirburn activity. They thanked the sub-group for their excellent work in exploring this complex area.
2. The group hasn’t met again since the last meeting but there may be further work required from members of the group as the Bill passes through the Parliamentary process. There is an external stakeholder group working on developing a revised Muirburn Code and the SAC sub-group might be called on to provide input to this work.

**Targets and monitoring**

1. A new sub-group was set up in September to support work on: a) devising target topics for the Natural Environment (NE) Bill; and b) advising on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan.
2. In September the group worked to a tight timeline to advise on targets in relation to task a). The Scottish Government Biodiversity Programme Advisory Group (PAG) drafted targets for the Natural Environment Bill and asked the sub-group to peer review this work. We are expecting that the PAG may come back for further advice on this later in March.
3. Task b) may run for up to a year during the development of the monitoring framework for the SBS Delivery Plan. Work is yet to get underway on this task. Meetings are planned for March to further scope out the work expected of the group in relation to this task. A sub-group meeting will be set up once this scoping work has been undertaken. We may draw on further members to support the sub group work on task b). These two tasks are major pieces of work in areas of great significance for NatureScot.

**Deer**

1. The deer sub-group (first discussed at our March 2023 meeting) has been set up and held its first meeting to agree the terms of reference. A second meeting has been arranged for March. The group is being chaired by Neil Metcalfe and will be considering the evidence base round deer issues which will be required for delivery of the SBS.

**HPAI**

1. The work of this sub-group is complete. NatureScot staff have continued to draw on the expertise of individuals on the group to advise on work. A separate paper giving an update on recent work on HPAI has been provided.

## Marine birds – workshops

1. At our last meeting we noted that we expect to need expert input into workshops that our marine staff will be running.  Both these workshops will assist with assessing impacts of offshore wind developments on marine birds. The areas of work being considered are Population viability analysis and Accounting for HPAI mortality in our advice. These workshops have not yet taken place. A separate update on the work planned has been provided.

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**Annex A. Committee Sub-group tracker**

**March 2024**

| **SAC Sub- group** | **Task set** | **Membership** | **Date set up** | **Progress update** | **How advice has been used** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Targets and monitoring | a) devising target topics for the Natural Environment (NE) Bill; and b) advising on the monitoring framework for the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan. | Professor Marian Scott (chair), Ms Kathy Dale, Dr Ruth Mitchell, Professor Jen Smart, Professor Rob Marrs, Dr Penelope Whitehorn. | Sept 2023 | Met Sept 2023 to provide advice on task a).  Meetings to scope out task b) planned for March. | Advice has been used to inform development of targets for the Natural Environment Bill |
| Deer | Advise on deer related research and evidence requirements | Neil Metcalfe (Chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon, Sarah Woodin, Laszlo Nagy, Tom Morrison, Steve Albon | Sept 2023 | Met in Feb 2024 and due to meet again in March. |  |
| Muirburn | To provide expert advice to support staff in addressing unclear elements of the muirburn evidence base, to assist in developing a licensing approach to muirburn | Marian Scott (chair),Davy McCracken, Sarah Woodin & Rob Marrs | November 2022 | Completed, though further work may be commissioned | The final report has been produced and an update provided to the NatureScot Board in October 2023. The report will be used to guide future work in this area. As the Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill passes through the Parliamentary stages, staff may seek further advice in relation to muirburn. |
| MPA | Report to PAC as requested on consultations | Jane Reid (Chair), Neil Metcalfe, Ben Wilson, Beth Scott | 2013 | Not met since last SAC meeting | The group last met in November 2021 to advise on Red Rocks and Longay possible MPA. There have not been any meetings and there is nothing to update since the last committee meeting. |
| Genetics | Advise staff on development of novel genetics framework | Pete Hollingsworth, Richard Ennos (Chair), Rob Ogden, Penelope Whitehorn, Laszlo Nagy | March 2019 | No formal meetings this year. | This group has not met for some time. Propose to stand down this informal group. |