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 Des Thompson.

## 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

**Avian Influenza sub group**

1. This group was set up to advise on issues emerging from handling the avian influenza outbreak in Scotland last summer. A final report is currently being developed.

**Muirburn sub-group**

1. The group was set up in November 2022 and has met three times since then. Professor Marian Scott chairs the sub-group. The aim of the sub-group is to support staff on science matters in connection with the planned [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. This is an area where the science is contested and in some regards ambiguous. Their advice is being sought ahead of the introduction of bill which will include a proposal to develop a year round licensing approach. The terms of reference for the group are available in annex B.
2. The main focus in terms of the evidence base has been the [NatureScot Research Report 1302 - Reviewing, assessing and critiquing the evidence base on the impacts of muirburn on wildfire prevention, carbon storage and biodiversity.](https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1302-reviewing-assessing-and-critiquing-evidence-base-impacts-muirburn#:~:text=This%20review%20found%20that%20the,extent%20of%20wildfire%20in%20moorland.) The main findings in this report indicated a lack of clear evidence on the impacts of muirburn. Stakeholder views on muirburn are polarised and the groups’ advice will help navigate these in the absence of clear evidence.
3. To date the group have produced a near final draft report. This is currently being reviewed and revised to accommodate comments at the last meeting. The Chair will sign off the final report. There is likely to be considerable interest in the report. The intention is for the report to be succinct and to summarise key advice via a series of bullets in an Executive Summary.

**Genetics group**

1. The genetics literacy programme which was completed over the summer of 2022 was a significant success and we have now extended this to include a small programme of work on developing a view on the application of gene drives to the work of NatureScot. An online session, held on 23 February, which included contributions from specialists from North Carolina State University, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Exeter will be followed up with a further workshop involving NatureScot scientists who may have an interest in applying this technology, as well as more senior staff who will help steer our activities in this controversial area from a policy perspective. It is a contentious area, and one which presents significant scientific, political, social and philosophical challenges. We will contact the members of the Genetics group to invite them to be part of these discussions.

**Fish eating birds**

1. The SAC has previously considered a paper on this topic and agreed to setting up a sub group to assist staff. At the last meeting we advised that we were reviewing the need for a sub group given that Scottish Government had set up a Fish Eating Birds policy review group and we did not wish to duplicate effort. After further consideration we have decided that we don’t need to set up a sub group at this time. Thanks to those SAC and Expert Panel members who had offered their help in this area.

**Contact:**

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

**March 2023**

| **SAC Sub- group** | **Task set** | **Membership** | **Date set up** | **Progress update** | **How advice has been used** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 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. | The genetics group will be contacted to be invited to join discussions in an upcoming workshop on gene drives. |
| Capercaillie | To review the evidence and advise on measures for conservation and management of Capercaillie in Scotland | Neil Metcalfe (chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon, Rob Marrs, Judith Webb (observer) | August 2021 | Completed | The report has been used to inform discussions on next steps for NatureScot and Cairngorms National Park Authority at Board level. Advice has been provided to Ministers. |
| Digital aerial surveys | To advise staff on methodology | Marian Scott (Chair), Ruth Mitchell, Rob Marrs, Aly McCluskie, Francis Daunt, Tom Evans, Kate Thompson and Chris Eastham. | Dec 2021 | Two meetings on the 21 January & 4 February 2022. Workshop held in March 2022.  Completed | On 1st February we published on our website the DAS review and a suite of guidance on ornithological impact assessment for offshore wind. <https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/planning-and-development/planning-and-development-advice/renewable-energy/marine-renewables/advice-marine-renewables-development> .  The DAS review was extremely helpful in informing this guidance, particularly guidance note 2 - Advice for marine ornithology baseline characterisation surveys and reporting.  We are also:   * Maintaining liaison with the 2 current DAS providers to discuss the recommendations * Shared and are continuing to discuss results with the other SNCBs and Marine Scotland to ascertain what if any work they are doing around use of baseline characterisation. * Considering the recommendations as we start to develop guidance around use of UAVs ( drones) in collecting baseline data * Identifying what if any of the findings might mean in considering the collection of similar data for marine mammals. |
| Fish eating birds | To advise staff on evidence needs | Neil Metcalfe, Kathy Dale, Steve Campbell (SASA), John Armstrong (MS), Antje Branding (RESAS), Sally Blyth (licencing) | N/A |  | It has been decided to not start up this sub group – to avoid duplication with the Scottish Government Fish Eating Birds policy review group. |
| Avian Influenza | To advise on HPAI impacts, surveillance and research needs | Dan Haydon (Chair), Jane Reid, Anna Meredith, Mark Bolton, Eleanor Watson, Helen Baker, Francis Daunt | August 2022 | Final report being developed. | The group has been set up to consider a number of areas: Assessment of impact of HPAI on wild birds in Scotland; transmission pathways and epidemiology modelling; advice on surveillance; assessment of the impact of disturbance; priorities for monitoring passage and wintering waterbirds this winter and breeding birds next year; further research needs. The final report for the group Is being developed. |
| 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 | Met 3 times in December 2022, January 2023 and February 2023. | Final report in development. |

Annex B

**SAC Muirburn sub-group**

**Terms of Reference**

**Aim**

To bring together a small sub-group of the SAC to support staff in advising on science and technical matters related to: a) the [2022 review of muirburn published by NatureScot](https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1302-reviewing-assessing-and-critiquing-evidence-base-impacts-muirburn); b) gaps in knowledge and evidence; and ensuing work in developing a muirburn [licensing approach](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/).

**Background**

The Scottish Government committed, through the current Programme for Government, to introduce a new Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill in 2022-’23. The Bill will introduce two new licences; one for grouse moor management, and one for muirburn.

The muirburn licence will apply to all muirburn and not just that which takes place on grouse moors; it will apply to hill farmers and crofters as well as grouse moor managers. The muirburn licence was recommended through the [Werritty Report](https://www.gov.scot/news/grouse-moor-management/) and will result in muirburn being ‘unlawful unless carried out under licence’.

NatureScot is working closely with the Scottish Government to develop options for a [licensing approach](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/). The first stage has been a review of the evidence base. A final report has concluded, broadly, that some elements of the evidence base are unclear or contested in relation to impacts on carbon sequestration, wildfire incidence and containment, and biodiversity.

**Scope**

The purpose of the muirburn licence is to ‘minimise the risk of damaging effects on environmental interests, and address potential benefits such as the reduction of fuel loads’. **The purpose of the SAC muirburn sub group will be to provide expert advice to support staff in addressing unclear elements of the evidence base, whilst minimising risks and applying the precautionary principle in developing a licensing approach to muirburn.** This will contribute to the development of policy (the sub-group will not be involved in policy development).

**Main tasks/specific points it would be useful to consider**

* Identify key points from the main findings of the [NatureScot review report](https://www.nature.scot/doc/naturescot-research-report-1302-reviewing-assessing-and-critiquing-evidence-base-impacts-muirburn) which support evidence based approaches to potential licensing of muirburn;
* Advise on key knowledge gaps outlined in the review, and others, which could be addressed through further work;
* Advise on further risks and benefits associated with muirburn as detailed in the review, and drawing on any other lines of available evidence;
* Support staff in developing the evidence base underpinning the application of the precautionary principle in relation to muirburn.

**Membership**

Professor Marian Scott (SAC) – chair

Dr Sarah Woodin (SAC Expert Panel)

Professor Rob Marrs (SAC Expert Panel)

Professor Davy McCracken (SRUC; external expert advice)

**Duration of group/frequency of meetings**

This will be a time bound task and finish group. We anticipate that the group will meet two to three times, once in late- November, once in December and potentially once more in January. Advice will be sought through correspondence as well as in meetings.