

Welcome and Introduction

- Firstly, I would like to thank Scottish Land and Estates for inviting me along to their Moorland Conference today.
- As someone who started out their career as a shepherd, and then a hill farmer, I am fully aware of the pressures and responsibilities placed on land managers.

Wildlife Management and Wildlife Act Latest Position

- The Bill for this Act of the Scottish Parliament was passed by the Parliament on 21st March 2024 and received Royal Assent on 30th April 2024.

- The Act makes provision for the management of wildlife through the prohibition of glue traps and snares and regulation of other wildlife traps and the licensing of land on which certain birds are to be killed or taken; and for the licensing of the making of muirburn; and for connected purposes.
- We are looking to bring the provisions to licence grouse shooting in to effect as soon as possible and prior to the upcoming grouse shooting season.
- We are also working on bringing the other provisions in the Act in to effect as soon as reasonably possible, however noting that some provisions require opportunity for training courses to be developed and completed and for licensing systems to be developed.
- We will provide updates to key stakeholders on the dates as and when they are available.

Acknowledging the Benefits of Moorland Management:

- The Scottish Government acknowledges the decisive role moorland management plays when it comes to biodiversity and nature – including its importance for red listed ground nesting birds in particular, such as curlew, lapwing, golden plover and black grouse.
- The Scottish Government welcome landscape-scale initiatives to promote the conservation of raptors on grouse moors across Scotland, such as the East Cairngorm Moorland Partnership and the South of Scotland Golden Eagle Project.
- The Scottish Government acknowledge the importance of grouse shooting when it comes to Scotland's rural economy, with Scottish Government Commissioned Research noting that driven grouse shooting is associated with:

- the highest levels of local / regional spending, providing much needed support to rural businesses including garages, game dealers, gun shops, builders, electricians, plumbers, etc.
- The Scottish Government understand the importance of grouse shooting for social cohesion, mobility and wellbeing – with rural communities turning out in abundance to support driven shoot days as beaters, flankers and pickers-up.

Licensing Grouse Shooting

- The Act has not been introduced to penalise grouse moor operators who are complying with the law and delivering important benefits for biodiversity and the rural economy.
- The Act is designed to clamp down on the minority of operators engaging in wildlife crime.

- The licensing scheme for grouse shooting is a direct consequence of the correlation between grouse shooting and raptor persecution.
- This regime is required on the back of the rigorous review of grouse moor management undertaken by Professor Alan Werritty.
- The Scottish Government have taken care to design a licensing scheme for grouse shooting with strong legal safeguards.
- Decisions to suspend or revoke licences will not be taken lightly, and will require NatureScot to be satisfied (to the civil burden of proof) that a relevant offence has been committed on land to which a grouse shooting licence relates by a relevant individual.

- To that end, grouse moor operators complying with the law will have nothing to fear from this licensing scheme.
- The legal safeguards within the scheme, coupled with the diligence and professionalism of NatureScot, will mean that the licence will be revoke where there is definitive evidence of criminality.
- It is worth noting that many of the amendments to the Bill and the legal safeguards within it were a direct consequence of the close partnership working between the Scottish Government and Scottish Land & Estates (SLE). Thanks particularly to Ross Ewing and Ashley McCann who provided Ministers, officials and the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee with constructive suggestions which enabled improvements to be made to the Bill.

- In summary, SLE have been a key critical friend of the Scottish Government throughout this process which has enabled Ministers to strike the right balance. The Scottish Government will continue to engage with SLE to ensure the scheme is operating as it should.

Licensing Muirburn

- The Act also contains provisions which will licence the making of muirburn in Scotland. This has been a challenging issue for the Scottish Government to deal with owing to the lack of scientific consensus surrounding the impacts of muirburn and the polarised views.
- The Scottish Government have taken a precautionary approach to the regulation of muirburn. I recognise that muirburn can deliver tangible benefits, but they also recognise the importance of protecting peatland – a vital carbon store.

- Under this licensing scheme, muirburn will be permissible on both peatland and non-peatland, but there will be a narrower range of licensable purposes on peatland. This reflects precautionary approach taken to muirburn on peatland.
- I recognise, however, that muirburn can have an important role to play on peatland habitats when it comes to wildfire mitigation and habitat conservation. The licensable purposes reflect this.
- A broader range of licensable purposes – including managing habitat for moorland game and wildlife – exists for non-peatland habitats, enabling muirburn to continue contributing to moorland management objectives.

Summary

- The Wildlife Management and Muirburn Act is not designed to disincentivise or detract from the social, economic and environmental benefits of moorland management.
- I recognise these benefits and want them to be sustained for years to come.
- The Act is in place primarily to tackle the minority of operators engaging in the illegal persecution of raptors.
- The provisions of this Act send a strong message that such offences will not be tolerated in Scotland, and Ministers are confident that it will do the job.
- I am grateful for the opportunity to address you all today: to recognise the good work you are doing and to make clear my expectations of the Wildlife Management and Muirburn Act.

- My thanks to Sarah-Jane, Ross and the team at Scottish Land Estates for organising this important conference, and I would be delighted to take any questions you may have.

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