



For discussion

Title: Deer incentive scheme

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Purpose

This paper presents an update on the delivery of the deer incentive scheme run by the Park Authority in the hind culling seasons of 2024/25 and 2025/26.

Recommendations

The Performance Committee is asked to:

- a) Discuss the paper and consider any implications for deer management and future deer incentive schemes.

Strategic policy consideration

1. The National Park Partnership Plan (NPPP) 2022 – 2027 has an objective to:
 - a) Reduce the negative impacts of red deer and other herbivores across the National Park to enable woodlands to expand, heather loss to be reversed, peatlands to recover and wider biodiversity and landscape enhancements to take place.
2. The target is to achieve:
 - a) Average open range red deer densities in each Deer Management Group (DMG) are a maximum of five to eight per km² by 2030.



Performance dashboard

Performance Measure for 2025/26	Rating	Commentary
Finance: Maximise use of £40,000 budget from Scottish Government (SG) via NatureScot which is available in 2025/26 for a deer incentive scheme.	Green	The Park Authority has secured and deployed funds in support of a deer incentive scheme. The scheme is likely to be underspent, but the extent of that underspend is currently unknown as culls may continue until end of March. In general, public money is protected within deer incentive schemes. If cull targets are not met, then incentive payments are not made, and the money is retained within the public purse.
Finance: Impact on the Park Authority's budget management.	Green	No impact on our budget and resources. Funds for deer incentives have been secured from other budgets.
Deer culls achieved and populations reduced.	Amber	Cull targets are unlikely to be achieved in West Grampian DMG or South Grampian DMG. Deer counts will be carried out in February or March. Results are not yet known.

Delivery against strategic outcomes

3. The Park Authority offered an incentive scheme, which we have also called a venison subsidy, to two DMGs in the hind culling seasons of 2024/25 and 2025/26. These are the South Grampian and West Grampian DMGs in the south of the National Park. South Grampian DMG is the hill land from Glen Shee ski centre east to Kirriemuir and including Glens Isla and Prosen and the south side of Glen Clova. It includes estates like Tulchan of Glenisla, the Bachnagairn beat of Balmoral and the new Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS) landholding at Glen Prosen. West Grampian DMG lies in the River Tay catchment between the Glen Shee ski centre,



west to Drumochter and contains large estates such as Atholl, Fealar, Glenfergate and Rhiedorrach. Both DMGs currently sit at similar densities of around 14 deer per km² but are in very different places in terms of statutory process. Most of South Grampian DMG is in a Section 7 Agreement and has been operating under various Agreements almost continuously since 2003. Section 7 Agreements are legal agreements made between NatureScot and landowners where deer are causing damage. In contrast West Grampian DMG has never been in any statutory deer management process.

4. Both DMGs have reduced density by more than half over the last 20 to 30 years, and grazing pressure is greatly reduced. However current densities do remain amongst some of the highest in Scotland.
5. We have funded an incentive scheme for the last two hind culling seasons, and this scheme has been aimed at incentivising reductions in the DMGs with higher deer densities. Estates were set targets and are paid a rate on a proportion of the cull if they achieve that target. SG emphasised that incentives should only be paid if culls increased and that no money should be paid for culls where the aim is to maintain a stable population. Targets for West Grampian DMG were agreed through the Strategic Land Use Planning process initiated under Cairngorms 2030 (C2030) and discussions with the wider DMG. Targets for South Grampian DMG were set through the Section 7 Agreement. Cull targets were set to reduce deer populations in line with the NPPP. In 2024/25 both DMGs achieved cull targets and £28,000 of incentive were paid to estates. This was on an intervention rate of £70 per hind plus associated calf. In 2025/26 the targets remained the same for both DMGs (at 1,400 hinds) but incentive rates were increased to £100 per hind and £100 per associated calf. This is a considerable uplift on the game dealer value of a carcass which might equate to around £70 for a hill hind and £30 for a calf.
6. However, cull levels have reduced in 2025/26. West Grampian DMG were at 72% of target at the end of the hind season. Only two estates have applied for an extension to the hind season so it's unlikely the hind cull target will be achieved and currently we might pay a total of £10,000 to £15,000 to certain estates which have met their individual targets. On 09 February cull levels on Section 7 estates were at 66% of target. All estates have hind season extensions until end of March so, it is harder to predict how much incentive will be paid.



7. The consensus in the West Grampian DMG is that culls have been reduced as estates think deer are too scarce or are at least seeing fewer deer than they expect to see. There has also been very poor weather with this very prolonged session of southeast wind making northeast Scotland the wettest it has ever been and thick mist making shooting dangerous.

Discussion

8. NatureScot have also run deer incentive schemes for two years, targeting sika deer south of Loch Ness and roe deer in the central belt. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority have also run an incentive scheme but for one year only. These schemes test different approaches on different species and with different deer stalking models. It is hoped that different approaches will increase learning on the best ways to incentivise higher culls. Schemes in different years are also testing different price points and the influence on price point on culls.
9. Early analysis suggests all schemes incentivised higher culls in their first year and have seen cull reductions in their second year despite an increase in the incentive rate from £70 per hind and calf to £100 per hind and calf.
10. The reasons for this are likely because estates where deer stalking provides significant income are nervous about deer reductions and will wish to maximise the deer population they hold within the context of any target. In the case of the West Grampian DMG there is a strong desire to delay further deer reductions until the population has been counted. A helicopter deer count is scheduled for February / March of 2026 but has not been carried at time of writing.
11. Estates which value stalking income take a very long-term view of deer population management and are likely to view an incentive scheme based on venison value as a short-term gain which comes at long term cost to them.
12. These values create some tension between estates where stalking is a key component of their business model and the NPPP target to achieve a maximum average deer density of five to eight deer per km² across each DMG. This tension is yet to be entirely resolved.



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19 February 2026

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