

MINUTES OF THE ENGLAND SQUIRREL FORUM MEETING HELD ON 7TH APRIL 2005 AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS, BELGRAVE SQUARE LONDON.

Present – Fred Currie, FC(E) Chairman
Charles Critchley, FE
Brenda Mayle, FR
Richard Pow, FC(E)
John Gurnell
John Morris, Chiltern Woodland Project
Linda Smith, DEFRA
Colin Pope, Isle of Wight Council
Melanie Hardie
Catriona Carlin
Jill Nelson, PTES
Roger Cook, ESI
Louise Bessant, Red Alert

WELCOME AND APOLOGIES - Apologies for absence were received from Judith Webb, James Kirkwood, Colin Booty, Tony Mitchell-Jones and Bill Burlton.

The Chairman welcomed those present and introduced Linda Smith and Jill Nelson to the meeting.

MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING

The minutes of the last meeting were agreed subject to the following clarifications

- Minutes of the UKRSG were now available on the JNCC web site.
- The reference to the establishment of a colony of reds on the Isle of Mull should refer to a feasibility study looking into the possibility only. Nothing further had been done.

1. ENGLAND GREY SQUIRREL POLICY AND ACTIONS

The consultation responses had been analysed and recommendations had been made for minor alterations to the draft. It was intended to produce a hard copy of the front end of the policy statement. The full policy statement with annexes would be available on the Forestry Commission England web site and put to the new Minister for publication as soon after the general election as possible.

2. WIDER EUROPEAN ISSUES AND NON-NATIVE SPECIES POLICY

Linda Smith reported that in the past few years grey squirrel issues had been advancing up the political agenda and Ministers had been taking an increased interest. Their concerns were not just the general problems caused by grey squirrels but also the impact they have on reds, and concern that these problems may become replicated on the continent. Ministers had been approached and advice sought on how to take this forward with European colleagues and they had suggested that the issue be raised at the last meeting of the Berne Convention. This was agreed and a paper tabled flagging up the issues of concern in the UK to try to prevent them from repeating our mistakes on the continent, especially in Italy. It was suggested that further work be undertaken through the development of the Berne Convention on invasive alien species strategy. This would culminate in a major conference next year. There was a meeting scheduled in June of an "Expert Group" on invasive alien species and it had been agreed that an element be included in the programme for the seminar focussing on a presentation, primarily by the UK, on the work undertaken and the problems faced and trying to get the profile raised internationally. The emphasis was now on drawing up the paper for the seminar and it could include case studies of particular UK interest such as Kielder/NE Region, the Chilterns and the Dean.

Linda would set up an e-mail group to look at what could be fed into the paper and invited those present to make it known if they would like to be included on the circulation list (Brenda Mayle, Fred Currie, Roger Cook and John Gurnell). Information to Linda asap as the deadline for the paper was the beginning of May. There would be close liaison with Italy.

The Chairman said that he thought it would be a good idea to set up a European Working Group, initiated and researched by the UK Red Squirrel Group. It would look at the possibility, within the next 2 years, of setting up a 3-day workshop in the UK to illustrate the situation.

ACTION POINT – Melanie Hardie to propose European issues sub-group of UKRSG at next UK meeting.

ACTION POINT – all to comment on Linda's draft paper and provide case study information.

3. NORTHERN ENGLAND RED SQUIRREL CONSERVATION PROJECT

Richard Pow reported that this was a big and complicated bid and it was being compiled at a difficult time for resources. The papers tabled described the situation of the bid as it stood at the moment. The key point of the discussion for today would be to comment on the management guidelines for the reserves and the buffer zones, to comment on the Memorandum of Understanding (if needed) and to address the draft overview document (this was far from finished and the need for extra work was recognised).

Management Guidelines – the NE Red Squirrel Conservation Steering Group had endorsed this paper but it had been made clear to them that the endorsement of the ESF and UKRSG would also be sought giving broad and deep support of the paper, hence an improved chance of lottery success.

Comments on the papers included

- Brenda Mayle thought that there was some contradictory information in the supplementary feeding information. This would be re-worded in this paper and also the paper on buffer zones.
- Insert the information that any grey squirrel carcasses should not be sent to the Project Officer – they should only be informed for information only and to advise on where to send the carcass for post mortem.
- When the buffer zone information is published there would be a 2 sided A4 publication with all the stakeholder logos on making it clear that those organisations are supporting the bid.
- Annex C – consider asking some of the key landowners in the buffer zones to sign up to the paper
- Annex D – it would be made clear that it was recognised that not all reserves are equal in the likelihood of long term red squirrel persistence. All the sites where it was thought that the Red had good long-term persistence chances were selected. Also, some had been selected where long term persistence was less likely but important in other matters. This was important to engender HLS support.
- There would be an improved map to accompany the papers.
- It would be made clear on the site descriptions that “as soon as greys appear” control measures needed to be implemented

Costings Budget – this demonstrated the variety of different organisations involved in the bid. A Defra Rural Enterprise Scheme was being pulled together. This would focus agricultural areas of the buffer zones of the reserves. Through that scheme land owners in those areas would be able to get grant aid for grey squirrel control. The scheme would be focused on areas of <3ha as in larger woods the FC Woodland Grant Scheme would be available.

PTES/MTUK support had been confirmed.

Broad figures for the bid were £1.2 - £1.3 million.

The ESF wholeheartedly supported the bid.

ACTION POINT - Members organisations to write to Richard Pow to give their support to the bid. Deadline 15th May 2005.

4. SQUIRREL POX VIRUS RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Brenda Mayle reported that there had been a meeting of the (?) UK group in Newcastle and all of the scientists involved in the pox work were present. A report of the meeting had been produced and distributed widely. At the meeting it was agreed that the next step was to produce a paper which would then go through the ESF and the UKRSG to ministers. This would outline the issues, understandings of the disease and the way forward. The draft of this paper was tabled at this meeting. At the moment there was still no test to identify the presence of the virus, so at the moment the use of supplementary feeding hoppers, the cleaning of traps etc could not be advised on. This formulation of this test was the major issue.

Comments on the paper included;

- The paper may need developing more and writing in the appropriate "secretariat" language for Ministers to take in interest and it may be better targeting the Defra heads of divisions before putting the paper to Ministers.
- There was a huge amount of expertise in commercial vaccination sector which may be worth addressing.
- The paper would be sent to the UK group via e-mail

ACTION POINT - Further comments to Brenda Mayle within 2 weeks.

ACTION POINT – Brenda to amend and circulate within Defra/JNCC/FC at high level.

There had been an international 2-day workshop on fertility control and wildlife management. It had been held in York and had been chaired by Richard Brand-Hardy. Leading international representatives had been invited. Presentations on day one covered e.g. emerging fertility control technology and delivery systems. Day 2 covered, among other things, regulatory issues, vaccine effectiveness and the gathering of data.

In terms of the way forward it was agreed that with so few organisations involved the importance of collaboration in terms of information gathering, the pooling of data was paramount. A formal information exchange system was to be set up. It was also agreed that there was a need for an annual meeting to include a wider remit of representatives as well as scientists. The next meeting would be at Fort Collins USA.

In terms of applications to GB wildlife, CSI were looking at wild boar and the development of technology. Results had been very good so far and it had been mentioned that there was potential application to grey squirrels. There was already commitment at policy level between FC and Defra to look at funding work for greys in the future, but it would be minimal.

ACTION POINT – Brenda and Steve Gregory to meet with Richard Brand-Hardy to discuss the way forward.

5. METHODS OF DISPATCH OF TRAPPED GREY SQUIRRELS

Charles Critchley reported that at the meeting held on the Isle of Wight last year Jason Reynolds made a presentation proposing the use of air gun to dispatch grey squirrels in cage traps as an alternative to the cranial method given as FC best practice – it did not recommend shooting the animal in the trap as a humane way of dispatching it. As a result there had been a sub group (Jason Reynolds, Colin Booty, Richard Schiabile and Charles Critchley) to consider the issues raised on IOW. It had been intimated at the IOW meeting that the use of the air gun was commonplace with all operatives in Northern Ireland. Later this was retracted and it was made clear that not all NI operatives used the gun method.

The sub group came to the following conclusions "we recommend to the ESF that a veterinary audit of the current legal methods of dispatch is undertaken to assess the humanness of the 2 legal methods of

dispatch." Justification for this centred on the lack of consistency between FC best practice and Defra advised best practice.

General feeling of the meeting, and of John Gurnell in particular was that the cranial method of dispatch was the favoured method and by far the most humane and that the Defra leaflet should be amended.

ACTION POINT - Linda Smith would flag the matter up with Matthew Haydon and point out the inconsistencies in the two leaflets and ask for it to be amended in line with FC Practice Note 4.

6. IMPACT ON NESTING WOODLAND BIRDS PROPOSAL

Fred Currie reported that under the auspices of the Woodland Bird Group a consortia proposal led by the Game Conservancy Trust had been put forward and circulated within the Government. However FC/Defra/EN were not able to fund the proposal at this stage. The collaboration will continue. Comments had been made that actual evidence of grey squirrel predation was needed. RSPB and Game Conservancy Trust were putting up cameras on spotted flycatcher nests in their study areas in the hope of catching direct evidence. It was hoped for some evidence by late Autumn in time for reworking the proposal. Defra required an application for grant from the European side of the conservation budget by the end of September.

7. UK RED SQUIRREL ACTION PLAN TARGETS REVIEW

Catriona reported that these targets were not yet completed. When they were complete they would be circulated to the group. The map to accompany the target areas would be 10km²

The next meeting of the UKRSG was 5th July.

8. UK RED SQUIRREL WEB SITE

Melanie reported that the information for the web site had been submitted to the web master and it was hope to be live by mid June. Any information to be included on the site would need to be signed off at a country level. The URL for the site was www.ukredsquirrels.org.uk

9. RED ALERT NW AND NE

Louise reported that she was busy with the previously mentioned HLF bid.

Jason Reynolds had left Red Alert. Simon Lloyd the information officer was keeping the project ticking over. Louise would be the representative for the Wildlife Trusts on the UKRSG.

After the meeting in Newcastle on squirrel pox disease Louise had made contact with Liverpool University who are working on identifying the virus on squirrel feeders or the actual body, she had agreed that any possible pox cases from her would be sent to them. The most recent case of pox in the NE was at the end of 2004 about 20 miles south of Keilder.

As a result of the work done by Bill Burlton joint talks in key areas had been held. 3 public talks had been held and a workshop for practitioners had been held in Keilder – feedback had been very good. 2 more were planned for the summer 1 in Northumberland and 1 in the Cheviot area.

ISLE OF WIGHT

Colin Pope reported that the IOW remained a grey free zone with no sightings.

FE design plans for consultation were expected at the end of the week. These seemed to be very good and take into consideration the requirements of red squirrels.

Through the forestry visulands project there was a student from Bournemouth university starting work on the island looking at connectivity between woodlands and particularly ancient woodlands to assess the biodiversity benefit of that was and how rapidly species could colonise planted corridors.

10. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no further business.

11. DATE AND VENUE OF NEXT METING

The Chairman suggested that the next meeting be held in the Newcastle area on 8/9 November. A field visit on 8th possibly Kielder area and meeting on 9th. The Forum agreed – details to follow.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 1445.