

MINUTES OF THE ENGLAND SQUIRREL FORUM MEETING HELD ON 15TH APRIL 2003 AT THE ROYAL OVERSEAS LEAGUE, LONDON.

Present - Fred Currie, FC(E) Chairman
Brenda Mayle, FC Research
Tony Mitchell-Jones, English Nature
Jason Reynolds, Cumbria Wildlife Trust
Judith Webb, CLA
John Morris, Chiltern Woodland Project
Louise Huxley
Bill Burlton, FE
Colin Pope, Isle of Wight Council
Alison Pyrah, FC(E) Minutes

Apologies for absence were received from Colin Booty, Charles Critchley, Jo Ellis, Steele Haughton, Dr John Gurnell and James Kirkland.

Minutes of the last meeting were agreed a true record subject to John Morris being added to the list of those present.

Matters Arising

Priority Areas Paper – this would be amended and published on the Internet hopefully by September 2003. Tony Mitchell-Jones to e-mail members when it was available.

Eradirat/Eradimouse – evidence pointed to this product not being particularly effective as all other sources of food needed to be removed. This was not possible in the wild. The product was approved for rodent use but not for use against grey squirrels.

1. RED SQUIRREL BAP

a) Report of UKRSG.

Tony Mitchell-Jones reported on the recent meeting of the UKRSG in Inverness. It focussed on red squirrel conservation in the Highlands. The visits and discussion at the meeting revealed that the differing circumstances in each country would require different approaches. Some suggestions were made to the Highland Squirrel Group re the monitoring of greys and looking at and improving data collection.

Site management plans and implementation plans were also looked at. It was emphasised that the country squirrel groups needed to periodically look at the implementation plans and report on progress. This would be an agenda item for the next meeting.

The advice notes group had encountered some difficulty in preparing the website. A list of advice notes completed, to be completed and to

be written is attached to these minutes. Jason Reynolds to draft an advice note on dealing with injured red squirrels.

A similar 2 day UKRSG meeting is being planned for April '04 on the Isle of Wight.

b) Northern England

i) Management Plans for Priority Sites – Jason Reynolds outlined the project to compile detailed, costed management plans for priority sites in the priority regions of northern England. A composite summary plan for northern England as a whole would then be produced. The work is nearing completion. Parallel more detailed forest structure modelling work is taking place in Keilder FD by Newcastle University. The chairman hoped that both pieces of work, together with FE's Forest Plans could merge to form the basis of a broad partnership proposal to be put forward not only to HLF and other potential funders, including FC and EN, but also to wider stakeholders to gain, for example, agreement on land use strategy within buffer areas defined in the plans. Once the plans (and overall plan) had been agreed, he envisaged a seminar of all interested parties to agree how to take forward.

ii) Possible HLF Project – Jason Reynolds has had preliminary discussions with HLF regionally. After discussion, members agreed that a northern England project bid would have a better prospect of success than a cross-border England/Scotland approach. Elements of the plans that would require funding include monitoring reds and grey incursions. FC to assist Jason Reynolds and CWT in developing.

ii) Red Alert – Louise Bessant has been appointed the new Red Alert NE Officer. The post is funded by FC (regionally), Lord Ridley and an appeal by Northumberland Wildlife Trust. Jason Reynolds to ask Louise to email her contact details to Fred Currie/Alison Pyrah so that she could join the Forum.

20,000 sighting leaflets had been produced to commemorate the anniversary of Squirrel Nutkin.

Funding was available for blood sampling kits and new traps. Jason Reynolds to provide a guidance note on how to take the samples which would accompany the kits.

iii) Sefton Coast Plan – the first case of suspected parapox in the area has killed 2 red squirrels. There had been a quick diagnosis and interest had been shown by the media. The publicity and interest provided an opportunity to emphasise the need for grey control which is supported by the LA's.

The coastal forest plan was still ongoing. An EIA consultation is underway for EN's proposal to remove part of the fore dune forest at Ainsdale NNR. It is considered that this will have minimal effects on red squirrels.

c) Isle of Wight

The key effort remained focussed on grey squirrel vigilance. Following last summers trapping further trapping had taken place using the 100 custom made traps for the island. Thanks were extended for the help in obtaining these. Hair tubing would take place in the winter. Thankfully no grey squirrels were trapped or detected.

English Nature and the island Wildlife Trust had co-funded a project on the island to look at the distribution of red squirrels. In 1996 a survey showed that out of 249 woods visited 71% of them contained red squirrels. This was repeated last winter and out of 277 woods visited 86% of them contained red squirrels.

FC planting under JIGSAW aimed at improving connectivity for reds and other priority species, has continued to be very successful. At the last round of judging approx. £200,000 more funding had been allocated for 16 further schemes.

Forestry Commission had offered to assist with the hair tubing exercise in winter 2004.

The IOW Action Plan and Memorandum of Agreement regarding rapid development of resources in the event of grey incursion on the future awaited signature.

Colin Pope and the Chairman to liaise re the organisation of the UKRSG meeting scheduled for April '04.

d) Red Squirrel Research Update

Amanda Lloyd, who had been hoping to complete a thesis in Kielder on the "Influence of Forest Management on the Temporal and Spatial Ecology of Squirrels" had had to change her plan due to foot and mouth disease. She had moved south to monitor work on the impact of felling within a woodland block on actual movement and behaviour of grey squirrels. However, she had gathered site specific data from Kielder to improve the input data for modelling. She was able to look at coning frequency in Norway Spruce and Sitka Spruce. Her findings suggested a sympathetic coning frequency. The findings would be fed into the red squirrel technical paper.

As a follow up to the Thetford study funding had been received from FC and there was currently a trapping control study being carried out.

This compared trap location and bait efficacy within the Thetford study site. There were 4 areas in the study each with 2 compartments. Within each there were 2 transit lines, one for a trap location on a tree and the other for ground located traps. Maize bait was being used in comparison with mixed bait (maize, sunflower seeds and hazelnuts). All animals trapped were being visually inspected for reproductive activity and also sperm numbers and motility were being looked at. This fed into the immuno-contraceptive work.

Brenda Mayle had been asked to arrange a seminar/workshop event for those involved with red squirrel research. This would be in the autumn and would address red squirrel priorities and issues. The International Squirrel Colloquium was due to be held in Northumberland in May. Brenda had contacted Peter Lurz to suggest that the gathering take place there. Brenda will draft a FC strategy for red squirrel research following this international research colloquium.

2. GREY SQUIRRELS

a) Draft FC England Grey Squirrel Policy

A first draft (based on the ESF workshop and consultation within FC) had been prepared and sent out with the agenda to members for comment). The Chairman said overall thrust of the draft was for FC to target its support for grey control at areas where public benefit and values (i.e. biodiversity, economic, recreation) are threatened.

Members thought FC had an opportunity through the policy of re-engaging the traditional private owner as no other subject provokes more feeling that grey squirrel damage. Members thought FC should make more effort on gathering evidence of impacts and minimising the impacts especially on wider biodiversity and cultural measures and decision support. There was too much emphasis on grant support in the draft and some advised separating the policy/position statement from support/grant measures.

The Chairman outlined a possible milestone/date timetable, subject to response from FC senior staff. Clearly because of the sensitive nature of the issue Ministers would need to endorse the final policy. Members agreed to submit written comments by mid May. The Chairman would then re-draft it in light of comments received by the end of May for circulation within FC and ESF and revise the milestone dates.

b) Warfarin Usage Update

A decision on warfarin usage was expected later in the year.

c) Grey Squirrel Research Update

- i) The Practice Note on controlling grey squirrels damage to woodland had been revised and reprinted. It now totalled 16 pages due to the increased detail and range of information. It was available on the FC Internet site.

Focus of research had been on improving the ability to predict high risk sites and years. G.I.S. had been used to identify 11 vulnerable sub-compartments adjacent to high holding habitats. Of these 11 sites 2 were in Wales and the rest in southern England. In the first 2 weeks of January staff had pre-baited traps and then for the second week the traps had been set. Natural food availability had also been assessed. The next stage was in September when damage assessments on vulnerable locations would be carried out. This was a 3 year study.

There was an ongoing study (4/5 years) in the Forest of Dean on the impacts of grey damage on tree growth. Damage had been monitored on oak and beech regeneration. Final measurements had been made in December and final damage assessments had been made in January. Analysis was ongoing. However, it looked as if impacts on both tree top height and yield class were evident. A field trip to the Dean was suggested.

A review of trapping efficacy had been carried out. Findings would be drafted into a report.

Biodiversity – Brenda is discussing with others the potential impacts of greys on wider biodiversity issues. Some research on the diet of greys using stable isotope analysis will be commencing shortly and a review is being done along with BTO and RSPB.

3. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There being no further business the meeting closed at 3.30pm.

4. DATE AND VENUES OF NEXT MEETINGS

Late Nov/early Dec (date to be confirmed) at Royal Overseas League, London

13th, 14th and 15th April 2004 joint meeting with UKRSG at Isle of Wight.