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**Sixth meeting of the UKRSG, Forestry Commission HQ, Corstorphine Rd, Edinburgh,
3 September 2002**

Those present:

Jessa Battersby (Secretariat)
Mairi Cole (Scotland forum)
Liz Halliwell (Wales forum)
Tony Mitchell-Jones (England forum)
Alex Morris (Scottish Squirrel Group)
Gordon Patterson (FC)
Jason Reynolds (Wildlife Trusts)
John Milburne (EHS)

1. Apologies: Brenda Mayle (FC), Martyn Howat (EN, Chair), Fred Currie (FC).

Tony Mitchell-Jones acted as Chair for the meeting. It was decided that the issue of the Chairmanship should be revisited at the next meeting if the current Chair was unable to continue in that position.

2. Minutes of the last meeting – Agreed.

Action 1 – Carried out but very few comments received. The decision was taken that if no comments had been received within 1 week from the date of the meeting then the ToR should be signed off and circulated to the group as an agreed document.

Action 2 – not carried out because of lack of clarity regarding the action. A discussion on funding issues followed. It was suggested that the group could contract someone to put in a bid for HLF funding but it was also felt that the group had mainly a co-ordinating and reporting role and that the executive role lay more with the country for a. In the future the situation was likely to become more devolved and the UKRSG should have a similar role to that of JNCC. As far as HLF funding was concerned the group could have a facilitation role providing strategic planning for a bid. Funding bids for species conservation were now possible but HLF were keener on integrated bids and were prepared to put money into development officers and area bids were preferred. It was felt that the red squirrel ought to be a high profile species.

The group decided that its role should be to provide information about HLF criteria to country and local groups and produce guidance on how to proceed with an HLF bid. A bid for NE England was underway and would provide a real example of the sort of information required.

Karina Woodall has already prepared draft notes about local BAPs and SAPs.

Action 1: Jason Reynolds and Gordon Patterson to produce an information paper on potential HLF involvement for the next UKRSG meeting in December.

Action 3. Costs of site selection in Scotland. MC advised that the first step involved finding and funding someone to carry out the process for areas in Scotland. This was difficult because local groups don't have the personnel. The selection process had been carried out in Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders because both areas had red squirrel project officers. SNH were looking at employing someone to do the work for the rest of Scotland on

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a six month contract and then build a 3-5 year survey and monitoring strategy with SNH funding. SNH had a bid in for money for 2003/4 GP advised that FC could possibly find some funding. It was pointed out that agreeing and managing priority areas would need to overlap with native woodland development because of potential conflicts in management strategy.

It was agreed that the UKRSG should give its full backing for this to be a top priority in Scotland.

Action 2: MC draft something on the subject to send to AM and GP. Update the Group in December.

Action 4 – defer to next meeting – JB had contacted relevant people and was awaiting a reply.

Action 5 Workplan revision. This was on the agenda for the next country fora meetings.

Action 3: Country fora reps to ensure that the revised implementation plan is discussed at the next country for a meetings and return comments to UKRSG for consideration at the December meeting.

Action 4: JB to ensure that the date is added to the latest revision to avoid confusion.

Action 6- on Agenda

Action 7 – on Agenda.

Action 8 – carried forward to December

Action 9- under item 5 on the Agenda

Action 10 – carried out and on Agenda.

3. Matters Arising and not covered by other agenda items.

JR asked about the Woodland Grants Scheme and whether providing up to 60% of the costs of management included grey squirrel control. AM advised that it was difficult to set up standard figures for costs of woodland management. The process was demand led but funding would only be provided for priority areas. Potentially HLF funding could provide the necessary 40% top-up.

JR also wished to note that the Wildlife Trusts main concern with the Eradirat pesticide was one of humaneness (Jason do you want to supply a sentence here?).

4. Regional Updates

England.

Management Plan project for N. England. The plan is to write up to 20 management plans for priority woodland in England. Two have been completed so far. The plans include proposals for changes in management and costings. The plans will then be ranked in order of importance. The project is jointly funded between EN and FC until the end of March 2003.

The Isle of Wight. The island has a red squirrel population but until now no grey incursion. In 2001 a female grey squirrel that had bred previously was found dead on a road. Also there have been 1 or 2 local sightings. A survey plan has been put into action, involving trapping and the use of hair tubes to ascertain the status of greys on the island. To date there is no evidence from either trapping or hair tubes. There has been good liaison between FC and FR

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and the plan has worked well. Having traps available to move at short notice has been an important factor in the success of the project.

Action 5: TMJ to circulate notes on the IoW issue.

Red squirrel officer in NE England. EN almost have enough funds for a red squirrel officer in NE England, located with the Wildlife Trusts, to replace Jason Reynolds.

Northern Ireland

Red squirrel survey. A preliminary survey has been carried out to check on the changes in distribution of red and grey squirrels since the last survey in 1995. JM advised that he would circulate the final report. Main results are that grey squirrels have extended their distribution and are moving into two areas that were red squirrel strongholds.

The Forest Service is continuing to work towards red squirrel conservation. The following report was provided to the UKRSG.

Forest Service Report to UKRSG September 2002

The Forest Service (an Agency of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland) manages the bulk of forests in Red Squirrel Preferred Areas (RSPAs) identified in the NI Red Squirrel species Action Plan (SAP).

Progress has been made towards delivery of conservation measures through:

- Inclusion of specific measures for Red Squirrel protection in RSPAs through management planning, including appropriate choice of tree species for planting and in retaining areas of mature trees as refuges and sources of food
- Development of management plans for specific forests in RSPAs, taking account of local factors
- Forest education programmes for schools
- Recording and collating observations of red squirrels
- Control of grey squirrels

There are a number of issues in need of resolution. These include:

1. Conflicting management directions arising from the Red Squirrel SAP and native woodland and parkland HAPs.
2. The proliferation of small broad-leaved woodlands in buffer areas and the requirement for resources to facilitate co-operation between landowners.
3. Conflict between allocation of resources for grey squirrel control for forest protection and red squirrel conservation.

For further information contact: Richard Schaible or Fay Forster, Forest Practice Branch, Forest Service, Dundonald house, Upper Newtownards road, Belfast BT4 3SB.

Or

John Griffin, Forest Practice Branch, Forest Service, Inishkeen house, Killyhevlin, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 3EJ.

The NI Squirrel forum. This group should have met prior to this meeting but will meet now in October or November, but certainly before the next UKRSG meeting.

Priority area information should be put on the website.

Scotland

International Squirrel Colloquium. This is a research conference to be held in May 2003 in Ford Castle, Ford, north Northumberland. MC raised the question of a national conference to discuss red squirrel conservation in the UK.

MC also raised the issue of requesting funding from PTES or Mammals Trust UK because they will fund high profile projects in research and/or conservation.

Road signs. MC asked if there was an approved format for road signs denoting the presence of red squirrels in an area but it was considered that LAs would have to be contacted for location and design of road signs. This was an important issue for delivering BAP targets and perhaps should be considered by the group.

Wales

Habitat management in Central Wales. This is being reviewed to identify suitable areas and to provide initial information on what needs to be done for red squirrels.

Clocaenog- Various work including trapping, DNA analysis and research into parapoxvirus.

Anglesey. There is a proposal to reintroduce red squirrels to Newborough a 800ha woodland, which is also a SAC for dune systems. The Anglesey group (Menter Mon) have been provided with the UKRSG notes on reintroductions.

JR noted that there are captive-bred populations of red squirrels and it would be nice to have a place to reintroduce them. There would be problems with local perceptions about conflicting conservation management.

Action 6: The role of translocations and re-introductions should be an agenda item for the next meeting.

5. Communications issues

JB advised that there were still problems with communication between the UKRSG and the country fora with minutes received from the Scottish Squirrel forum only. TMJ advised that he would take up the issue with Alison Pyrah. LH advised that she would remind the secretariat and chair to send information to JB. JM advised that he would do the same.

6. Immunocontraception research and future directions

JB advised that there had been a press release on the ending of the project on grey squirrel immunocontraception, but there had been no public reaction so far. The intention at the last steering group meeting had been to keep the group format and reconvene once a year to look at grey squirrel management and control. This group should have close links with the UKRSG. Brenda Mayle has been to North America to review the ecology of the species in its natural habitat and should be able to report to the group at the next meeting.

Action 7: BM to present findings of North American trip to the Group in December.

7. Creation of Technical group to produce Advice notes and for other issues

After some discussion it was decided that a sub-group should be convened. The remit of the group would be to collect together all existing advice notes via the country fora, to examine where the gaps exist and where the advice is adequate and any gaps that exist. The group should report back to the UKRSG at the April meeting. EHS might be able to help with publishing the notes.

Action 8. JB to circulate the existing list of advice notes.

Action 9. JB to convene a sub-group to look at revision of the existing advice notes and creation of others. The sub-group: JB, JR, BM, TMJ, JM, LH and Corrie Brummer. Progress should be reviewed at the meeting in April 2003.

Action 10. JB to liaise with country fora and collect information on existing advice.

8. Squirrel surveillance and monitoring

JB introduced a paper on monitoring red squirrels. After some discussion the main points raised were:

- Transect walking was not a viable method
- There was a need to assess the minimum information required- would presence/absence be sufficient to obtain an index of species status?
- On sites that were being managed for red squirrels it would be important to know whether or not the management had worked and so fairly detailed information would be required.
- Over wider areas there was a need to know changes in the distribution of red squirrels and then a more rigorous system to give some index of changes in squirrel numbers.

Possible methods:

- The use of squirrel feeders to assess presence/absence
- Use new technology – camera tubes, thermal imaging, dataloggers etc.
- Use public returns of leaflets on squirrel sightings to assess population change, based on change in number of leaflets returned over time

The group decided that a contract should be let to assess the best methods for monitoring red squirrels. The contract should be in 2 parts:

- 1 What methods are likely to be effective for monitoring red squirrels?
- 2 Trialing the methods.

Action 11. Agency reps and JNCC to assess the first stage of letting a contract for someone to carry out the work. Update the group at the next meeting.

9. Future meetings of the UKRSG

JB Advised that the next two meetings of the UKRSG would be held in Bangor/Anglesey in December and in the Scottish Highlands in April 2003. This would enable local groups to give presentations to the UKRSG on important local issues. Two papers were circulated to the group on progress made by the Anglesey red squirrel group by Craig Shuttlesworth and important issues in the Scottish Highlands by Ian Collier. JB advised that the meeting in the Scottish Highlands would require the group to stay two nights, which was a heavy work commitment. However, it was considered important because the Highlands are a red squirrel stronghold and have problems that are specific to the area.

Action 12: JB to circulate meeting details and programmes of events.

10. AOB none

11. D.O.N.Meetings. 17 December 2002, Bangor. 9 April 2003, Scotland. 3 September 2003, Venue to be agreed.