

Minutes of the UKRSG meeting held on the 5th July 2005, EHS Commonwealth House, Belfast

Chair: Tony Mitchell-Jones, EN

Members present:

Louise Bessant (RANE)

Brenda Mayle (FR)

Linda Smith (Defra)

Richard Shaible (FC NI)

Ian Collier (FCS)

Caitriona Carlin (EN)

Jean Mathews (CCW)

Melanie Hardie (JNCC)

Brenda Mayle (FE)

Tony Mitchell-Jones (EN)

John Milburne (EHS)

Declan Looney (EHS)

1. Apologies were received from Fred Currie, Mel Tonkins, Mairi Cole, Liz Halliwell & Gordon Patterson.

2 & 3. Minutes of last meeting & Matters Arising

Action points all carried out or to be discussed later in the agenda. LB agreed to carry over Jason Reynolds work and action points.

4. European Squirrel Issues

LS updated the group on the recent Bern Standing Committee meeting where UK, Ireland and Italy presented information on grey squirrels as an alien invasive species (IAS) and the specific threat they pose to red squirrels (see paper). It was agreed that a resolution should be drafted by UK and Italy to raise awareness in other country governments to put pressure on local authorities and the EU. It has been suggested that the grey squirrel population could be at the Swiss border in 15-20 years; this potential entry site should be the priority area for any attempted control effort. The Italian government is keen to do something but cannot force the local authority to take action. LS will send a report specifically to France and Switzerland (which were not represented at the meeting) and re-address this issue at the September Standing Committee meeting.

It is important that general awareness is raised throughout Europe in both Government and non-Government organisations, it may be possible to link this specifically to IAS research especially fertility control and other non-lethal control methods.

AP1. BM to look into international conferences (e.g. Vertebrate Pest Control Conference) and raising awareness of this issue in EU and gaining contacts in Europe to back possible proposals

AP2. LS to find out about the system in EU for raising research issues/proposals, possibly with assistance of Andy Stott and Richard Brand-Hardy as contacts.

Further consideration of these issues will be raised at the next UKRSG meeting.

5. UKBAP Targets

The UKBAP Targets Review was meant to be completed for all BAP species in March, hence this is now very overdue and will limit the time for consultation.

England (see paper)- It has been deemed that the risk to peripheral RS populations in some areas is too great for our limited ability to control the GS population, it is not realistic to set targets that state we will maintain the current range. Therefore the targets are based on speculative loss. TMJ is looking at commissioning some modelling work to estimate GS movements towards RS sites.

Wales – The WSF is not keen on setting negative targets and will look to maintain current population; work is on going to estimate the number of 10km squares currently occupied. It was noted the situation in Wales is slightly different to that of England in that many of the peripheral populations have already been lost.

Scotland (see paper) – Similar to Wales, the SSG do not want to have negative targets, however it was noted that their proposals to increase RS populations would be as a result of better recording and not an actual biological gain. This approach may need to be revised. LB concerned that this proposal could have an impact on the RSSS and their funding bid.

Northern Ireland – as in England the NI RS populations is in an active loss situation and the targets, calculated from recent surveys, suggest a decline in RS range is expected. However, some sites have reds and greys co-existing long-term, the decline may not be so great. The work to develop the All Ireland SAP will help inform the targets once this is completed.

It was recorded that in NI there are RS preferred areas – landscape scale areas with suitable habitat – but no priority areas with specific defences. The paradox of HAP targets for native species and RS protection and SAP targets has not been addressed here. In North England there is a compromise between land management bodies.

AP3 ALL to comment on England and Scotland BAP targets, send comments to TMJ and Mairi Cole respectively.

AP4 LB to forward details of NE guidance on priority woodland and buffer zone management to IC, RS and JM Done

5 b) Data Collection

This process has highlighted the number of disparate datasets of RS sightings, making the process of collation for baseline figures difficult. We need a way of ensuring that all data collated is easily accessible, such as being housed on the NBN. Specifically we need better information on areas on range overlap and better quality data from groups of trusted volunteers (many ad hoc records have no form of verification or quality assurance). There is possibly a way of using current records and have a coding to indicate whether it is from a trusted observer, with the metadata sorted this could then go directly on the NBN.

Ideally each region would update their records annually, through targeted surveys in transition areas and priority sites using experienced recorders. There is the issue of time

and resources to undertake this, however this could be an objective of red squirrel week with training and group/community activities to record squirrels in specific woodlands.

AP5 TMJ to draft guidelines/framework on how this could be achieved.

6. Research

A. SQPV

An expert group discussed SQPV in January to identify the priority research required to inform how we tackle this issue. A gant chart and paper have been produced as a result of this meeting suggesting a way forward with approximate costs. The next stage is to raise awareness of this issue and secure funding to initiate the work such as through the animal health bodies. However, as SQPV is not a threat to people or livestock it is unlikely they will take this on. GS shown to be seropositive for SQPV throughout NI however there have been no RS cases as yet. Unfortunately the first case of SQPV in Newcastleton, Scotland has been reported.

AP6 TMJ to take this SQPV research paper forward on behalf of the UKRSG, LS to identify specific people within the appropriate government departments/agencies and inform TMJ.

B. Squirrel monitoring

JNCC/PTES tender for the national squirrel monitoring protocol is ongoing. Volunteer support will be factored in next year looking at testing the monitoring methods outlined in FC advice note to calculate an index of change.

C. Other Research

Mel Tonkin has completed a squirrel literature database from 2002, and is in the process of writing a report on Scottish Squirrel monitoring. Squirrel monitoring is continuing in Wales with the Tywi woodland complex. 11 RS have recently been captured there, however greys are being caught to, therefore, there will need to be further monitoring of the squirrel populations there.

The results of a PhD looking at grey squirrel use of conifer woodlands will be written up and published soon by Forest Research. Corrie Breummer is looking at modelling the epidemiology of GS with respect to SQPV in Cumbria at the woodland scale using GIS analysis. Moredun/ZSL/VLA are all involved in monitoring SQPV antibody and are now looking at collating all this information into one central area. In Newcastle there have a new molecular technique to look at SQPV.

AP7 BM to keep updated list on developments in squirrel research.

7. Northern Ireland Red Squirrel Update

An Ireland conference on squirrels was held in April 2005 to discuss how to develop an All Ireland Red Squirrel Action Plan by early 2006. GS were introduced to NI in the early 1950's. The NISF was formed in 1996 joining the many local groups and drew up an action plan. This terminated in 2004, with few of the targets met, a national re-survey in 2002 was conducted to look at the RS/GS interface areas and monitor GS range expansion, which continues. There are now few forests without GS in NI. The next 10

year Action Plan will have a different focus with the significant issue being funding for GS control in clearly identified woodlands. In the Republic of Ireland, the River Shannon divides the country from east to west. So far no GS have crossed to the west side and so there is hope this river will provide an effective barrier. However it was felt by the group that this is a little optimistic as river or coastal straits have not worked as barriers in GB.

8. Regional Updates

England

Wildlife Trusts (see report) LB gave a summary of the North England Red Alert Project which is looking at costs of £1,000,000 over 3 years and approaching HLF for ¾ of this, the bid is now expected to go through at the end of August. HLF have had a few concerns on the amount of money being asked for, but are generally quite supportive, news of whether the bid has been successful is expected in the early next year. The group was asked if individual organisations and members of UKRSG could write letters of support for this project.

Defra have funded a study on GS control around a reserve as a pilot in a targeted area to look at public acceptance of this strategy. This may be fast tracked if GS control shown to be effective.

There was a discussion on Red Squirrel Week, many of the UKRSG members were unsure who set the date and what activities are arranged, and by who. LB was keen to move the dates of the week and make it a bigger occasion, possibly tying in with the woodland monitoring as detailed in Section 5.

AP8 TMJ/MH to write letter of support for HLF bid on behalf of UKRSG

AP9 All to ensure organisation write a letter of support

Scotland

SSG still have the issue of GS control, currently looking into a new method of dispatch that will be agreed by all parties. Land owner support is needed to conserve RS and it was felt that if the FTA wish to control GS in the interests of timber damage the SE should take this up and SSG is not losing its focus on RS conservation. MC is contacting SE Non-native Species Group about this. NISF has a similar situation, but if timber people not on the group it would be greatly reduced. By including local foresters there is a better buy in to the work of the NISF through this inclusive mechanism and they ensure their discussions are equally divided over the two species. The SSG also felt there was an increasing N/S divide over red squirrel conservation therefore Richard Pow (FC England, RANE HLF bid co-ordinator) has been invited into the guest slot of the next SSG meeting. SNH/FC have also just published a report on identifying priority woodlands for RS in south and central Scotland, this is now available on SNH website.

Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) update – a new FSGS pack has been launched, the vision for this scheme is that 90% funding for native woodland conservation as part of that the RS strategy is moving up the agenda for FCS and they are beginning to look at ways forward for RS conservation such as active management. FCS/Highland RSG have put together a bid for HLF funds, match funding 50% of £100,000, to pay for a project officer for 3 years to raise public awareness of RS conservation and collect records by training volunteers to go to specific areas, not just core areas but random transect surveys too. Bid should be in by July and a result expected in 3 months time.

Wales

WSF is now up and running, it's primary focus is on RS conservation and the secondary agenda item is GS management with smaller working groups undertaking specific tasks to feed into the Forum. Next meeting scheduled for Oct/Nov. In Anglesey the RS released in Newborough are breeding, they are now looking at the viability of a GS eradication programme again this time with a flexible approach and with different methods. However, there has been limited success so far. Questions to be answered are whether this is feasible and how long will it take to deal with GS in Anglesey/Wales. Anglesey is possibly the only site left in UK where we may gain red squirrels by the next reporting round.

9. Website and Advice Notes

The website is now live, MH wished to thank everyone for their input and suggested that any updates or additions to the site be first signed off by the UKRSG or the Country groups for their pages, to avoid any disputes. There are still some gaps in the advice notes and what we aim to cover, including supplementary feeding for woodland managers and best practice guidance for woodland management dealing with issues such as continuous cover, timing etc. However, there is limited information available on this and it would need to be region specific. One of the main obstacles is the difficulty of identifying dreys in woodland. This is an area we need to keep within our agenda and raise when better information available. Priority is how to develop a better forestry design plan rather than obsess about individual dreys, which some of the general RANE information goes some way to addressing.

MH felt that the Implementation Plan for the group needed to be reassessed to ensure it is in line with new proposed targets (when they are finalised) and to ensure all the actions are still relevant. It was agreed that initial work was needed on this before discussion at the meeting.

AP10 MH to review the Implementation Plan and send suggested amendments to the group for the next meeting.

10. AOB

A. Grey squirrel dispatch advice was discussed at the ESF and MH raised the issue to ensure UKRSG were aware of what was proposed by the sub-group, now disbanded, working on this. The group felt that the recommendations were too restrictive and humane dispatch by a trained/skilled operator using the method they are most comfortable with is most appropriate.

AP11 LB to see what pressures there are on the method and level of dispatch in NE.

B. Next financial year a joint project will commence on fertility control of GS by Forest Research and CSL, but there may be a shortage in the funding required. This will be an enclosure trial with the vaccine bait fed with a marker in the bait, a trial on the animal house and a trail on the bait. It is a not species specific bait, however the method of delivery will be species specific, looking at ways of reducing the risks as much as possible.

11. Date of the Next Meeting

FC invited the group to join the next ESF meeting in Newcastle with a site visit to the NE priority sites and discuss the HLF bid. All agreed this would be a useful session.

8-9th November 2005, Newcastle – exact venue tbc.