

## **Minutes of the UKRSG meeting held on the 6th December 2004, EN Offices, Devon House, London**

Chair: Tony Mitchell-Jones, EN

### **Members present:**

Mairi Cole (SNH)  
Fred Currie (FC (England))  
Liz Halliwell (CCW, via VC from 1.30pm onwards)  
Melanie Hardie (JNCC)  
Brenda Mayle (FE)  
Tony Mitchell-Jones (EN)  
Jason Reynolds (RANW)

1. Apologies were received from John Milburn & Gordon Patterson. Others not present

### **2. Minutes of last meeting**

Action points carried out and to be discussed later in the agenda

### **3. Matters arising**

TMJ asked about whether the Jigsaw funds that were demonstrated in the Isle of Wight at the last meeting, were still in operation. FC explained, that due to revised Forestry Commission England targets, the Jigsaw Challenge grant scheme, had finished. Their main priorities now are ancient and semi-natural ancient woodland management and restoration (rather than woodland expansion). This is unlikely to have any major impact on red squirrels as most woodland in the areas identified as priority areas for red squirrel in northern England are secondary and conifer. FC though is keen to promote woodland connectivity, and management for red squirrels in priority areas and this should still be covered by England Woodland Grant Scheme.

### **5. Research Task Group**

#### *A. Squirrel Poxvirus research*

BM action from last meeting was to provide the group with a breakdown of tasks and costs into the proposals put forward in the Nettleton and McInnes paper, in combination with other proposals from J. Gurnell and others on research into Squirrel Poxvirus (SQPV \*See 5G).

A ten year research programme looking into developing a vaccine - costs estimated in the region of:

90 –150k per year (excluding field work)  
150 – 200k per year for field trials  
27 –30k per year on PhD Studentship

However this would not cover all the issues of SQPV. TMJ pointed out that this was a lot of money to throw at a project when the benefits of such are not clear. There are two questions we need first to address (1) What do we need to do to understand the disease better and (2) What do we need to do about it? We still do not know the actual impact of SQPV in the replacement of red by grey squirrels, so even if we could provide a vaccine would it actually help conserve the red squirrel or would the money be better spent elsewhere. BM pointed out the research and modelling work of J. Gurnell (based on assumptions) predicted the rate of replacement of reds by greys was greatly enhanced by the outbreak of SQPV. However, there is also the evidence of the rapid replacement of reds by greys in North Italy in the absence of SQPV. Additionally P. Lurz who has stated that in the ranking of our priorities we should first be looking at the natural immunity of reds to the disease, therefore what is the most effective tool to develop for red squirrel conservation, SQPV research, immuno-contraception or something else?

BM stated that at the very least we need to know the mode of transmission to ensure our management guidance is correct and for supplementary feeding advice etc as currently all we have is guess work. Need to set up a workshop to bring all the researchers, international bodies, vaccine producers (Roger Cook contacts (ESI)) and potential funders together to discuss the issues of SQPV. BM has already raised this as a potential way forward to Richard Powell and Valerie Keeble (PTES) who have said they may be able to support such a workshop. Next step is to identify a venue and time. TMJ stressed that this should be seen as a discussion on whether it would be feasible to go down this road of research, not as an assertion that we will be commissioning work into this research. We need to understand the problem first, then the next stage will be finding a solution.

**Action Point 1. BM to work on getting an invite list, venue and date for a workshop looking into SQPV issues, possibly for Easter 2005.**

**Action Point 2. TMJ to send Roger Cook (ESI) Nettleton and McInnes paper.**

#### *B. Cone seed production*

Forest Research have held internal meeting discussing their long term data collection of cone seed production, particularly lodge-pole pine and BM is looking into developing this further to see if it would be useful for red squirrel management. The databases are from records collected on annual surveys, recording masting years, seed production on a scale basis (0-4, but this needs to be quantified), with possibility of looking into what influences the seed production. JR stated that a similar, recent survey at Kielder Forest sites has started to observe the annual seed production relations to red squirrel numbers. However FE research is over a much longer time scale, and BM has asked that they extend their surveys to include species such as larch.

So far this has only been internal discussions but could possibly be extended to externals. Need to ensure that the management advice that we are providing is accurate and are actually going to benefit red squirrel. TMJ queried how this piece of

work will be progressed. BM will feedback from the cone seed meetings anything that will be of use to red squirrel management to the UKRSG.

*C. Report production*

The two theses of Bryce and Cartmel looking at red and grey squirrel interactions will soon be written up as a summary of the main findings as information notes (18-20 pages) to be published on FR website by April 2005.

*D. Ongoing research*

BM is going to compile a list of the on-going research projects connected to red squirrel and link with J Gurnell's website, to understand what is going on UK wide.

*E. Grey only research*

Ten sites are being used to look into masting and natural food availability for grey squirrel, study is carried out in January using a catching strategy, if squirrels can be caught with an artificial food source it is assumed there is insufficient natural food available. The objective behind this research is to look into damage limitation to timber crops.

Biodiversity research is on-going using stable isotope analysis to investigate when grey squirrels are switching from plant to animal foodstuffs. Further analysis on this will be undertaken this winter and a report is expected by middle of 2005. This will be used to guide further experimental research into grey squirrel impacts on wider biodiversity. FC updated the group on progressing a research proposal looking at grey squirrel impact on nesting birds, being taken forward by a collaboration of partners under the auspices of the UK Woodland Bird Group. Matched plot grey removal study in parallel with evidence gathering by video camera at actual and artificial nests is envisaged. This is a complex and potentially costly research question and further consideration will take account of recent comments arising from this meeting and the recent ESF meeting. The research is aimed at helping explain declines in woodland bird populations. What happens if it is shown grey squirrels do have an impact on birds is another question and, we need to ensure that bird interest groups are realistic about what we can achieve in grey squirrel control.

*F. Red Squirrel monitoring contract*

JNCC and PTES have now let a contract, awaiting confirmation, to start in January 2005 to look into the feasibility of the different methods of surveying for squirrels at a UK level. A report, including a costed management plan for a national red squirrel monitoring programme will be produced in early spring 2007. JR stated that the only real method to monitor red squirrel is capture mark re-capture.

Mel Tonkin (Scotland Squirrel Officer) is looking into setting up a network of red squirrel groups to cover monitoring on a local scale throughout Scotland and carrying out a gap filling exercise to look at distribution of red squirrel. National monitoring programme is unlikely to be applicable to both the North and South Scotland scenarios.

### *G. Parapox or poxvirus*

The group discussed the recent research by Thomas et al (2004) that sequenced the virus sampled from infected red squirrels and found that it didn't have the characteristic genes of the Parapoxvirus genera and was more likely to be a new genus of the Chordopoxvirus and as such should be referred to as Squirrel Poxvirus (SQPV).

**\*The group agreed that we refer to this disease as SQPV rather than parapoxvirus.**

## **6. Grey squirrel issues**

### *A. England Grey Squirrel Policy*

A Defra/FC England grey squirrel policy proposal and action plan has been presented to the Minister and is now out for consultation, until 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004. The final version will be published on the FC (England) website by next spring. The policy states that FC England grants and resources will be targeted to those areas where public benefit is being critically threatened by grey squirrels (such as grey squirrel incursion zones in red squirrel priority areas). FC Woodland Officers will be the ultimate decision makers on these grants.

Other countries are unlikely to be in a position to adopt a similar strategy. MC detailed that the first priority is to identify all the key areas for red squirrels and high threat zones in Scotland. The current sites which have not been identified could be because either there is no red squirrel there or no recorder in the area. Therefore need to develop this, through the work of Mel Tonkin, plugging the gaps in the recording of red squirrel in Scotland. But then the issues may differ slightly in Scotland, however G. Patterson is keen that after this first step, then Scotland should adopt a similar policy.

### *B. Grey squirrel Issues in Scotland.*

The SSPCA have still not confirmed their backing to the plastic bag method, many in the group felt this was a highly inappropriate method to dispatch grey squirrel. If there is no decision taken, a higher level of SNH may have to get involved as there is currently a stalemate. The key is to have a method that can be undertaken by locally, trained people without the need for resources or licencing.

MC is going along the route of producing SNH guidance to the best methods for grey squirrel dispatch that are approved, then as long as people are well trained it is up the individual on how they feel they are best equipped to dispatch them.

As the FC training applies in Scotland it is a UK issue. There needs to be some common guidance that the UKRSG group agrees to be the best practice in terms of being humane and feasible. FR does not condone the use to the air rifle on health and safety grounds to the user (due to the ricochet of the weapon). The exact details of the methods and their limitations need to be consolidated for the group to decide which methods to endorse. FC confirmed that FC England will only approve/agree the best practice methods as published in the most up-to-date version of the FC Practice Note. Any additional method will need to be proposed and agreed with FR and wider

within FC. This work compliments the sub-group of the ESF on air rifle use, therefore JR asked to carry this forward.

**Action 4. JR to produce a paper describing exact details of how to use an air rifle to dispatch grey squirrel, including a risk assessment and do the same for the sack method. Item to be discussed at the next UKRSG meeting.**

## **7. European Squirrel Issues**

TMJ outlined the recent drive from government on red squirrel issues and the push to raise greater awareness of the threat of grey squirrel in Europe, hence Defra put together a paper for the Bern Standing Committee meeting that was held last week. As yet there is no feedback. However, BM noted that Peter Boyer, Germany, has said that grey squirrel is one of the few named species in German legislation with restrictions on ownership and introduction.

## **4. Targets Review (LH joined by VC)**

TMJ gave a presentation outlining the reasons and needs of this review, to cater for devolution and to quantify the targets which need to be SMART, by the deadline of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2005. TMJ suggested that for red squirrel, where we have no clear picture of their numbers, or even an index of their population, we should look at their range only. This can be achieved by counting the number of squares where red squirrels presently reside and looking at the number of those squares that have been identified as a red squirrel priority area to set targets at the 2010 and 2015 levels, i.e. have targets that we know we can defend whilst being realistic, we know that within 5/10 years populations in some areas will be lost. Setting targets could realistically be achieved in England, Wales and possibly NI, using current distribution as the 2010 target and 10% less as the 2015.

There is, again, a different set of issues in Scotland as is it unknown exactly where the red squirrel exists in Scotland and therefore which areas are priority. This situation will possibly be resolved in 2-3 years time when Mel has completed her contract, plugging the gaps in our information on distribution, so this could be used as 'a get of clause', however this is not ideal. As a compromise SSF could agree a minimum viable area in which they wish to maintain red squirrels (as the target is not linked to geographical data) which they hope to exceed but not go below, then when further research is available revise this target to include any new areas. Therefore targets could be all 10km<sup>2</sup> where there is a record and reduce this by 20% for the 2010 target.

**Action Point 5: MC to liaise with SSG about how they will set the Scotland target.**

**Action Point 6; JR and TMJ compile information for England (JR whole of the north and TMJ islands). JM and LH to look into completing the same exercise in NI and Wales respectively.**

## **8. Website and Advice Notes**

MH informed the group that there has been a moratorium on adding additional material to the JNCC website as the in house set up is changed over to a new system.

## Final

Therefore the UKRSG website has been unable to be progressed, the new deadline will be in the beginning of January. There are still a few outstanding pieces of information and MH will collate these and send around the final draft for sign off before Christmas.

For the advice notes, there are comments and minor amendments to be sent to MH, as well as a need to write a supplementary feeding advice note for foresters/ woodland advisors, as highlighted at the recent ESF meeting.

JR pointed out the duplicity of the current legislation for tree felling in the presence of red squirrels. FC reported that Forestry Commission (England) have a high level Working Group looking at all obligations woodland managers have on all relevant Priority and Protected species,(under CRoW Act 2000 etc)with a view to reviewing existing guidance and developing new guidance and where appropriate with partners. Work is ongoing already on woodland management for bats and birds with partner bodies. Red squirrel issues will be taken to this group for consideration.

**Action Point 7. ALL to send comment to MH on advice notes. FC to send JR any outcomes of the woodland species guidance work for inclusion in best practice advice note. JR to send FC draft practice note please**

**Action Point 8. MH to complete website outline and send to group for final sign off, and to write Supplementary feeding advice note for woodland advisors.**

## 9. Regional Updates

*England* -The management plans for the 20 sites in the North East have now been drawn up. A partnership of JR, Richard Powell and research scientists has been created to model the spread of SQPV into Kielder Forest, it is estimated that SQPV will have reached Kielder in the next 5 years. JR will be giving a presentation to the HLF about the project proposal to be submitted in February. Defra are also on board as this will also fit in with their regional target plan.

The Isle of Wight population have a management plan in action and a group formed for the Poole Harbour Islands. An Action Plan has been drafted and was launched last July. Forestry Commission England are partners and as for IOW will activate a contingency plan in the case of any grey squirrel incursion on to the islands. It was asked whether there is any known populations still in Thetford, there has not been a recorded sighting for a few years now and it is likely that they have all but gone, however FE are maintaining the enclosure there as a research facility.

TMJ stated that the site at Sefton coast, being restored for the designated movable sand dune habitat has taken into account red squirrels and it is ENs long term plan to maintain the woodlands behind this habitat for them.

*Scotland* - The localised maps of the priority woodland report are being generated for the local groups and to aid Mel Tonkin's work in identifying those sites flagged up and where the gaps are.

TMJ suggested that to ensure the priority woods the countries have identified for red squirrel are officially recognised they could be placed on the governments dedicated protected site web-based register <http://www.magic.gov.uk/default.htm>

**Action Point 9. JR to look into the feasibility of getting the red squirrel priority sites onto the magic website.**

The Highland Group are also putting together a bid for HLF, however this will be more for a community based project rather than research.

*Wales* – The WSF recently had an open meeting to decide how best to continue with this national group. 25-30 people attended from statutory bodies, NGOs, forestry and timber growers, and it was run by a facilitator. The meeting looked at the current status of red squirrels in Wales and then discussed what functions and roles the forum should have. It was agreed that the forum should cover both red and grey squirrel issues. The final format and membership of the new group has yet to be finalised, but it is likely that there will be a top forum supported by various sub-group that look into specific areas.

LH gave an update on the issues on Anglesey where Menter Mon are considering adopting a strategy to maintain just two sites as grey squirrel free rather than eradicating them from the whole island. This is due to funding constraints. The Central Wales project has now appointed an officer who will be carrying out the trapping in a two year project looking at the status of the red squirrel in Central Wales.

## **10. AOB**

- A. FC alerted MC to the possibility of ESI investigating a possible proposal to re-introduce red squirrel to the isle of Mull, MC had not heard of this development.
- B. Albion, a company that makes small mammal traps has a new design on their books for single capture of grey squirrel. Information was passed around to the group.
- C. After recent suspected outbreaks of SQPV in Northumbria Louise Bessant (TWT) has asked the group for their advice on whether red squirrel with suspected SQPV should be put down or nursed back to health, and the implications of possible SQPV carrying reds being released into wild populations.

**The group agreed that red squirrel should be allowed to recover as we do not know what the recovery rate is. Additionally, under the WCA 1981 wild caught listed species should be re-released once they have recovered regardless of whether or not they are carrying a disease.**

## **11. Date of the Next Meeting**

5<sup>th</sup> July 2005. MH to confirm with JM to hold the meeting in NI.