

UK RED SQUIRREL GROUP

**WEDNESDAY 22 APRIL 2009
SNH, Silvan House
Edinburgh**

MINUTES

Present

Tony Mitchell-Jones (NE, Chair)
Mairi Cole (SSG, SNH, Secretariat)
Simon MacKown, (Defra)
John Griffin, (Dardni)
Richard Pow, (FC England, ESF)
Ian Collier, (FC Scotland, SSG)
Brenda Mayle, Forest Research
Carri Nicholson, WT
Liz Halliwell, CCW, WSF (by VC)

Also present:

Colin McInnes, Moredun Institute

1. Apologies

None

2 Minutes of the last meeting

AP1 Discharged
AP2 Discharged
AP3 Discharged
AP4 Discharged
AP5 Superseded. Some comments had been received and incorporated. However, it has subsequently been agreed that the website needed to be re-structured and further comment was not necessary.
AP6 Discharged.

2. Matters arising from minutes not covered by other agenda items

None

3 Country updates

England

North England Review: RP provided a presentation summarising progress on this report. The contract was undertaken by an authoritative group of experts on squirrels and wildlife management issues. Three key problems identified: 1) lack of funding to support reserve strategy, particularly in relation to grey squirrel control, 2) fragmentation of effort and 3) public dissonance between organisations involved. The latter two, in particular, have led to divergence in the philosophy and focus on a red squirrel conservation strategy. Evidence collated suggested that grey squirrel remained widespread with no significant impact from current control. Also, FCE grant-aid supported red squirrel conservation work in reserves

and surrounding buffer zones, SoS supported a wide range of red squirrel work with a high emphasis on public engagement and education; direct work on grey control is restricted to incursion corridors in to Kielder and SW Scotland. RSPP undertook and supported grey squirrel control right across Northumberland, working mainly on a reactive basis. Key finding of the report (summary):

- Overall effort to control grey squirrels has been uncoordinated and fragmentary;
- No evidence that grey control has had any effect on the distribution of grey squirrels and, by implication, population numbers in northern England.
- For animal welfare reasons, control should be conducted by professional operatives with additional assistance from appropriately trained and supervised volunteers where appropriate;
- Data recording has largely been fragmentary, unsystematic and non-standardised between different organisations and groups;
- standard data collection measures and protocols need to be introduced across northern England to record abundance and distribution of reds and greys, complimenting/supporting sighting reports;
- Detailed GIS maps should be produced and maintained to show: squirrel distribution and abundance; land ownership; control operations and habitat management.

A future strategy should formulate and use Standard Operating Procedures, with independent monitoring of pro-active control. Trapping effort needs to be recorded as well as systematic monitoring of squirrel populations. The strategy should be led by statutory agencies co-ordinating organisations and voluntary groups and should have strong links to Scotland. It needs to be more inclusive, and engage more widely between organisations, including local groups and landowners. It needs to be 1) proactive, 2) include conservation work other than grey squirrel control and 3) include community engagement. These should have targets which are reviewed annually and in close liaison with neighbouring areas.

The report presented four options: 1) do nothing, 2) reserve-based, 3) landscape-based and 4) regional eradication. Conclusions pointed to a combination of (2) and (3) as the workable model. However, this needed to recognise and engage with voluntary groups and landowners whilst retaining and reviewing the current reserve system. Public resources should not be used to fund work not covered by the strategy. Awareness-raising should be an essential component and should be proportionately resourced.

A meeting had been arranged on 23 April to discuss further developments from the report. The results of this would be discussed at the review Steering Group on 15 May. The aim is to agree a strategy with key stakeholders which is consistent with the review recommendations.

Scotland

Strongholds: MC reported that the list of 20 proposed red squirrel strongholds had been opened for public consultation. This is available on the Forestry Commission Scotland website and is open until 26 June.

Grey Squirrel Control Strategy: The Grey Squirrel Control Strategy is still in development but, once finalised, will be put out for a 12 week public consultation. This is anticipated to be around June. It identifies three reasons for controlling grey squirrels in Scotland: 1) to contain squirrelpox virus, 2) to stop further spread of the non-native species and 3) to retain the current geographic range of red squirrels. It identifies a number of sites and locations across Scotland (presented as maps in the document) at which grey squirrel control will be considered a priority for public funding and in public policy. The intention is that the strategy, once finalised, will provide definitive guidance for anyone wishing to

contribute to red squirrel conservation by controlling grey squirrels. It will also influence allocation of funding under the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). The results of the consultation will be combined with the results of the strongholds consultation and, together with guidance on habitat management to favour red squirrels, will provide the basis of a statement for future public red squirrel conservation policy in Scotland. It is anticipated that this may be available some time in 2010.

Saving Scotland's Red Squirrels Project: This partnership project, supported by SNH, Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT), Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) and the Scottish Rural Properties and Business Association (SRPBA), was launched in February. The project will run until March 2012 and will primarily investigate the efficiency and efficacy of grey squirrel control as a tool for red squirrel conservation. It will include encouraging and supporting landowner applications for SRDP funding in strategic areas as well as providing guidance on appropriate woodland management where applicable. Work will focus primarily in central and north-east Scotland, and the project currently employs a Project Co-ordinator (Mel Tonkin) and Project Officer for the East (Ken Neil). Employment of a North East officer is imminent and funding currently provided by SNH for grey squirrel control in Grampian will be transferred to run through this SSRS project also. In order to retain some consistency of practice across the whole of Scotland, the project also provides funding for the Project Officer (Richard Wales) and two grey squirrel controllers in South Scotland. These posts are Steered by the Red Squirrels in South Scotland Steering Group which includes representation by all SSRS partners. It is, however, an autonomous project. SNH and FCS also contribute some funding to the Highland Red Squirrel Group who employ a Project Officer in North Scotland. Whilst there is liaison between these projects also, all work in Highland is directed locally. Grey squirrel control carried out under the SSRS project will be guided by the Grey Squirrel Control Strategy and will adhere to all animal welfare standards instructed by the project Steering Group.

Ireland

Environmental initiatives, including red squirrels, are mostly funded in Northern Ireland by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

The Irish Squirrel Survey was based on questionnaires – postal and website-based – and received approximately 1,500 returns. Approximately 1,000 of these were from environmental organisations, 330 from Irish forestry companies and other from public groups such as gold clubs, etc. A copy of the survey is available on the website (www.coford.ie/iopen24/pub/pub/irishsquirrelsurvey2007revised.pdf). The results show that grey squirrels have spread mostly through the east and north of Ireland from 1911 to 1997. Red squirrels remain quite widespread throughout Ireland although there are fewer sightings in the areas where grey squirrel were first recorded and in the west. Although extensive conifer plantations do exist in the west, most are surrounded by bog habitat and the area is further characterised by a lack of suitable corridors which have prevented the spread of squirrels into this region. There has been anecdotal suggestion that pine marten have had an influence on red squirrels returning but no supportive data. Grey squirrels continue to spread through Ireland and into the NE of Antrim which is considered to be a good red squirrel stronghold. This issue is to be considered more fully by the Irish Squirrel Forum.

There are currently no dead red squirrels which can be related to poxvirus in either North or Southern Ireland despite the Moredun Institute having tested approximately 650 samples over the past 10 years. GS have been confirmed to be seropositive (carrying the virus) but there have been no reports of outbreaks in red squirrels.

Wales

CCW is currently writing the Red Squirrel Conservation Plan. This will be submitted to the new BAP ecosystem group for approval. A parallel piece of work is the identification of focal sites for red squirrel work in Wales using guidance based on the UKRSG priority sites paper.

HLF funding is being investigated for a possible Wales Red Squirrel Project. Discussions regarding the best structure for such a project are ongoing and applications to HLF may need to be phased as the funding is limited. .

There have been discussions within the WSF regarding funding of grey squirrel control through FCW. Grant-aid is only available as part of Better Woodlands for Wales which requires a whole woodland management plan. This approach has not been working well for red squirrel work.

Anglesey has funding until 2010. The project currently employs three full-time trappers, plus Craig Shuttleworth and another project officer. They have caught 18 adult grey squirrels this year (down on last year) with 170 individual red squirrels across the island. These are the result of three reintroductions using animals from breeding programmes in the UK (some from Foulshaw Moss) and also the remnant population at Pentraeth. There has been another case of adenovirus in Newborough. There have been no cases of squirrelpox virus in mid-Wales or Clocaenog despite extensive trapping. One case has been found in the reintroduced population in Newborough, but a suspected case in Pentraeth failed to be confirmed.

4. RSST

This is a new charity which launched at a public event in April at which they announced their focus on Cumbria and their intention to co-ordinate with landowners and local groups. The organisation has been set up primarily as a fund-raising body and shares most Trustees with the European Squirrel Initiative. Originally intended to be a grant-making body with an Advisory Panel assessing open-entry applications, this structure does not appear to have been developed and there is currently no information available to UKRSG members on how funds are allocated. Members of the UKRSG agreed that efforts should be made to integrate the objectives and action of RSST with other conservation action being co-ordinated in the north of England.

5. Squirrelpox update

Moredun research

There is currently no squirrelpox in Ireland or mainland Wales although there is concern that it may be present in Wales but undetected. Approximately 1,000 samples have been monitored from South Scotland and, although there hasn't been an obvious spread through the grey squirrel population recently, there have been new cases of pox disease in red squirrels. These may be a legacy from the previous concentration of seropositive grey squirrels, rather than new cases.

Moredun currently sponsor a PhD student looking at transmission of the virus between grey squirrels. This may provide some insight into transmission between grey and red squirrels. Laboratory work has just begun to investigate what happens within the first few weeks of infection, e.g. where does it replicate, how is it excreted? Work is also looking at whether disease is transmitted to naïve grey squirrels housed alongside – but in with – deliberately infected grey squirrels. Work following this will look at animals housed together and, finally, will let infected animals use an area, remove them and then allow red squirrels to use the same area. These experiments are all designed to identify whether the virus is transmitted

directly or can be transmitted environmentally. The latter, in particular, may have implications for re-introduction of red squirrels to areas previously colonised by infected greys squirrels.

Liverpool research

Julian Chantrey, Liverpool University, is also looking at the implications of poxvirus at Sefton. This work complements the work being done at Moredun.

Vaccine research

There is evidence of poxvirus in the USA (Wisconsin) however fibroma virus is also present and may be a complication for diagnosis. There is a need to ensure that positive poxvirus results are not a cross-reaction with fibroma virus.

Work is also underway to investigate a poxvirus vaccine. Work began in January and is consistent with the recommendations of the North England Review report. Laboratory work is currently attenuating the virus and trying to identify parts of the virus which may be recognised by the red squirrel immune system. The work currently has two years funding. Julian Chantrey has obtained a full sequence of the poxvirus genome which is to be published. This will be very helpful for the vaccine work.

Disease monitoring

Co-ordination of poxvirus samples in South Scotland is being led by RSSS who will provide update maps. MC noted that SNH had allocated funding for poxvirus monitoring to cover the samples generated by SSRS grey squirrel controllers. This now includes a limited number of post mortems and Transmission Electron Microscope analysis of samples for in cases where rapid detection is essential. SNH will be setting up contracts with Moredun, the Dick Vet and VLA to cover the costs of these. Samples generated by other sources may be funded under the 'rapid detection' element of the contracts with the decision on whether this is merited made by the vets receiving the carcasses. The contract will also cover costs for occasional tests on animals sourced in other parts of the country.

6. Research

BM circulated an updated list and requested feedback.

AP All to provide feedback to BM on items for inclusion/deletion

The question of whether Interferon is useful in treating poxvirus remains. Only a single vet surgery has shown any success with this and there remains the question of whether this was due more to the rapid and intensive treatment of the animal.

All expressed an interest in the rope bridge work undertaken in Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

AP MC to approach Gavin Skipper to allow copies to be circulated to UKRSG.

7. AOB

UKRSG website

All agreed that the website requires an update. It was agreed this could be quite a radical re-structuring to minimise the maintenance required.

AP MC to provide alternative structure for consideration

Advice notes

TMJ enquired whether there were any policy or advice notes required of the UKRSG. No suggestions were offered. It was agreed that country groups should be invited to offer suggestions which they consider to be appropriate from the UKRSG.

AP MC, IC, LH, JG and TMJ to ask country groups for suggestions of Policy or Advice notes needed.

DONM

Wed 7th October 2009 at Newcastle