

FINAL

Minutes of the UKRSG Meeting, Wednesday, 27 September, 2006

Natural England offices, London

Present:

Ian Collier (FCS, Scottish Squirrel Group) (IC)
Liz Halliwell (CCW, Wales Squirrel Forum) (LH)
Brenda Mayle (FR, FC) (BM)
Rachel Harris (Defra) (RH)
Tony Mitchell-Jones (EN, England Squirrel Forum, Chair) (TMJ)
Fred Currie (FC England) (FC)
Richard Schablie (DARDNI) (RS)
Caitriona Carlin (EN) (CC)
Mairi Cole (Scottish Squirrel Group) (MC)
Jessa Battersby (JNCC, Secretariat) (JB)

1. Apologies

John Milburne (EHS), Jane Goodwin (Defra).

2. Minutes of the last meeting

All to send comments to JB on draft minutes.

3. Matters arising

AP1 Carried out

AP1 In hand

AP2 Done and latest Research update attached for the Sept 06 UKRSG

AP 11 Carried over. TMJ commented that he had looked at the relevant website and not found any illegal advice. Could look again periodically.

AP3 On Agenda

AP4 In ToR

AP5 No suggestions received. MC noted that the Scottish Executive had been invited to the meeting and were considering the situation.

AP6 Carried out.

AP7 Carried forward.

AP8 No further action.

AP9 Being carried out.

AP10 Carried out. Actioned and a letter from SG sent to chairperson of UK RSG and Country Squirrel Groups

AP11 Carried out and on agenda.

AP12 Carried out and on agenda.

AP13 On agenda.

AP14 On agenda.

AP15 On agenda.

AP 16 Carried out.

AP 17 Carried forward- on agenda.

AP18 On agenda.

FINAL

AP19 On agenda.
AP 20 Carried out.

4 and 8. Revised Terms of Reference and membership of UKRSG and structure of the group

There was discussion on inviting other members to join the group. It was decided to invite the Welsh Assembly Government, as Defra was represented and the Scottish Executive had been invited. The Wildlife Trusts should agree a UK representative for the group. Experts in various fields should be invited to meetings with specialist subjects on the agenda, and so should the European Squirrel Initiative. Additional members of the country groups could be invited from time to time. There could be rotation of the country fora representatives at each meeting, if desired. Decisions on those to invite to a meeting should be made at the prior meeting.

AP1. TMJ to change wording of ToR according to discussion and circulate to group

AP2. JB to check implementation plan for UK roles and advise everyone.

AP3. TMJ to confirm with the Wildlife Trusts who their representative will be.

AP4. LH to contact WAG and invite them to join the group if they wish.

The Secretariat location was discussed. JNCC pointed out that the job had become more time consuming with the need to manage the website and that the role of UKRSG Secretariat was not part of JNCC's new strategy. After some discussion and the conclusion that it would be best to keep the Secretariat role and website management together, MC offered to check with SNH regarding holding the secretariat role.

AP5. MC to advise all of decision.

AP6. JB to find out about SNH staff doing work on the JNCC website with the possibility of continuing to have the UKRSG site within the JNCC site, but managed by SNH staff.

AP7. JB to try to continue to update the website with the minutes of meetings, until the situation is resolved.

5. Red squirrel records and Warfarin Map – Fred Currie/ All

There was considerable discussion on various aspects of the map, including quality of data required to recommend changing status of squares where reds used to be present but are no longer considered to be, whether the removal of buffer squares could be considered if only modified selective access hoppers were allowed for bait distribution, and agreeing guidance for country groups on collecting records and building the map. It was agreed that there were problems with the data on the NBN in terms of age and comprehensiveness.

The way forward was agreed: Overall aim of the map is to protect red squirrels from warfarin poisoning while allowing control of grey squirrels. FC agreed to take on the role of providing advice to the country groups on collecting records. The UK group should agree criteria to select protected (red) squares. It was agreed to stay with 10km squares rather than try to develop a finer scale map. In areas where populations not likely to change then records from 1994 onwards, with some information to confirm the record, would be considered. In other areas, where populations under pressure, then records from 1996 – 2006 would be considered. Areas that have been recently surveyed professionally could be considered separately. Generally, if there was an intention to change the status of a square then detail on reasons for change would need to be provided.

The data and map should be reviewed at the next meeting.

FINAL

AP8. Country Group representatives to take message back to country groups and ensure that actions carried out.

AP9. FC to take the suggestion to use only modified hoppers for consultation with Pesticides Safety Directorate.

6. Poxvirus issues

TMJ circulated information on SQPV.

7. Red squirrel surveillance - JB/All

JB advised that the two year red squirrel surveillance study would end in spring 2007 and suggested that there could be a combined workshop on red squirrel recording and the results of the surveillance pilot, when the report was due. Update on the warfarin map issues could also be included.

AP: MC to investigate whether it would be possible to include presentation of the surveillance study in Mel Tonkins conference next year.

9. Regional updates

Scotland

UKRSG membership. As regards the members of the UKRSG, the concerns of the SSG were taken to the last meeting. It was suggested that an annual meeting/workshop be held with representative RSCO from each country being invited. The SSG agreed with this way forward and MC will take this agreement to the next UKRSG meeting.

A request was made for the lines of communication between the country groups and the UKRSG to be improved ensuring a two-way flow of information. Any advice notes produced by the country groups should be in line with the UKRSG Advice notes.

Red Squirrel Action Plan. The plan has been submitted to the Minister. Officials at the Executive have indicated that the Minister is likely to invite the Action Plan Working Group to discuss the plan in October 2006. It was hoped this might give some guidance for the development of work to begin in 2007. The response to the plan may be withheld until the Species Framework is finalised in December 2006.

There is a need for a costed strategic model for grey control, which the action plan would implement. SNH and FCS support strategic, targeted grey squirrel control. In order to support this it is necessary to identify strategic areas where grey squirrel control will maximise benefits for red squirrel conservation nationally. Development of this approach is currently underway.

Squirrel poxvirus. See BM update report on squirrel research and monitoring and refer to map attached to RSSS report for distribution of seropositive grey squirrels in Scotland. Anna Meredith at the Dick Vet School near Roslin carries out analysis on any possible squirrelpox cases in red squirrels. If a poxvirus red squirrel is found in South Scotland then RSSS will be notified quickly and they have the system in place to deal with the relevant press release. The first record of squirrelpox in Scotland would of course be an important issue and the PR departments should highlight the need for funding to control greys.

Warfarin Map. A detailed discussion on:

- The case for changing green squares to red at this time pending improved data.

FINAL

- How currently red squares could be transformed to green e.g. in Edinburgh.
- Clarification on the use of hoppers.

Led to the conclusions:

- The SSG is not in a position to offer comprehensive viable record data at this time
- There should not be a ban on the use of Warfarin over the whole of Scotland, neither should the restrictions be lifted without further information.
- More time is needed to discuss this contentious issue.

Scottish Squirrel Survey update. The Scottish Squirrel Survey was up and running: <http://www.scottishsquirrelsurvey.co.uk/>

A new location for the conference has been suggested as Dundee. The group agreed this and it may be possible for the conference to incorporate the next UKRSG meeting that would be the workshop/meeting that the RSCO would attend.

Supplementary feeding issues. South Scotland is in a unique situation being is the only area of the country currently exposed to the risks from squirrelpox virus. The meeting agreed that, under these circumstances, the benefit of using point source feeders to attract and remove grey squirrels outweighed the risks from transmitting squirrelpox virus at an enhanced rate. Moreover, any attempts to remove the use of these feeders was undermined by methods currently employed for pheasant feeding (the provision of food on the forest floor). As such it was agreed that feeding hoppers could be used to help grey squirrel control in this area. However, MC noted that SNH did not approve the use of feeding hoppers in mixed red/grey areas elsewhere.

Nature Conservation Act. Discussion is on going (between SNH SEERAD and FCS) in relation to the protection of dreys and the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004.

There was concern around the group that tree felling, particularly in relation to planning issues was allowed despite dreys being present in the area. As regards FCS approved fellings the key was to work with the FCS at an early stage such as in Forest Design Plans and Long term forest plan consultation and consultation for felling licences. There was agreement that we all had to work together to achieve an acceptable pragmatic way forward within the wording of the current legislation.

Grey squirrel control. The subject of the BBC Wildlife article was raised and a question whether there was a need for scientific evidence to prove that grey control benefits red conservation. It was felt that to do nothing is not acceptable and would ensure the rapid demise of the red squirrel in Scotland. It was noted that the article argued that grey squirrels could be removed from the country at a later date and red squirrels re-introduced. Although the ethical argument behind this was flawed, the removal of a much larger grey squirrel population was also questionable. It was agreed that information could be collected, by monitoring of existing grey squirrel control schemes. In particular these should include baseline information, detailed timesheets and records of red squirrel sightings.

Next meeting of the SSG will be on 24th January 2007 at Battleby

Northern Ireland

The NI Red Squirrel forum had been provided with a current draft of the all-Ireland Red Squirrel action plan and had discussed the plan at a recent meeting. The document is to be

FINAL

issued to government bodies in both Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland for consultation.

At the forum meeting John Rochford, present as a guest from Trinity College Dublin, reported that grey squirrels had declined at Castle Forbes, the location of the original introduction to Ireland, and that this was associated with an increase in sightings of pine martens in the area.

Despite the presence of SQPV antibody seropositive grey squirrels, there has been no evidence to date of SQPV infection of red squirrels in Northern Ireland. This was surprising given the close proximity of red and grey squirrels at bird feeding stations in the car park of Belvoir Park forest in Belfast.

Belfast Zoo had expressed an interest in the captive breeding of red squirrels. This would facilitate greater awareness of the need for specific conservation measures, including grey squirrel control. Belvoir was a potentially attractive source because its red squirrels were closely monitored and were acclimatised to artificial feeding.

ESI Ireland is becoming established. RS attended the second meeting as a member of UKRSG. Contact between UKRSG and ESI Ireland may well be beneficial for red squirrel conservation because of the links between ESI Ireland and private landowners.

Wales

Anglesey – only 160 greys have been culled in 2006 despite increased effort, compared to 450 in 2005. Decrease probably due to access in 2005 to one estate where no control had previously been permitted – all significant woodlands on the island are now trapped. ARSP has received grant of £440k over 4 years from Grantscape. Eradication of greys is now a realistic objective. Following a decrease in 2004, numbers of red squirrels at Pentraeth appear to be returning to former levels.

Mid-Wales – additional site found with reds, but greys also trapped. High proportion (c. 80%) of greys positive for SQPV. Project currently without funding.

Wales Squirrel Forum – meeting of Partnership in July agreed to progress development of a Wales red squirrel project. The full scope of the project will be developed during 2007/08.

England

Northern England. Save Our Squirrels, the main red squirrel conservation project, has received funding from a HLF bid. Now, with the match funding they have £1.15 million over the next 3 years. There are 16 red squirrel reserves in the area accommodating approx. 80% of the English red squirrel population. Staff are currently being recruited to take the project forwards.

Isle of Wight. Still occasional reports of grey squirrel sighting, but none confirmed.

10. Any other business. None

11. Date of next meeting

8 February 2007, London.