NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency

**SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

**NatureScot**

**INFORMATION PAPER**

# Update on sub-groups

## Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on the work of its sub-groups.

## Action

1. **The Committee is asked to note the update.**

## Preparation of the paper

1. The paper was written by Sarah Hutcheon and Des Thompson.

## Background

1. Committee sub-groups review our work and provide advice from Committee and Expert Panel members on novel, contentious or complex matters. The sub-groups contain at least two Committee members (one of whom chairs the sub-group), two Expert Panel members, and additional expertise as required. A staff member provides the secretariat. Depending on the Terms of Reference, the sub-groups report to the Board, to the Committee, or to members of the Senior Leadership Team.
2. This paper provides an update on existing sub-groups. **Annex A** provides a tracker of all current sub groups.

## Key sub-group updates

**Capercaillie sub group**

1. The sub-group concluded its review in December 2021, and the report was published in February. The report informed discussions at the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board and the NatureScot Board on next steps in May and June. It has also being utilised in advice that has been provided to Ministers.

**Avian Influenza sub group**

1. This group was set up to advise on issues emerging from handling the avian influenza outbreak in Scotland this summer. The group held their first meeting at the beginning of August, and a second meeting in late October. With the formation of the Scottish Task Force (chaired by Eileen Stuart) and related developments in relation to handling and managing avian flu issues, the work area is fast paced. The sub-group is supporting staff in identifying knowledge and research gaps on a number of key topics, such as transmission pathways, assessment of impacts of disturbance and surveillance, and monitoring priorities. Several members participated in the well-attended workshop on 27th October. Dan Haydon can provide an oral update on the work of the group at the meeting. We continue to draw on additional expertise outwith the sub-group.

**Digital aerial surveys**

1. This sub group was set up after the September 2021 meeting. Chaired by Professor Marian Scott, it was tasked with reviewing the current information around the methods for undertaking and analysing data from Digital Aerial Surveys (DAS). There are two main DAS providers and this is the main technique for collating baseline survey information to inform EIA and post consent monitoring studies. One provider supplies digital video and the other digital still images. As a result of ongoing queries from ourselves, Marine Scotland and RSPB and due to the competition between both providers, NatureScot suggested that a review by a subgroup of our SAC would help provide an independent and objective appraisal of the issues and enable recommendations to be made.
2. The sub-group were set terms of reference and were provided a set of questions as well as hosting a workshop where further information could be obtained from the two providers. The subgroup has now reported on their findings and a series of recommendations has been made.  We are now in the process of sharing these recommendations with both the providers, but also where there are no commercially sensitive issues, more widely to other interested parties.  We wish to take this opportunity to formally thank the subgroup for all their hard work and to recommend this approach for any future similar review requirements.

**Muirburn sub-group**

1. We are setting up a sub-group to support staff on science matters relating to the recently announced Scottish Government consultation on the [Wildlife Management (Grouse) Bill](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/1/) relating to [muirburn](https://www.gov.scot/publications/wildlife-management-scotland-consultation/pages/5/) issues. This is an area where the science is contested and in some regards ambiguous. Professor Marian Scott has agreed to chair the sub-group.

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**Annex A. Committee Sub-group tracker**

**September 2022**

| **SAC Sub- group** | **Task set** | **Membership** | **Date set up** | **Progress update** | **How advice has been used** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| MPA | Report to PAC as requested on consultations | Jane Reid (Chair), Neil Metcalfe, Ben Wilson, Beth Scott | 2013 | Not met since last SAC meeting | The group last met in November 2021 to advise on Red Rocks and Longay possible MPA. Jane Reid has now taken on chairing the group, as Aileen Mill’s term on the SAC has come to an end. Neil Metcalfe has also joined the group. |
| Genetics | Advise staff on development of novel genetics framework | Pete Hollingsworth, Richard Ennos (Chair), Rob Ogden , Penelope Whitehorn, Laszlo Nagy | March 2019 | No formal meetings this year. | The ‘genetics literacy’ programme for staff continued with the development of a summer seminar series of talks which included presentations from 12 established and early career researchers. Topics were initially selected to provide both a foundation for understanding how genetics can be used in NatureScot’s work for monitoring/surveillance and conservation (including translocation). Other contributions included an introduction to major barcoding and genome sequencing initiatives such as Bioscan and the Darwin Tree of Life.  Outwith this programme progress is being made on a web-based training tool for NatureScot staff to enable them to commission and evaluate DNA-based projects – led by our Genetics Graduate Placement (Brodie Thomas). Projects underway include the Scottish Government project ‘Developing Habitat Scale DNA Monitoring in Support of Post 2020 Biodiversity Reporting Requirements’ which is being taken forward under its Contract Research Fund, and the development of eDNA based methodologies for the monitoring of rare fish within a Common Standards Monitoring Framework. These are in addition to our long-term collaboration with the DToL project at Beinn Eighe and the Cairngorms, where we are involved in the collection of material for genomic analyses alongside others such as the national Museum of Scotland, the Natural History Museum and RBGE.  David O’Brien has been invited to contribute to the Genetic Diversity Monitoring Workshop 2023 taking place on January 23rd – 24th 2023 in Zurich, Switzerland. This will discuss current advances and future directions in the field of national and international monitoring of genetic diversity in wild populations and species. This work has already contributed to the development of the CBD COP15 monitoring framework.  We anticipate engagement with the Genetics group in 2023 when we have some outputs from the genetic literacy project for them to consider and for comments on a genetics interventions review that we intend to start. |
| Capercaillie | To review the evidence and advise on measures for conservation and management of Capercaillie in Scotland | Neil Metcalfe (chair), Jane Reid, Dan Haydon, Rob Marrs, Judith Webb (observer) | August 2021 | Completed | The report has been used to inform discussions on next steps for NatureScot and Cairngorms National Park Authority at Board level. Advice for Ministers is being formulated. |
| Digital aerial surveys | To advise staff on methodology | Marian Scott (Chair), Ruth Mitchell, Rob Marrs, Aly McCluskie, Francis Daunt, Tom Evans, Kate Thompson and Chris Eastham. | Dec 2021 | Two meetings on the 21 January & 4 February. Workshop held in March. | Report has been finalised and recommendations are being shared with interested parties. |
| Fish eating birds | To advise staff on evidence needs | Neil Metcalfe, Kathy Dale, Steve Campbell (SASA), John Armstrong (MS), Antje Branding (RESAS), Sally Blyth (licencing) | TBC |  | We are reviewing the need for a short term working group involving SAC members. Scottish Government has set up a Fish Eating Birds policy review group and we want to consider whether we need an additional group to help us take forward this work. |
| Avian Influenza | To advise on HPAI impacts, surveillance and research needs | Dan Haydon (Chair), Jane Reid, Anna Meredith, Mark Bolton, Eleanor Watson, Helen Baker, Francis Daunt | August 2022 | Met twice so far, and participated in AI Workshop on 27th October | The group has been set up to consider a number of areas: Assessment of impact of HPAI on wild birds in Scotland; transmission pathways and epidemiology modelling; advice on surveillance; assessment of the impact of disturbance; priorities for monitoring passage and wintering waterbirds this winter and breeding birds next year; further research needs. |