



Sunart Rainforest Project - Working Group Meeting, Confirmed Notes

Location: Online & Sunart Centre, Strontian

Date: 18/09/2025

<p>Attending: Victor Clements (NativeWoods Co-operative Ltd) James Hilder (SCC Director) Rory Sinclair (Resipol) Ross Dunsmore (SGRPID) Donald Campbell (Ardery) Euan Campbell (Ardery) Peter Sinclair (Resipol) Jim Jackson (Resipol) Paolo Berardelli (Ranachan Croft) Laura Sutherland (Ranachan Croft) Gary Servant (Upland Ecology Ltd) John Jones (SCC Chair) Bruce Taylor (Brambletree Management Ltd) Euan Palmer (SCC Rainforest Coordinator)</p>	<p>Attending via Video Link (Teams): Ronald Macintyre Callum Strong (FLS) Steve Fox (ELSDMG) Graeme Taylor (NatureScot) Diane Baum (Woodland Trust) David Mosgrove (ELSDMG)</p> <p>Apologies: Malcolm Gillespie (Camusfearna & Bunalteachain) Andrew McMaster (NatureScot) Alison Gainsford (SCC Director) Craig Holden (SCC Longrigg Coordinator) Jamie MacIntyre (Longrigg Woodland)</p>
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1. Welcome & Introductions

Rory Sinclair welcomed all joining both in-person and online. All present introduced themselves.

2. Actions from last meeting – 24th July 2025

Action 1: BT to re-issue tender for INNS ground survey in coming weeks. – **Completed**

Action 2: JH & EP to make enquiry to NatureScot funding team about the option of appointing Brambletree Management to do work included in LOT 4. – **Completed**

Action 3: BT, EP & JH to submit ASR funding application before deadline on 04.08.2025. – **Completed**

Action 4: JH to draft comprehensive list of voting members before next SRPWG meeting. – **Completed**



3. Note of last meeting

Sunart Rainforest Working Group Meeting notes dated 24.07.2025 accepted as read. Proposed by John Jones. Seconded by James Hilder.

4. Update on Tender Appointments

BT updated WG on tenders received for future works. Tenders for future works have been separated into Lots 1, 2, 3 & 4.

LOT 1 - INNS Drone and Ground Survey

INNS drone survey contractor has been appointed. Angus Mackie of Scotland 360 has begun planning flight routes across the project area. Work expected to begin in October. All landowners of areas which are included the survey flight paths will be contacted directly before any work is carried out, to avoid conflict with other activities. Contact details for all affected properties have been provided to Scotland 360.

LOT 2 - Open Hill HIA and Woodland Expansion survey

This work could not be delivered due to time of year contract was tendered. RD noted SGRPID concern about this work not being completed, as they had expected data from open hill HIA to be shared and considered for their own management decisions. BT noted that this could still potentially be completed at the end of March. Discussions needed with NatureScot to ensure this work can be completed before end of project.

GS has begun completing NVC surveys across open hill areas which may potentially support woodland expansion.

LOT 3 -Deer Management Plan and Nature Recovery Plan

VC has met with many land owners, land managers, and stakeholders to discuss deer management priorities for the project area. An early draft of his DMP, outlining key messages, has been produced and further discussion will feature as part of this working group meeting.

LOT 4 - Woodland Management Plans and GIS

Lot 4 still under discussion as to the most appropriate way forward. GS noted that other plans (DMP & NRP) needed to inform direction of holistic WMP.

5. Update on Draft Deer Management Plan - Key Messages (Victor Clements)

VC gave a presentation to the working group, outlining the key messages included in his early report on the Sunart project area DMP. This document was circulated in advance of the meeting. Key messages included in the report are as follows:

- The baseline woodland condition from which the project is starting is very promising, and this should be considered in all management decisions.
- There is sufficient evidence within the landscape to suggest that woodland restoration can be achieved without repairing the strategic deer fence.

- Recommendation to expand focus of DMP to include wider deer control area, which includes FLS Glen Hurich & FLS Drimnatoran. This would improve the effectiveness of deer control measures, and also provide the greatest scope for expanding and restoring ancient woodland areas.
- Highlighted that there is a partial north-south “strategic fence” between Loch Shiel and Loch Sunart, which if re-structured could allow for partial control of deer movements.
- Recommendation for the East Loch Shiel DMG to be split in two, to provide for a stand-alone deer management structure in the west (which includes the expanded project area).
- Within the expanded project area, a significant majority of properties will have deer control as management priority. If deer control management is co-ordinated across project areas under public control (FLS, NatureScot, & SGRPID), a much lower deer density could be effectively achieved.
- SGRPID must consider how current red deer sporting leases must run on a different basis from their renewal in September 2026.

VC also explained a number of personal recommendations. VC discouraged the forming of a voting structure for the working group, which would limit the potential for conflict though acknowledging that it may limit final outcomes. VC also stressed that the baseline condition of the woodland areas is positive, and that there is much scope to expand rainforest woodland areas across the wider Sunart landscape. Furthermore, VC highlighted the benefits which could be realised in having one operator managing deer across the Sunart Rainforest Project area.

Discussion on the presentation by VC followed. RD began by explaining that SGRPID’s current sporting leases were deliberately let on a shorter 2-year period because of the expected need of flexibility in anticipation of the findings delivered by the Sunart Rainforest Project. RD emphasised that SGRPID are open to all discussions on how to take forward their sporting leases, while underlining that these discussions must include feedback from current leaseholders.

JH asked for clarity on the north-south “strategic fence” which was referenced in VC report. VC re-iterated the benefits of securing this fence and increasing the area over which deer control is exercised. RS enquired about FLS position and priorities on deer management. CS noted that FLS are investing in repairing large sections of the fence referenced in the report.

CS went on to discuss FLS general response to VC key-messages. The business case for taking on the deer management of SGRPID grounds would need to be assessed, and careful consideration would be made against the cost effectiveness of this proposal. CS noted the key areas which FLS have a focus on native woodland establishment are at



Loch Sheil and Achnaellan. FLS timber operations cannot support further native woodland restoration efforts, and additional measures would require direct funding from Scottish Government.

DM highlighted that the projects area of focus has now increased. VC reiterated that the scale of project is important, and that focus area is ultimately a decision for the group. JH pointed out that the Sunart Community Company needs to focus on the NRF-funded project area, however it is helpful to consider a wider focus on deer management strategies.

RS made the point that FLS seem to include fencing as an appropriate deer management strategy, so why would it not be appropriate for the SRR? VC & CS noted that there are different objectives between FLS and SRP.

GT explained to the group the rationale behind the decision to not award funding for North Sunart strategic deer fence. NatureScot have a duty to ensure public money is spent effectively. Repairing the strategic deer fence was deemed high risk at this time, noting issues with the scale of the fence, lack of active DMP, and the limitations of a 3-sided fence.

6. Rainforest Restoration Fund (RRF) – SRP Application

a. RRF – Initial NatureScot feedback and final application

BT gave a background to what was originally included in the SRP RRF application. Through previous discussions at working group meetings, it was clear that the most appropriate activity to include was repairing the strategic deer fence. A request for £180k for fencing repairs was made. It was also decided that a deer cull incentive scheme should be included to focus on reducing deer numbers in woodland areas. A request was made for £100 per head of deer. Additionally, requests were made for funding further woodland HIA in March 2026, a community polytunnel, and increased project management and administration fees associated with increased workload through an RRF award.

Initial feedback from NatureScot was received on the 21/08/25. The feedback stated that funding for fencing repairs was unlikely to be supported at this time. Further queries were raised about the cull incentive scheme and the necessity of a further HIA in March 2026. As such, we were asked to consider other activities which could be supported with funding. It should be noted that all of this took place within a 3-day turnaround deadline.

The final application included an increased budget for the cull incentive scheme. Final budget for this activity was £20k, supporting a cull of 200 deer at £100 per head. We also included a proposal for rhododendron removal works. Final budget for this activity was £174k, supporting a removal of a net 40ha within the Sunart oak woodland area. 13k was included to support the purchase and instalment of the polytunnel. 14k was included for additional management and administration fees.



b. RRF – Notice of Decision

BT revealed that all project activities included in our final application were granted approval of funding. £262,325 of funding has been secured subject to a few conditions. The decision panel appear to be keen to increase the budget for the deer culling incentive scheme.

BT noted that this decision has not yet been publicly announced. Details of the decision must not be discussed or promoted on anything in the public domain.

Notice of this award was followed by a roundtable discussion on how the project activities included in our RRF award may be taken forward. Discussion focussed on the practicalities of running a deer cull incentive scheme. There was consensus amongst the group on taking forward all other proposals, and maximising spend of the funding award.

GT gave a background to other pilot schemes which NatureScot currently have in operation.

VC noted the limited impact which any cull incentive scheme will have in short time period.

Action: Schedule further meeting to specifically discuss deer cull incentive scheme for Sunart Rainforest Project area. Meeting scheduled for 23rd of September at 3.30pm.

7. SRPWG Voting Structure

JH confirmed that 1 vote will be given to each landholding within the project area. The vote will be given to the registered land owner of each landholding, or a confirmed representative of that landholding. JH noted that this provides the most benefit to the project.

RD & RM noted that consideration must be given to the various croft holdings which exist within the project area. It was noted that it may be appropriate for the common grazing committee to have a representative vote.

Action: JH to circulate confirmed voting list and voting criteria.

8. Date & Time of Next Meeting

The next Sunart Rainforest Working Group Meeting is scheduled to take place on the 16/10/2025. The meeting will again be held online and in-person.