



## Sunart Rainforest Project - Working Group Meeting, Confirmed Notes

Location: Online & Sunart Centre, Strontian

Date: 13/11/2025

<b>Attending:</b> James Hilder (SCC Director) Rory Sinclair (Resipole) Euan Campbell (Ardery) Jim Jackson (Resipole) Laura Sutherland (Ranachan Croft) Gary Servant (Upland Forestry Ltd & Native Woods Co-operative Ltd) Alison Gainsford (SCC Director) Euan Palmer (SCC Rainforest Coordinator) Jamie Macintyre (SCC Longrigg) Craig Holden (SCC Longrigg)	<b>Attending via Video Link (Teams):</b> Ronald Macintyre (Ranachan Croft) Steve Fox (ELSDMG) Victor Clements (Native Woods Co-operative Ltd) Ross Dunsmore (SGR PID) Mary Paton (SGR PID) Paolo Berardelli (Ranachan Croft) Bruce Taylor (Brambletree Management Ltd)
	<b>Apologies:</b> John Jones (SCC Director) Callum Strong (FLS) Malcolm Gillespie (Camusfearna & Bunalteachain) Peter Sinclair (Resipole)

### 1. Welcome & Introductions

Rory Sinclair welcomed all joining both in-person and online.

### 2. Note of last meeting

Sunart Rainforest Working Group Meeting notes dated 18.09.2025 accepted as read.

### 3. Update on Tender Appointments

BT updated WG on tenders received for scheduled work activities. Tenders for project activity works have been separated into Lots 1, 2, 3 & 4. Update also given on RRF tendered work activities.

#### LOT 1 - INNS Drone and Ground Survey

Angus Mackie of Scotland 360 has now received consent from the majority of land owners and managers across the project area. Flight paths have been created and



surveying expected to begin imminently, beginning at Ranachan. The survey drone flights are expected to be completed by early February.

### **LOT 2 - Open Hill HIA and Woodland Expansion survey**

BT noted that Cathy Mayne has been in touch to express interest in completing the Open Hill HIA. Open Hill HIA methodology means survey cannot be carried out before end of March 2026. However, some scoping work can be delivered during project period, with subsequent funding found to complete HIA. Further discussion required with SGRPID.

GS has completed NVC surveys across open hill areas which may potentially support woodland expansion. Further discussion of the preliminary results to be discussed as part of this working group meeting.

### **LOT 3 -Deer Management Plan and Nature Recovery Plan**

VC continuing work on DMP. GS has begun work on Nature Recovery Plan, further discussion of the preliminary results to be discussed 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.

### **RRF Tenders**

BT noted that 4 tenders were distributed for the Rhododendron removal works as part of the RRF. Two contractors (Upland Forestry Ltd & Woodland Conservation Services) have returned tenders and are both available to be part of rhododendron removal works. Both contractors have noted their preference for using manual methods. A further contractor (Boreal Forestry) has been approached, to provide chemical treatments on larger bushes, where required.

Some roundtable discussions followed the update from BT, enquiring about included properties.

It is expected that all ground within the project area, and all ground within a 500m buffer zone of the project area, will be cleared of Rhododendron ponticum plants. This includes Shielbridge and the Common Grazing grounds. RD noted that active grazing's committee is in place and Pete Madden (grazing clark) is the nominated representative for the committee.

JJ asked if other INNS will be included in removal works. BT noted that this could be possible with available finances. To be discussed further with contractors.

JM noted that several proposals were dropped from the RRF application, specifically funding to undertake seed sourcing on open hill areas and the purchasing of a firewood



processor. JH & BT noted that proposals were dropped because they were doubtful to be accepted by RRF funding panel.

CH & JM noted that this wasn't communicated. EP acknowledged, noting the limited timeframe for returning feedback on funding application to be the likely reason this wasn't picked up during application process.

#### **4. Update on progress on habitat survey for woodland expansion & Nature Recovery Plan – Gary Servant (Upland Forestry Ltd & Native Woodland Cooperative Ltd)**

GS gave a short presentation to the group discussing the results of habitat surveys and his initial work on the Nature Recovery Plan. A copy of the presentation slides will accompany the meeting minutes.

Around 200 ha of National Vegetation Classification (NVC) habitat types were mapped, mainly focused on Ranachan. The maps highlight constraints such as deep peats and GWDTE habitats. They also highlight areas of existing trees which can be a seed source, with a 50m buffer for natural regen. GS has also mapped areas of successful regen and planting from previous SFGS. The mapping exercise will enable assessments of net plantable areas and tree species suitability and woodland types.

GS presented considerations of the why, what, where and how associated with a Nature Recovery Plan for the Sunart Rainforest area. The Nature Recovery Plan will detail the required landscape-scale collaboration on control of invasive plants, PAWS restoration, deer management, native woodland expansion and peatland restoration. Proposals included in the plan are to follow the SMART criteria, and will require further direction and guidance from the SRP working group.

A roundtable discussion followed the presentation by Gary Servant.

RS & EC enquired about the end goals of the Nature Recovery Plan. It remains unclear what targets the project aims to achieve, and what specific measures will be required to achieve those targets. Concern remains about the target deer density, and what certain densities mean for deer management and woodland restoration.

CH noted that focus should be on reducing the browsing damage on woodland areas, which is what WHIA data gives indication of. Without change to high browsing pressure over long period of time, healthy woodland structure will disappear.

RD echoed the concerns raised by RS & EC. Change in deer management objectives will be a significant cost. Targets & outcomes need to be communicated early.

JH & GS stated that proposals should reflect the aspirations of the group, and final outcomes will be for individual landowners and the working group to decide.



## 5. Update on future Deer Management Strategy

VC gave an update on latest developments with the DMP for the project. Two specific developments were discussed:

- NatureScot have communicated expected target levels of habitat impact within rainforest woodland areas.
- The Deer Cull Incentive Scheme is up and running, and has good engagement from several landowners.

NatureScot have communicated that the status of the SSSI oak woodlands within the project area are not as good as has been previously stated. They would expect that future HIA's should indicate that 80% of species assessed should show low impacts. VC noted that the resulting deer density to achieve this would be in the realm of 2-3 deer per sq km.

VC noted a number of implications which would result from such a deer density.

- Any sporting interests in the area would vanish.
- Resourcing very low deer density will require significant funding over a sustained period of time. Will result in RPID having to put in a lot of resource to achieve this and will require a change in lease arrangements. Majority of costs to fall on FLS & SGRPID. Achieving Nature Scot targets will result in a loss on private estates and a cost to the public bodies.

These outcomes can be negotiable with NatureScot. SRP should enter into negotiations with NatureScot about setting appropriate habitat impact targets.

A roundtable discussion followed about the feasibility of achieving such targets, and the likely consequences associated with reducing the deer density across the area to low levels. Agreement that consequences must be clearly understood and communicated to project stakeholders.

VC suggested that a small working group should be established to negotiate achievable habitat impact targets with NatureScot.

**Action JH, BT, EP:** Establish deer management working group which includes one private landowner representative, one public body representative, one community representative and one representative from the ELSDMG.

### a. Discussions between SGRPID & FLS

RD updated the group on discussions had between FLS & SGRPID. Both are clear on the intentions of the project, and are aligned on the wider vision. FLS noted the historic difficulties they have had of achieving low deer densities over a long period of time.



Sustaining low deer densities must be factored on resource and capacity limitations. Further comment will follow when targets have been set.

Deer management across leased ground will remain in control of SGRPID, with FLS noting that they would not take on stalking contracts as it would remove local people from the area.

Discussions were had over the potential split in deer management strategy between the east and west of the ELSDMG. Both parties considered how to effectively utilise deer fencing to bring down population in the western area (SRP area).

This sparked wider discussions around the table on the implications of splitting from the ELSDMG. VC communicated that pursuing a different deer management strategy in the west will have a direct impact on deer management in the east, and that any significant change must be communicated to, and considered by, the ELSDMG.

SF noted that while the ELSDMG have always managed deer in the western end of the East Loch Shiel area, the Sunart Woodland Owners group have always set the management strategy for the woodland areas. SF acknowledged the potential consequences for the wider ELSDMG if a split in management and actions occurs.

VC stressed that any split from the ELSDMG should be done amicably, with the consent of the ELSDMG. VC would be happy to consider implications of any split as part of the SRP DMP process.

## **6. Rainforest Restoration Fund (RRF) - Update**

### **a. Landowner Declaration Forms – Maintenance Requirement**

RS & EC noted their concerns with signing the landowner declaration forms due to the 10-year maintenance commitment. The form in its current wording is vague and open-ended.

BT noted that it has been communicated to the RRF funding team that any subsequent maintenance works will require additional funding to be secured by the SRP. Further discussion to be had with NatureScot to link project maintenance period with approved maintenance plan in writing.

### **b. Deer Cull Incentive Scheme**

EP noted that cull incentive scheme has good level of returns, approximately 70 since the Epicollect system has been set up. All properties have reached the threshold, except Resipole.

**Action EP:** Communicate cull return data to each involved stalker.

## **7. Date & Time of Next Meeting**

Date of next meeting scheduled to take place on 11<sup>th</sup> of December 2025. Decision to host meeting will be made closer to the time, and will depend on perceived need.